

# Mail Order Mama

By

Ericka Scott

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

### Mail Order Mama

Copyright© 2007 Ericka Scott Cover Artist: Pam Skochinski

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced electronically or in print without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in reviews.

### Dedication

This book is dedicated to you. May your holiday season be merry and bright!

San Francisco, 1882

I want a new Ma for Christmas. Stephen Muller, Age 3

I stopped believing in Santa the year my mother died. Thomas Muller, Age 15

Mr. Hawkins stood at the front of the one room schoolhouse collecting the last assignment before the Christmas holidays: a Christmas wish and watched Mary Muller slowly gathered up her books. The poor child was only twelve, but already carried the burden of being a woman by cooking, cleaning, and tending for her men folk. What the child really needed was a mother. But there was a slim chance of that happening. Womenfolk were rare in these parts.

"Merry Christmas Mr. Hawkins," she said as she turned in a piece of paper.

Mr. Hawkins opened it and then quirked his eyebrow at her. "This is your little brother's wish. Don't you have a Christmas wish, Mary?"

"Oh, I do have a wish." Mary flipped her long blond braids over her shoulder and her blue eyes were serious. "I'm just not sure I believe in Santa anymore."



*Chicago*, 1882

Katherine Larson hated her dismal existence. Not only did she have to clean up after other people, day in and day out, as a maid in her aunt's boarding house, but she had to endure meals with her cousins, Blanche and Elizabeth Nelson.

There was never much food left after the boarders had filled their plates. Katherine scraped a small spoonful of cold egg onto her plate and sighed. The tea was cold too. But, she was lucky to have a roof over her head and food to eat.

"Look." Blanche held up a lovely piece of lace for the others to admire. "I think I'll put this in my hope chest."

"It's beautiful lace; it will look gorgeous on a petticoat or," Elizabeth paused significantly, "a nightgown."

Blanche blushed prettily.

"Kitty, you haven't asked Blanche for the pattern. Don't you want to knit some lace for your hope chest?" Elizabeth's blue eyes mocked Katherine over her tea cup. "Oh, but I forget, spinsters don't need hope chests."

Blanche snorted with laughter.

"Girls," Aunt Clara admonished both of them.

"Well, it's true." Elizabeth protested.

Katherine hated the nickname Kitty, she hated her blonde and pretty cousins and her stern, haughty aunt, but most of all she hated being a spinster. The shame of having no money paled in comparison to the shame of having no husband. And, at twenty-six, her marital status wasn't likely to change. If only she were tall and blonde like her cousins. Instead, she'd been graced with mouse brown hair and muddy brown eyes. She looked down at the dowdy gingham dress. It, too, was brown. No wonder no one noticed her.

She sighed and stirred her tea. The only men she met were those staying in Aunt Clara's Boarding House. After cleaning up their rooms, she knew more about them than a wife would and as a result, desired them less. They were all slovenly and rude, to say the least. If she only had more time off, she could perhaps meet someone. Besides, she only had half a day off on Wednesdays and Sundays for church. Those were the days she had to do her own cleaning and mending, there wasn't any time left over for fun.

"You're dawdling, Kitty. The laundry must be collected by ten o'clock." Aunt Clara reminded her.

"Yes, ma'am." Katherine finished her cold tea in a gulp and went upstairs, stopping first at Mr. Gibson's door.

"Sir, 'tis Katherine, the housemaid. May I come in?"

There was no answer, so she turned the knob. Mr. Gibson was still lying abed. Fumes from his mouth and the open bottle of whiskey on the bedside made Katherine gag. She quickly gathered up the mound of clothes by the door.

"Here's one more for you, girl," Mr. Gibson called out.

There was a rustling sound and Kitty turned to take the garment he handed her. A quick glance showed he'd taken off his trousers and stood in front of her nude from the waist down. Averting her eyes from the wide expanse of pale flabby skin, she couldn't quite put her hands on

the trousers he dangled just out of her reach. He did this every single week, teasing her unmercifully and then complaining about her poor service to Aunt Clara. Well, not this week.

Kitty raised her eyes, tried not to gasp at the sight of his exposed erection, and snatched the trousers. Her face burned, but she turned with what dignity she could muster and marched out of the room.

"There's more where that came from girl, you just have to ask and I'll let you play with it." Mr. Gibson called after her.

"Damned cheeky bastard." Katherine cursed, dumping the clothes down the laundry chute.

Most of the other residents were out of their rooms, working or looking for work, so Katherine was able to finish collecting the laundry. It was almost ten; if she hurried upstairs to the attic, she could collect her dirty clothes too.

As she entered the cold room she shared with the other members of the house staff, she could hear crying. "Marta?"

Marta was the kitchen maid. If anything, her job was worse than Katherine's. Marta did all the dirty work for the cook, a temperamental old tyrant aptly named Mrs. Grump.

The dirty clothes forgotten, Katherine hurried to Marta's side. Marta was crying as if her life were over. "Oh, Marta. Whatever is wrong? Has Mrs. Grump been mean to you again?"

Marta only sobbed louder. In her hand, she held a soggy piece of paper.

