



Crystal Clear

By

Ericka Scott

Crystal Clear 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.

Crystal Clear

Copyright© 2007 Ericka Scott

ISBN: 978-1-60088-135-0

Cover Artist: Sable Grey

Editor: Susan Greene

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.

Cobblestone Press, LLC

www.cobblestone-press.com

Dedication

To my husband Ed—he's why I believe in happily ever afters.

A special thank you to Lt. Danny Agan for his assistance with police procedure.

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 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.

Chapter One

Would she die tonight? The question haunted her daily, getting worse as the day approached closing time, the time when she went home to an empty house.

Sara had just turned the lock on the front door of the bookstore and flipped the sign over to Closed when the phone rang.

She sighed in indecision. To answer or not answer, that was the question. With a shrug, she opted to ignore the shrill tone. If it was important, they could leave a message. There had only been three customers today; one more wasn't going to make a huge difference in the day's receipts. Luckily, her livelihood didn't depend on the book sales from her tiny store.

A smile played at the corners of her lips as her eyes roved over the shelves of books. It was all so neat and orderly. Then her smile faded. Unlike her life.

The phone stopped ringing, and Sara relaxed. She hadn't realized how tightly wound she was until she jumped when it immediately started ringing again. The ring sounded different this time, sinister. All just her imagination. However, it still took four rings for her to pick up the receiver. Why did people call right at closing, anyway?

Sara smiled insincerely, hoping to put a smile into her voice. "Insights."

"Hello, am I speaking to Sara Dawson?" The male voice was pleasant, deep, and clear. It was also vaguely familiar.

"Yes you are." Sara struggled to put a face with the voice. How did she know this voice?

"Hi, I'm Tony Markham. I was looking for a reputable life coach and was given your name. I have a couple of career decisions that I need advice about. Could I possibly stop by and talk with you?"

"Tony Markham?" Why was the name so familiar?

"Oh, you probably know me as Murray Sinclair, from *Secrets and Sins*."

Now she knew who this was! He'd been prominently featured in this week's commercials for the popular daytime drama, *Secrets and Sins*. Although Santa Clarissa was only ten miles from Los Angeles, it wasn't a town frequented by Hollywood celebrities. "Let me check my calendar. I should be able to meet with you tomorrow."

"It needs to be tonight. Could I come by and see you at your store?" Tony's voice had taken on an imperious tone.

"I was just closing the shop—"

"I can meet with you at your home, if that's more convenient."

"No," Sara snapped. After the vision of her death almost three months ago, she no longer met with any of her clients in her home. "I would only be able to spare a few minutes."

"I'm right around the corner. In fact—"

Sara jumped at the loud knocking on the front window. "In fact, I'm here already." A tall blond man smiled and waved. She recognized him immediately.

Sara grimaced and replaced the receiver before striding to the door. She fumbled with the twist lock on the door, taking several tries before she could get it to open. Her palms were sweating, and she almost lost her grip on the shiny metal doorknob. She had the jitters just because it was getting dark. How silly was that? He was a customer, like any other customer. If it had been three o'clock in the afternoon, she wouldn't have thought anything about letting him into the store.

"Hello. I'm Sara."

Tony shook her proffered hand and then paused dramatically. "It's so nice to meet you, finally."

"Finally?" Sara smiled. A shiver danced down her spine. "How can I help you?"

"As I said on the phone, I need some career advice." Tony wandered over to a shelf of books and began to pull them off the shelf at random, glancing at the covers before tossing them carelessly into a pile on a table where they teetered precariously.

Sara automatically locked the door and hurried over to prevent Tony from disorganizing more of her shelves. "Well, you've come to the right place." Sara took a book out of Tony's hand and put it back on the shelf. She motioned to the back of the store. "Why don't we sit down at the counter, and you can tell me about yourself and what you want to accomplish." And stop making a mess of my store.

"Well, I need more than just advice."

"More?"

Tony's pale blue eyes flashed with impatience. "I think you know what I'm talking about, here. I need the whole crystal ball thing done. I need to know what's going to happen tomorrow, next month, and next year."

"I'm not sure what you're asking for," Sara hedged.

"Damn it, you know what I want. I know who you are and what you can do. I need to know what my future holds."

In her mind's eye, she could see the hand-lettered sign outside the trailer where she'd lived growing up. *Do you want to know what your future holds? Ask Madame Margarita.* Sara shivered. It had been so long ago, she had hoped there wasn't anyone who remembered the small, silver trailer glittering at the side of the road. Not many people had stopped. But once, on that long ago summer day, she'd looked into her mother's crystal ball and seen the shooting of the president days before it occurred. It was an act she would forever regret, although it had brought fame and fortune to the Dawson household.