"Oh, do you have bad news from home?"

Marta shook her head and handed the letter to Katherine. It read, "My dearest one, I am sending you money for a ticket to join us for Christmas. Once you are here, we will make arrangements to wed immediately. With my warmest regards, Jonathon Muller." Katherine hugged Marta. "Why are you crying? This is wonderful!"

Marta wailed.

"It isn't wonderful?"

"N-n-no."

"But you'll be married, away from all this." Katherine waved her arms, encompassing the small dark attic housing their beds and belongings.

"But I love Antonio." Marta wrung her hands.

"Antonio? The butcher's boy?"

"Yes. I can't marry this man, this Jonathon. I don't even know him. I want to marry Antonio." Being upset brought out the Italian accent Marta tried so hard to suppress.

"Then write him back and tell him so." Katherine said.

"No, I can't. I advertised him, wrote letters, told him I come to San Francisco. I promised. He needs mother for his children. He sent me money." Marta motioned toward a thin bank check sitting atop a small pile of letters. "And now I fall in love with Antonio." Marta buried her face in her hands.

"Listen, don't worry. I'll fix this for you and no one will need to know." She hadn't realized Marta was so desperate for a husband. But then, she was twenty-three. "So, don't worry and don't cry anymore."

Marta looked up, her tears drying as she gave Katherine a wavering smile. "Then, I don't have to marry this man? I can marry Antonio?"

"Yes, you can marry Antonio. Now, get back to work before Mrs. Grump misses you."

Marta's boots clattered on the stairs and Katherine turned to the neat pile of letters. She gathered them up. The first paper in the pile was a newspaper clipping, torn out of a San Francisco newspaper. It was an advertisement. A lady, 23, good looking, without means, would like to hear from a gentleman of position wanting a wife. She is hard working, accomplished at sewing and cooking, amiable, and affectionate.

What followed was a series of letters, neatly penned, from Jonathon Muller, a gentleman farmer living in San Francisco, California.

San Francisco. Katherine closed her eyes. Even the name sounded romantic. Blue sky, fresh air, fields of green, and the ocean. How could Marta even think about turning down the opportunity to escape dull and dreary Chicago in winter? Marta wanted to stay here for what? Antonio?

Antonio worked for the butcher, delivering meat in his little mule-pulled van from sun up to sun down. Meanwhile Marta would slave in Mrs. Grump's kitchen and live in the attic until Antonio could afford a tiny, dank, smelly apartment. They would probably court for a year, maybe two, before they could afford to get married. Then, there would be children and making sacrifices for them. They'd be living in near dire poverty for years. Where was the romance in that? It wasn't a life, it was a death sentence.

Well, it was Marta's death sentence, not hers. She gathered up the letters and tied them up with the red ribbon from her hair. She'd just write to Mr. Muller on Marta's behalf and let him know he'd have to find a different bride. She'd write the letter right after dinner.

All her good intentions came to naught, for when she walked into the dining room everyone was gathered around Elizabeth admiring something in her hand.

"And I said yes! We'll be married in the spring. It looks like I'm going to beat Blanche to the altar after all."

As though it was a competition!

Aunt Clara sighed. "Oh, so romantic. Perhaps you'll be next, Blanche."

"Oh, but if we're going from oldest to youngest, Kitty should be first." Blanche's sugary words were full of venom.

Katherine's embarrassment was overcome by a huge flush of anger. It wasn't her fault she wasn't married. Her parents had died when she was twelve and since then, she'd been working her fingers to the bone at this dreary old boarding house. She'd been given no opportunities to meet a suitor. And now it was too late. She blinked back angry tears. Even Marta, the poor kitchen maid had more prospects than she did, one to keep and one to discard. It just wasn't fair. She heard a voice saying, "Oh, but I am getting married first," and with a shock, she realized the voice was hers!

"What!" Everyone said at once.

Resisting the urge to giggle at everyone's shocked expressions, Katherine continued, "Yes, I got the letter from Jonathon today. I'm leaving for San Francisco in the morning. We'll be married right after Christmas. Isn't that romantic?"

In the silence of the room, it was easy to hear the ladle Marta dropped in the empty soup tureen.

"Don't tell lies." Aunt Clara snapped.

"It's not a lie. I have the letter, right here." Katherine was grateful none of the letters specifically mentioned Marta by name.

She pulled the top letter out, then carefully retied the ribbon. The precious letter was passed around and read aloud, not once, but several times.

"You don't have a penny to your name." Elizabeth accused. "How are you going to get to San Francisco?"

"On the train. Jonathon sent money for the ticket. I'll have to leave tomorrow in order to get there in time for Christmas."

"Unescorted?" Aunt Clara folded her napkin. "I forbid it."

"I'm twenty-six years old, Aunt Clara. I know my own mind and you cannot stop me." Katherine stood up. "I do want to thank you for giving me a home once I passed the age of maturity." She bit her tongue, resisting the urge to say the only reason she was allowed to stay on was because she worked like a slave and saved the cost of hiring a house maid.

"But we don't know anything about this man." Aunt Clara nearly wailed. "Oh, if only your Uncle Charles were still alive. He'd be able to make inquiries."

Thank goodness Uncle Charles wasn't alive. Lord help her, the last thing she wanted was anyone making inquiries. "Jonathon is a good man, a gentleman farmer in California. He owns his own land and has three children who need a mother."

"Three children? Oh mercy!" Aunt Clara fanned herself.

The dining room was in pandemonium when Katherine finally just walked out, and went up to her room.

Marta followed her at a run, cornering her on the landing.

"Oh, Miss Kitty! Why you do this?"

"I want to." Katherine smiled at Marta. "I don't want to live here and be a spinster for the rest of my life. I want to get married and have a family. I may never get this opportunity again. Think of it Marta, San Francisco!" Katherine grabbed Marta and spun her around. "You marry Antonio and live a long and happy life."

"Thank you, Miss Kitty." Marta wiped her eyes with her apron and went back to the kitchen, smiling broadly.

It wasn't until Katherine was sitting on her bed that the full impact of what she'd just done hit her. *Oh, my God, I'm getting married!* Fumbling with the ribbon tying the rest of the letters together, she spread them out and she read through them again and again, savoring each one. All too soon, it was time to pack her meager belongings into the one small suitcase she had arrived with so many years ago. She was nervous, excited, and, scared to death. *Not at all a bad way to start out on an adventure*.



The children would be home soon. Every year, he promised himself they would celebrate Christmas. But, as the holiday approached, darkness would fall on his heart. Above all, he vowed he wouldn't sink into despair on the day of his wife's death, but every year, he did.

Jonathon Muller slid the box out from under the bed. He ran his sleeve over the top and buffed the gleam of the wood. Everything he had left of his dear wife was in this box. After she'd given birth to Stephen, she'd never been the same. She was always tired, listless, and wan. And she had never gotten any better, but grew weaker by the day. He'd begged her to see a doctor, but she refused, stating she was fine. Jonathon suspected she knew she was dying and

didn't want her suspicions confirmed. All he knew was one morning three years ago, he woke up and her body lay beside him but her spirit was gone.

He flipped open the lid of the box. Surprisingly, his heart didn't hurt so much this year. He sorted through the mementos he'd kept: their wedding picture, the first handkerchief she'd embroidered for him, her wedding ring, and the tiny bottle of perfume he'd given her on their first Christmas together. He pulled the stopper out of the glass bottle and sniffed. It was empty; all that remained was a tiny whiff of fragrance, no more than a memory of those happier days. He picked up their wedding picture and stared at it, Carolyn was almost a stranger.

How could he have forgotten her face? Didn't he see Carolyn everyday in the children? She was there in the way Thomas chewed on the tip of his pencil when he was reading, in the way Mary twirled her hair, and in the tilt of Stephen's head when he listened to his bedtime story.

At the bottom of the box were three envelopes addressed to the children in Carolyn's copperplate handwriting. He replaced the items and stood up.

Barely holding his composure, he paced the floor. As he passed the table, his sleeve caught the edge of the box and the whole thing fell to the floor, scattering its contents.

He picked everything up, stacking them neatly back into the box. Mary's envelope felt different, lighter than the others.

Carolyn had written a letter to each of the children before she'd died. The town had taken up a collection, but Jonathon couldn't bear to spend any of the money. He'd put one hundred dollars into each envelope. He opened Mary's envelope; the money was gone.

With a start, he realized there hadn't been any dust on the box this year. Someone had gotten it out recently. Mary? Had she taken her money?

"Mary," Jonathon looked up from the table as the children came trooping through the door.

Mary's face paled when she saw the box on the table and the envelope in Jonathon's hand.

"Did you take your money, Mary?"

"Yes, Pa."

"Why Mary? It was a lot of money, what did you do with it?"

"She bought us a new Ma." Stephen gloated.

"What?" Jonathon exclaimed.

"How did you know?" Mary whirled on Stephen.

"I heard you and Thomas whispering."

"You were supposed to be asleep." Thomas pushed Stephen.

"Mary!" Jonathon pointed to the kitchen chair. "Sit and explain. You boys can go outside."

"No, it was my idea too, Mary just wrote the letters." Thomas admitted.

Mary shot Thomas a grateful look.

What was all this? A new Ma, letters, missing money? What kind of father was he? He didn't know what was going on under his own roof?

"I found this one day." Thomas dug into his school satchel and pulled out a crumpled page from a newspaper and handed it to Jonathon. It was a whole sheet of advertisements for men looking for wives and women looking for husbands. One ad was circled in the middle of the page.

"So, you wrote to this woman?"

Mary nodded eagerly. "And she's coming. I sent her the money for a ticket. She'll be here for Christmas and then we can have a family again.

"Oh, honey." Jonathon was truly touched. If it wasn't so serious, it would be funny. Advertising for a wife! Too bad these advertisements were scams meant to separate desperate men from their money. "This woman's not coming."

"What? Why not?" Thomas asked.

Stephen began to cry. "I want a new Ma."