She looked up again at Tony. She didn't recall him, but then, she didn't know everyone who had come to see her mother, seeking advice. She'd paid scant attention to the clients who came while she was sitting at the cracked veneer kitchen table doing her homework or watching

television on the tiny black and white set perched on the countertop. Gauging his age at pushing forty, he would have been a teenager the summer she clandestinely looked into her mother's crystal ball. Although the story had been covered in the local newspaper, only a few people knew that it was she who sat huddled over the crystal ball for hours describing everything she saw to her mother while her mother took all the credit and the money for seeing the clients' futures. So, how did he know?

"So, will you do it?"

Visions of her own dead body still haunted her dreams as well as many of her waking moments. What if she looked into the crystal ball and saw it again? "No, I can't." Without trying to hide her irritation, Sara snatched up the books Tony had discarded, and then filed them neatly back into their slots on the shelves.

"You can't or you won't?"

"I'm sorry. I can't," Sara said firmly. "I can give you advice based on facts and research. Nothing more, nothing less."

"Please."

"No."

"Okay. I'll take what you can give me." Tony sighed dramatically. "Perhaps once you see how dire my situation is, you'll change your mind."

"Well, have a seat and tell me all about it." Sara motioned to a stool at the counter. To her amazement, Tony slid past the counter and charged through the hanging beads into the back room. The nerve of him!

She followed him. "It's just a store room."

"Is it?" Tony pulled the black cloth off the crystal ball sitting on her desk. Reaching out, he slid a finger over the smooth surface.

Sara snatched the cloth out of his hand. The crystal looked foggy. But when she looked closer, it was clear. With a practiced movement, she flipped the cloth back over the crystal. "We'll do this my way, or no way."

Tony shrugged and followed her back out to the front counter, nothing in his face betraying his feelings. He pulled out a stool and sat down.

Definitely not a gentleman.

"Here's my situation. I've been with *Secrets and Sins* for a season. However, I auditioned for this great part on another show. A sitcom in a prime-time slot. I need to know if I'm going to get the part."

Sara stood at the counter, her arms crossed. "That sounds pretty straightforward. You wait until they call, find out what they're offering, weigh the pros and cons, and then make your decision." Sara shrugged. "You don't need a crystal ball for that."

"But I need to know. And I know you have the power to see what's going to happen. That's what you did that day—you saw the President get shot."

"Tony, I was only three years old. Not everything I see comes to pass. Even if I tried to foresee your future—" Sara held up her hand to emphasize her next point. "Which I'm not going to do. But if I did, I can only tell you what might happen, not what will."

Tony was shaking his head. "But you saw President Reagan's shooting three days before it happened. And John Lennon. I've heard that you knew about that, too."

"I don't know who told you. But I can assure you, I didn't see 9/11 coming. It's not an exact science."

"So, you're saying I should stay with *Secrets and Sins*?"

"No, I'm saying wait and see. If you'd like, I'll do some research and see if I can determine if actors get typecast earlier in daytime television versus prime time, things like that."

"I knew you'd help me." Tony's smile lit up his face, and he stood up as if to leave. "You really won't regret this."

"But first, I have a standard contract that you'll have to sign. Would you like me to sign a confidentiality agreement as well?"

An odd look crossed Tony's face, and Sara felt a momentary pang of disquiet. "No, that won't be necessary."

Sara moved behind the counter and pulled a contract out of the drawer beneath the register. She turned and bumped into Tony. Panic clawed at her insides, and she stifled a scream. Heart pounding, she put her hand in the middle of his chest and pushed. He stepped back and put his hands in the air.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. I was just checking out your antique register. It's a beauty. Does it work?"

"Yes." Sara said through tight lips. Heart still hammering in her ears, she took a deep breath. She needed to get him out of the store as quickly as possible. Oh, why had she agreed to work for him? Stupid, stupid, stupid. Now, she'd have to deal with him again.

With flowing script, she filled out the top portion of the contract, and then hesitated before she pushed it across the counter for Tony to read and sign.

Tony didn't even peruse the contents; he just scrawled his name across the bottom. Then, with an exaggerated movement, he checked his watch. "I have to run. I have another appointment."

"No problem." Sara tried to keep the sarcasm out of her voice. She walked to the front of the store with Tony and unlocked the door.

He slipped out, calling back to her over his shoulder as he strode to his car, "I'll check back with you to find out what you've seen."

Shaking her head in frustration, she turned out the lights and looked out into the dark street. It was easy to imagine all sorts of horrors lurking in the shadows. Then, she squared her shoulders. She should listen to herself. Not everything she saw came to pass.