Jonathon gathered his family around him, hugging them tight. He guessed it was time he did something about getting his children a new mother. But who? He didn't know any single women. Perhaps it was time he made a trip back East to visit his family and find a wife.

Despite his assurances the woman had probably taken off with Mary's money, Mary convinced him to meet the train when it arrived the next day.

Christmas Eve dawned bright and cold. The station platform was crowded.

"Train's delayed today." The conductor pulled a pocket watch out of his coat and polished the cover before opening it. "There's been a bit of snow back East. Good thing since Santa Claus comes tonight." The conductor winked solemnly at the children.

Jonathon stared off into space. How could he have forgotten Christmas? There were no gifts, not even anything special for dinner.

The train finally arrived, blowing into the station with puffs of soot and steam. It was silly, but every time he saw a pretty woman step off the train, his heart lurched in his chest. Could this be her? Why was he getting his hopes up? Once the woman got here, if she even came, he'd have to tell her the truth; his children had written the letters. She had come all this way for naught.



Katherine peered out the window. She would be so glad to get off this train and walk along a sidewalk again. Despite her fears, she'd made it. San Francisco, California! Peering out the window, she tried to quell her feelings of disappointment. The city looked remarkably like every other one they had passed through on her journey. On her side of the train, she could see row upon row of dreary tenements and factories. Perhaps this had all been a mistake.

As the trained huffed into the station, she realized she couldn't do this. She couldn't marry a man she'd never met. What had she been thinking? She quickly summed the amount of money she had left. Would it be enough for a ticket back to Chicago? Perhaps she could wire Aunt Clara for money.

No! She silently screamed. She had no reason to go back to Aunt Clara's and endure more taunting and the desperation of watching her life pass her by.

No. She straightened her shoulders with determination. She'd go through with this. This was her only chance and she just had to grab it and make the most of it.

She gathered her suitcase and took a deep breath. There were people milling around, laughing and hugging, but no one appeared to be looking for her.

A small girl dashed up to her. "Are you Marta?" she enquired sweetly.

"No, I'm sorry. My name is Katherine."

"Oh," the little girls face fell. Belatedly, Katherine realized she was supposed to be Marta! Impulsively, she began making her way through the crowd toward them. She'd simply have to explain although she wasn't Marta, she had come in her place.

The little girl ran up to a tall handsome man with wavy dark hair, a full beard, and bright blue eyes.

"It wasn't her." Mary said, her voice catching in a small sob. "I was so sure she'd be here."

"Mary," Jonathon said gently. "Even if she did get her today, I wasn't going to marry her. I wouldn't even know her."

"But, Pa. You told us when you met Ma you wanted to marry her right away. You said you asked her that self-same evening."

"And she said no. I had to ask her three more times to get here to say yes." Jonathon laughed at the memory. "But, this is different."

"How?"

"I'm older, and have the responsibility of taking care of you and your brothers. I'd have to make sure the lady I picked out to marry would be nice to you." And pretty, patient, and kind; the type of woman I'd want to touch and hold.

He looked up at the woman who had gotten off the train. She was tall and attractive, with large hazel eyes. A pretty woman like her. Just for a second, he had a vision of her naked in his bed with rosy nipples to suckle and a heated wet core to slip into while she wrapped her legs around him. It had been a long time since he'd seen a woman who stirred his passion.

He nodded at the woman as they passed her, hoping she didn't notice his discomfiture at the wanton thoughts continuing to play in his head.

Katherine felt her legs grow weak. She staggered over to a bench and sat down. There was no future husband waiting. It had all been a mistake. She'd been such a fool to travel all this way. Now what was she going to do? Here she was alone in a strange city with no money and no place to stay. Her heart pounded desperately and she did something she seldom did, she broke down and cried.

"Excuse me, miss." The conductor stopped in front of her, "I can't help but see you are in distress. Can I help you in any way?"

"I—I came to get married." Katherine said between sobs. "But, he's not here to meet me. I don't know anyone and have no where to go."

"Perhaps he's just been delayed. Why don't you go over to the hotel? If someone shows up looking for you, I'll let him know where you are."

"Thank you." Katherine lifted her sooty handkerchief to her eyes. A warm hand took the dirty cloth from her. She turned and found herself looking into a pair of bright blue eyes while his hand dried her tears with a clean handkerchief.

"So, Miss—"

"Miss Larson, Katherine Larson."

"Miss Larson, it's nice to make your acquaintance. I know quite a few folks around here, maybe I know the gentleman you're looking for or could give you a ride to his address."

"It's – I'm—" Katherine thought desperately. She couldn't, she wouldn't, tell this man he was the one she had come to meet. She knew full well he'd soon be telling her it was all a mistake and she would have to leave. "I'm waiting for a Mr. S-Smythe. I wrote to him in care of the post office general delivery, so I don't know his address."

"I don't know of any Smythes," Jonathon murmured. "Mary, Thomas? Do you know of any Smythes from school?"

Both Thomas and Mary shook their heads.

Jonathon couldn't take his eyes off Katherine. He had the sudden irrational urge to tell her he was Mr. Smythe. What fool wouldn't be waiting at the station for this beautiful woman?

He noticed his children couldn't keep their eyes off the woman who had stepped off the train. Hope glowed in Mary's eyes and he could see Miss Larson was exactly the type of mother Mary wanted. Thomas, too, was looking at Miss Larson with adoration plastered on his face.

"Maybe he got tired of waiting and married someone else," Mary suggested, hope tingeing her voice with longing.

"I want my new Ma. Mary promised she'd be here today." He stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. "Why can't she be my Ma?" Stephen pointed at Katherine. "She don't have no one either and I want a Ma." He began to wail.

Jonathon looked at Katherine with a dubious expression. "I'm sorry Miss Larson. He's just tired."

"I understand." Katherine smiled. "He's just a child and he must miss his mother terribly."

"My wife died a few months after he was born, so he'd never really known a mother. I'm afraid I've been a poor substitute all this time."

"It must be especially hard on your family during the holidays." Katherine's voice was low and gentle.

"Speaking of which, it is lunch time. Would you favor us with your company?" Jonathon wanted to get her away far away from the train station. The thought of an unknown Mr. Smythe showing up and taking Katherine away was tearing up his guts with jealousy.

"Thank you, you're very kind."

Jonathon took Katherine's arm, glancing around as they walked, dreading being followed by a man who might claim Katherine as his own.

The only restaurant open on Christmas Eve was the one in the hotel. A waitress showed them to a table and pointed out a board nailed to the wall where the menu was written in chalk.

Before she walked away, the waitress smiled at Jonathon. "If your wife would like to freshen up, there is a washroom in the lobby."

"Not my wife." Jonathon started to tell the waitress, but she had already glided away to take orders at another table.

"Miss Larson?" Mary said.

He looked across the table at Katherine and she met his eyes and smiled before she tilted her head, just so, to hear Mary's question.

"What's a Welsh Rabbit? I don't want to eat a bunny."

The roaring in his ears was so loud he couldn't hear her answer. All he could hear was the beating of his own heart. Watching Katherine with his children, he realized he wanted to get to know her better, touch her soft skin, and feel her pink lips pressed against him. He shifted uncomfortably at the sudden rush of desire. Mr. Smythe be damned. It had to be fate that Marta and Mr. Smythe didn't show up? If she didn't have any place to stay, perhaps she would come home and spend Christmas with them. And if Mr. Smythe never showed up, perhaps she would agree to be his wife.

Katherine excused herself to freshen up.

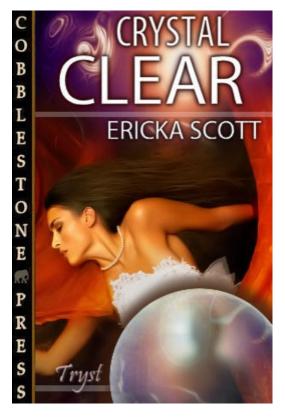
As she walked away from the table, she looked back over her shoulder. How could something that seemed so disastrous an hour ago, now be so perfect? She'd never dreamed Jonathon would be so handsome. She had only hoped for a nice man with nice children. What she'd found was so much more. And from Jonathon's slow blush at the waitress's comment and the way his eyes shone when he looked at her, Katherine suspected he liked her as well.

But, there was one thing she was sure of. No matter what happened, Jonathon could never find out she'd come out as a substitute bride in Marta's stead. So, on her way to the washroom, she took the stack of letters out of her purse and slipped them into the fireplace in the hotel lobby.

She didn't even pause to watch them burn.



# Crystal Clear by Ericka Scott



When a sexy psychic foresees her own death, can anyone save her?

I enjoyed the way author Ericka Scott imbued this novella with a feeling of dread from the very first sentence. I just knew something bad was about to happen but she kept me guessing until the end.

> Anna Mae Garland Just Erotic Romance Reviews

You get gratifying sex and a suspenseful murder mystery; it doesn't get any better than that!

Karen H. The Romance Studio

Excerpt

#### Prologue

Sara Dawson stared in horror at the body splayed face-up on the floor. Blood spatter decorated the walls and windows. Blood sheeted the floor beneath the body, congealing in the woman's black curly hair, and was dotted across the milky white skin of the woman's face like macabre freckles. Deep blue eyes stared at nothing. She knew that face.

Nausea roiled in her belly. Shivering, she hugged herself, swallowing hard, bile burning the back of her throat. It was cold, so very, very cold. What should she do?

Shadows deepened, and outside in the street there was a squeal of tires. She jumped, and her glance traveled to the door knob. With a wash of relief, she saw that it was locked. She was safe, for now.

Closing her eyes, she tried to breathe deeply; calm herself down. But again, her thoughts turned to the vision. So much blood. She shivered again. Over the years, she'd

# Crystal Clear by Ericka Scott

often seen death in her crystal ball, both peaceful deaths and violent deaths. She thought she'd become used to it, inured to the blood and the gore.

With jerky movements, she picked up a silky black cloth, forcing herself to perform a routine task when all she wanted to do was run. Run far away, someplace safe. Why had she been so stupid? She knew better than to look into her own future. Just look what it got her. She swathed the large crystal ball on the table with the black cloth and shuddered.