Too bad she didn't believe that.

Chapter Two

Whoever invented sushi was a tease. Floating by the bar in artfully arranged little boats, the rice, fish, and vegetables looked delectable. One bite, and...yuck.

Being Asian didn't automatically require him to like sushi. He wouldn't even be at a sushi bar if it weren't his friend Mike's birthday. Although Mike was nowhere in sight, if he listened carefully, he could hear Mike's guffawing laughter carried over the noise. Mike was currently in his happy-drunk phase.

Parker Ling glanced at his watch. In about another hour, Mike's cheer would evaporate like the end of happy hour and they could leave. Looking out over the crowd, he tipped up his beer and saw her. His heart stuttered. He didn't believe in love at first sight, but then, he'd never seen her before.

She stood across the room waiting for a table to clear. But even from a distance, Parker could see she had the face of an angel and the body of a goddess. With her wild riot of black curls and nearly-white complexion, she looked like an exotic gypsy, an impression strengthened by her floor-length flowered skirt and loose, round-necked white shirt. Large, gold hoop earrings hung from her ears, and her fingers glittered with gold rings. Without conscious thought, Parker found himself moving in her direction.

She was already seated at a table when he pushed through the crowd.

"Hi. Do you come here often?" As soon as the words were out, Parker wanted to slap his forehead. Had that lame pickup line really passed through his lips?

"No." The woman smiled up at him, her blue eyes twinkling with humor. Then she sobered. "Have we met? You look familiar."

"I would remember if we had. I'm Parker." He reached for the chair next to her. "Do you mind if I join you?" He already had visions of joining with her in a more intimate way, preferably naked in his shower or his bed.

"I'm sorry. I'm meeting a...friend."

He felt like such a dork. She obviously had a boyfriend.

"Well, maybe another time. Nice meeting you." Parker shrugged and moved back to the bar.

* * * * *

Sara stared after the handsome Asian man. She felt as if he'd cast a spell on her the moment he spoke. It was his voice. The sound of it was like a caress that started a slow burn of desire. What she wanted to do was to go pull the guy off into a corner and have him whisper in her ear. Or, better yet, he could take her home and do the whispering in bed. And he looked good, too. She'd love to run her hands through his short, spiked black hair and undress him. Find out if the body under his clothes looked as good as his ass did in those jeans.

But instead, she was waiting for a man she loathed in order to tell him news he didn't want to hear.

Why hadn't she asked him to join her? She didn't even know if Tony was going to show up, and now she'd sent the guy on his merry way to pick up or be picked up by someone else. Sure enough, when she glanced over at the bar, he was talking to a pretty redhead. Great. By the time she got rid of Tony, Mr. Tall, Dark and Gorgeous would probably be going home with someone else. Damn Tony.

"Hey there, pretty lady." Tony slid into the chair next to Sara, making her jump. Even in a public place, the man gave her the willies.

"Sorry to have to meet you this way, but the paparazzi would have a field day if they found out I consulted a psychic."

Sara resisted the urge to roll her eyes. She was sure the paparazzi were more interested in taking pictures of movie stars, not stalking a novice actor in a daytime soap opera.

"I'm a life coach, Tony," Sara automatically corrected him before taking a sip of her white wine. "It may surprise you to know that I went to college, and I have a Ph.D. in psychology. I give advice because I've been trained to. My psychic ability has nothing to do with it."

"Whatever." Tony slurped his beer and, under the table, his hand caressed her knee.

Sara grimaced and pulled her leg away, shifting in her seat to escape his reach. "I'm not really sure why I agreed to meet with you so soon. As I told you over the phone, I've not been able to do much research. However, everything I've found leads me to believe your career would be better served staying with the show. Margo Hutchinson has an impeccable reputation for grooming young actors for bigger and better roles. Almost everyone who started on *Secrets and Sins* ten years ago has gone on to prime time or movie roles."

"Well, personally, I'm not going to be any wrinkled up has-been's pet." Tony's gaze roved over the crowd, never quite meeting Sara's eyes. "This other role could be the opportunity of a lifetime."

"Perhaps if you gave me more information about it, I could use that to help in my research—"

"Yeah, right, and you'd sell that information to a rag before you even walk out the door."

"What? Come on, Tony. I'm the one who wanted to sign a confidentiality clause with my contract."

"Yeah, well, I would be so screwed if the producers of *Secrets and Sins* got wind of this. Sorry, but you're just going to have to do it my way."

Sara sighed. "Well, if you don't give me the information, there's no way I can give you accurate results. You'll just have to use what I've given you or take your best guess."