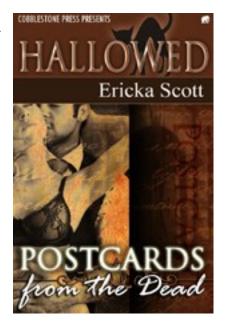
She'd seen death again, and this time, it was her own.

# Postcards from the Dead by Ericka Scott

The dead don't speak to her; they send her postcards.

Postcards from the Dead is a fun paranormal read, perfect for Halloween.... Don't miss this delightfully spooky read.

Karen Haas Just Erotic Romance Reviews



#### Excerpt

"A blind date?" Cassie shook her head, almost losing the phone receiver propped between her shoulder and her chin, as she flipped through the stack of envelopes she'd brought in from the mailbox. Bills, bills, more bills, and junk mail. Thankfully, there were no postcards. She didn't think she could deal with two of them in one week. "I don't think so. The last time you set me up on a date with one of Kyle's friends, it was a disaster. Remember?"

"No," Rosalie disagreed.

"Oh, come on. Mike was so lovesick for his ex-girlfriend he couldn't stop talking about her. I was so sick of hearing about Sara, and then, who did we happen to run into at the restaurant? I'll never forgive you for inviting her to join us. Do you know how hard it is to enjoy dinner when your date is practically making out with someone else at the table?" She didn't add that her bitterness stemmed from the fact that Sara's appearance in the restaurant wasn't coincidence, and Cassie had only been set up with Mike to make Sara jealous.

"Mike and Sara are getting married in December," Rosalie said matter-of-factly, but Cassie thought she detected a modicum of sympathy in her voice.

### Postcards from the Dead by Ericka Scott

"Send my congratulations but do not invite me to the wedding. And as for this blind date thing, I'm not going." As if to emphasize the point, she ripped the junk mail in two, and threw it away in the trash under the sink.

"It's just drinks before the game," Rosalie pleaded. "So if it doesn't work out, you never have to see him again."

"Never?" Cassie inquired. Not that she was even for a moment considering going.

"I promise." Rosalie's voice held a note of triumph.

"When and where? But, I'm not saying I'll be able to make it."

"Seven o'clock tonight at Dino's before the game."

Cassie sighed. "Okay. But drinks, and only drinks." And please let him be attractive, unattached, and interesting. Please!

It was still hard to realize it had been two years since Rick's death. His glasses and the book he was reading were still sitting on the end table where he'd left them that fateful evening. She looked around her little house. Reminders of Rick were everywhere, from the pictures on the mantelpiece to his clothes still hanging in the closet. Rosalie was always remarking how morbid it was she'd kept everything. She often berated Cassie about loving Rick too much. Love? No, love had nothing to do with it.

Cassie felt tears forming behind her lids and angrily blinked them back. She'd been a virgin bride by choice. Rick had been so pleased—until he took her to bed. It had been unpleasant and painful, so much so she'd done almost anything to get out of having him grunting and rutting on top of her. Deep down, she knew she was to blame for Rick's death. Obviously, her frigidity drove him into another woman's arms. He'd been working late every night for months and coming home too tired for sex. Thank the gods for small favors. The night the police had arrived on the porch to tell her Rick had been mugged and murdered, she'd had a fit of hysterics. They'd been so considerate of her grief, never realizing she couldn't stop crying because she was so indescribably happy. She was finally free.

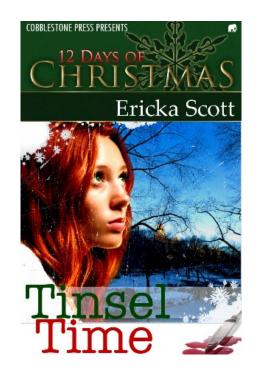
But was she really? Rosalie was always going on about forgiving herself, telling her that *she* didn't force Rick to stand on the corner of Genesis and Appleblossom waiting for a prostitute or a lover. *She* hadn't put a sign on his forehead asking for him to be mugged. But something was keeping Rick here. If it wasn't her guilt, what was it?

After wiping away more angry tears, she picked up Rick's glasses and the book he'd been reading and shoved them into an empty trash bag. Several pictures came off

# Postcards from the Dead by Ericka Scott

the wall, and a hideous plaster bust of Alexander the Great followed them into the bag. In the bedroom, there was less evidence of Rick, much like in life. But, there was still a closet full of his clothes. She pulled them out, hangers and all, and dumped them into the bag; shirts, suits, jackets, shoes. Soon, she had a closet all to herself. With several swift pulls, she extracted the drawers from the chest and dumped the contents into yet another bag. She glanced at the clock on the nightstand. It was almost seven, and she had a date. If she hurried, she could drop off these bags at the local shelter and still make it to Dino's on time.

She'd been living with Rick's ghost for two long years now. Perhaps this time, she would be able to exorcise him forever.



Coming 20 December 2007

Excerpt

Prologue

The letters start arriving as early as June. A few are typewritten; some are written in painfully neat cursive. For the most part, the letters are printed with poor penmanship and spelling. Some are composed entirely of pictures drawn on lined notebook paper. Once, the request came in the form of an empty Barbie doll box from a heartbroken little girl whose favorite doll had been lost when her family moved. Despite the format, they all began the same.

#### Dear Santa.

This one was different. Tinsel could tell by the way Santa held the card. His face was ashen. To Tinsel's distress, even his hands were shaking.

From her vantage point at the desk across from Santa's big chair, it looked like an ordinary Christmas card. Santa got a few each year from friends and retired elves. From

his reaction, the card didn't contain greetings of the season or anything resembling good news.

Tinsel got up from her desk. Santa was so intent on the card he didn't notice her until she'd finished reading the card over his shoulder. *Dear Santa, All I want for Christmas is Tinsel. And if I don't get her this year, you die!* 

The message sent cold tendrils of fear out to clutch at her heart, and she gasped.

Santa jumped and dropped the card in his lap. He put his hand over his heart. "Mercy, child, you scared me. I'm sorry, Tinsel." Santa looked up at her with a sheepish expression. His pale blue eyes glinted behind his glasses. "I never wanted you to see these."

"There's been more?" Tinsel stared at Santa in disbelief. "Show me the others."

Santa hefted himself out of his ornate carved chair with reluctance and walked over to his seldom-used desk. His hands shook a little as he unlocked the bottom right drawer. Inside was a stack of identical Christmas cards.

"Are they all the same?" Tinsel asked.

Santa nodded, but she could tell he was hiding something.

"Who in the world are the cards from?" Tinsel scrunched up her face.

"At first I thought they were from your family," Santa began. "When the Mrs. and I adopted you, the magistrate assured us the files were sealed."

"Whoever it is knows my adopted name. How odd..." Tinsel chewed on her bottom lip as she thought. "I can't imagine anyone threatening you. We have to take this seriously. What can we do to keep you safe?"

"Oh, heavens, Tinsel. I've received a card like this for the last eighteen years. I'm not the least bit worried about it," Santa said, but something about his manner belied his words.

Although Santa held out a hand to stop her, Tinsel reached into the drawer and withdrew one of the cards. She opened it. The wording was identical to the first; however, there was no threat to Santa's life on this one. She pulled out a couple more and again noted there was no death threat on any of them.

"This one is different. This one threatens your life." Tinsel waved the most recent card under Santa's nose. "You have to take this seriously. Someone could lie in wait for you and kill you. We have to do something."

"No, *we* don't do anything. It's important to keep you safe. I'll be okay." Santa's smile looked forced.

She was sure Santa thought the threat was serious. So why wasn't he doing anything about it? Granted, he couldn't quite call the police, but there had to be something they could do. What would they do if something happened to him? Well, he might be too proud and stubborn to ask for help, but she wasn't. No, she'd hire the bodyguard for him.

"So, please, don't worry about me, sweetheart. Nothing's going to happen," Santa said. "Promise me you'll forget you even saw the card."

Tinsel flashed a smile at Santa, hoping he couldn't see the wheels spinning in her brain. It was only a few days until Christmas, so she didn't have much time. She took her time composing a response that would both reassure him and not be an outright lie. "I'm not going to promise. But I'll try not to worry."

"Okay." Santa pressed a kiss to her forehead. He went back and sat down in his chair. She noticed he wasn't quite as enthusiastic as he pulled out the next letter to read.

Tinsel went back to work. Unable to concentrate on the invoices, she waited until he was distracted to slip out of the office.

The hallways were decorated for the holidays. Boughs of holly hung over the doorways, delicate ornaments hung from strands of garland along the top of the walls, and *Silver Bells* played over the public address system. When she'd first come to live at the North Pole, she'd been overawed by the decorations that hung year-round. After the first year or two, she'd stopped noticing them. Today, however, everything seemed to come into sharp focus. Goose flesh danced up her arms as she had a sudden feeling of grief and loss. Nothing, absolutely nothing, must happen to Santa.

She strode down the hall, muttering to herself. How did one go about hiring a bodyguard?

There was always the Internet but, as a security precaution against corporate espionage, Santa got a printout of all Internet activities at the Pole. She paused in the middle of the hallway, causing an elf following too closely behind her to squeak in sudden alarm as he bumped into her.

"Sorry," she murmured. Her mind was chasing down an idea. Bodyguards had to advertise, right? She'd just seen a whole stack of newspapers somewhere in the plant. She turned on her heel and walked back the way she'd come, heading toward the packing plant.

The papers were where she'd remembered them. She grabbed *The New York Times* on top of the pile. Flipping through to the ads, she was amazed at the variety of employment opportunities afforded to people in the Big Apple. Under her thumb, she saw an ad circled in red.

Noel Holiday, bodyguard. Available for holiday events.

Well, she'd definitely define Santa's Christmas Eve deliveries as events.

She pulled out her red-and-white-striped cell phone and punched in the numbers.

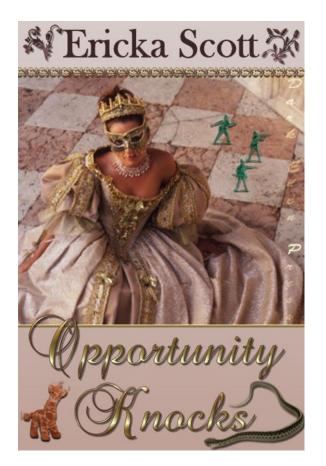
The line was answered on the third ring, and Tinsel started babbling out her story until she realized she was talking to a machine. She drummed her fingers, waiting for the beep to signal her time to speak.

"Hello, you've reached Noel Holiday. Please leave your name, phone number, and the date of your event. I'll call you back as soon as I've checked my calendar for availability." The male voice was deep and warm, like melted chocolate, and made her shivery all over and hot in certain places at the same time.

Tinsel left a message but hung up with an unsatisfied feeling. What if he didn't call back? Besides, she'd want to interview him in person. She'd just pop down to New York and talk to the guy. It wouldn't take long, and no one would be the wiser.

Santa had rescued her once. Now it was her turn to save Santa.

**Opportunity Knocks by Ericka Scott** 



Coming New Years Day 2008

Excerpt

"Zuzanna!"

Now, normally, I like the sound of my name as it echoes through the kingdom. Mixed with the sweet song of the birds singing in the trees, it usually heralded my successful return from a guardian mission and was music to my ears.

But today, the pissed-off tone in Prince Foster's voice made me cringe. Shit. Not polite speech for a faerie, but it summed up my feelings after last night's debacle. Obviously my immediate supervisor, Foster, also had words to pile on top of my already large dose of chagrin.

"Zuzanna!"

### **Opportunity Knocks by Ericka Scott**

I scurried off to bow and scrape in front of him as he sat on his throne in the shade of the largest apple tree in the orchard. The tree was in bloom, and the apple blossom scent was intoxicating. I resisted the urge to sink down into the grass, but stood instead, my head bowed.

"There you are." Foster's voice was sharp as a rose thorn. I looked up into his eyes. Their green depths glittered with enough frigidity to freeze the titties off my faerie body.

In response, my nipples puckered tight against the fabric of my gossamer lace dress. I suppressed a shiver. "Yes."

"This is the third guardianship you've botched in less than a year."

"Yes my liege." I gritted my teeth. It wasn't my fault Foster only assigned me teenagers. All faerie godmothers agreed that to do a good job, you had to take children under your wings while they were impressionable, while they still *believed*. But, arguing with the liege prince would only make things worse. He'd had it in for me for years, the unforgiving imp. When he was a child, he'd misled a human. The poor man was only trying to reach his ramshackle cottage before it burned to the ground to save the lives of his wife and children. Behind Prince Foster's back, I'd lead the human back home in the nick of time. When Foster found out, he'd run to the King, who had only laughed at his temper tantrum. When Foster had been put in charge of the faerie godmother division, he could finally do something about his feelings for me. He'd proceeded to make my life miserable from the very first day he'd taken office.

"You do remember at the beginning of the year I only gave you three chances to improve your performance."

"Yes, I remember." I bit my lip to keep from speaking further, and found my hands were clenched so hard my knuckles were white.

"Well, Cindy Rella was your last chance." Foster's voice was gleeful. "As of midnight, you will be stripped of your powers and banished from the kingdom."

"What?" I'd expected to be punished, perhaps be put in charge of some willful rich child in Hollywood or even demoted to being the scheduling secretary, a miserable and stressful job. But this was beyond imagining. Very few faeries had ever been cast out of the kingdom. My heart stuttered in my chest. With no magic, I would be...*mortal*. The thought was horrifying.

"But I am the only faerie godmother for the entire western region!" I protested.

### **Opportunity Knocks by Ericka Scott**

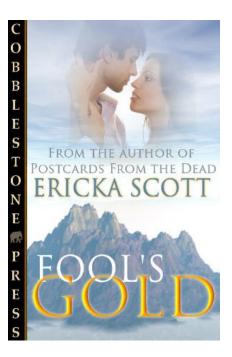
"We've had to downsize. Times have changed, children have changed. Faerie godmothers are out of date and old-fashioned. You can personally attest that they aren't needed anymore. Just be grateful you have a chance to make a fresh start."

A fresh start? As a mortal? Was he nuts? I opened my mouth, but from the look on Foster's face, I could see there was nothing I could say to change his mind. Then I took a closer look at his expression. I couldn't decide on an appropriate adjective for his look – contemptuous, ludicrous, or just insane. I guessed it really didn't matter. He was the faerie in line to be King. However, it would be a cold day in the garden of Hell before I, and many of my fellow faeries, allowed him to take the throne. He needed to mature. A lot.

"You are dismissed until the circle convenes at midnight." Foster flipped his hand at me.

I resisted the urge to stick out my tongue at him. Dismissed until midnight? That was hours from now! What in the world was I going to do until then? Stew in my own dread? Then, I got an idea. A really brilliant, awful idea.

Oh, I would leave the kingdom all right. I'd be gone long before midnight. And, I was taking my wand with me.



# The Werewolf Whisperer