"Damn it." Tony slammed his glass down on the table. "I'm paying you beaucoup bucks to give me answers, not guesses."

"I'm sorry, Tony. That's the best I can do."

"Well, do better. There's a lot riding on this. Your reputation is at stake here, too. I could ruin you."

"Don't threaten me, Tony," Sara answered coolly. "Our contract is very clear about what services I provide. If you'd like, I'll type up a letter of intent to break the contract first thing in the morning."

"Hey, no. That's not necessary. I'm sorry. I was out of line." Sara didn't detect a hint of sincerity in either his tone or demeanor. Then, just as suddenly, his voice and manner changed. "I know that if you used your psychic powers, you'd be able to help me out. And it would mean so much to me." His instantaneous personality changes only proved one thing to Sara; the man was quite an actor.

With a deft movement, Sara reached over to pluck a hair off his jacket, giving him a friendly pat him on the arm in the process. It was stupid, but she couldn't see any other way to get rid of Tony. She'd met a few men like him, they pestered and pleaded until they got what they wanted, and then they were gone. She'd always said no when it came to those men and sex, but this wasn't the same. Was it? All she had to do was take a look and tell him what she saw. She'd done it for a lot of people for far less money.

Besides, it may have all just been bluster and bluff, but Tony could ruin her. A few bad recommendations or a report about her practices to the Better Business Bureau could put her in a bind.

"So, you'll give it a try? Hey, I really appreciate it." Tony slugged down the last of his beer and stood up.

"A try? What do you mean by that?" Sara asked as a cold chill washed over her. How had Tony guessed what she planned to do? Had her expression betrayed her? Or was he just bluffing?

Tony tossed a few bills down on the table. "That should cover it. I'll call you tomorrow."

Sara rolled her shoulders to relieve a bit of the tension. She knew what she needed to get rid of the stress of dealing with Tony. Hopeful, she

glanced over at the bar. A mass of testosterone was gathered around the set, watching the end of the game, but there was no sign of Parker. Guess it was time to go home to her empty house and cold bed.

Hopefully she wasn't heading home to die.

* * * * *

Parker couldn't take his mind off the woman from Kenji's Sushi Bar. He'd seen a tall, blond man join her at the table. And he'd seen the way the man acted. Normally, Parker wouldn't think of poaching another man's girlfriend, but in this case, he was more than tempted. Anyone could see they didn't belong together. Not like... With a start, he wondered what he was thinking. Most cops didn't have successful relationships. Long hours and the stress of the job made for poor bedmates. But being with her sure would've been fun while it lasted.

Mike had been poured out of the backseat of Parker's Mustang and, after much maneuvering, Parker had deposited him on the couch. It was a ritual. Every year on his birthday, Mike drank too much and passed out; and every year he slept on Parker's couch. To add insult to injury, he typically got sicker than a dog in the night. Not a ritual Parker approved of, but Mike had been his best friend since grade school. If this was Mike's idea of a happy birthday, who was he to disagree?

Parker hoped Mike would sleep off the beer without getting sick this year. Just to be on the safe side, though, Parker put a bucket next to the couch and covered his prized 400-year old Oriental rug with a plastic tarp. Better to be safe than sorry, especially when it came to the furnishings in his apartment. If they were damaged, his mother would kill him.

Dimming the lights, Parker looked around. With a wry smile, he wondered if a drunken man on the couch would disturb the energy flow through the rooms.

Feng Shui. Did he believe in it? He wasn't sure. Growing up as a first generation Asian American, he'd been steeped in superstition and green tea. What his mom had thought would be a land of plenty turned

out to be a land of hard work and not much to show for it. As a result, she clutched at anything meant to bring good luck and prosperity. When his dad had died a couple of years ago, his mom began studying *Feng Shui*. To everyone's amazement, she'd parlayed it into a career. She'd done over friends' houses, neighborhood businesses, and even Parker's doctor's office. His mom had pulled in a six-figure income last year, more money than his dad ever made with his landscaping business.

Oh well. Energy flow be damned, one evening couldn't do too much damage to his luck. Parker glanced down at Mike, who was snoring on the couch. If he were a kind and caring friend, he'd pull the curtains and shut out the panoramic view of Santa Clarissa's city lights. But he wasn't feeling very kind. He'd leave the curtains open, and Mike would wake up to a bright, beautiful sunrise and a horrific hangover.

Once in his bedroom, he stripped down to his silk boxer shorts and slid into bed, the black satin sheets cool against his skin. Instead of reaching for the TV remote, he started thinking about her. With soft strokes, his fingers caressed and cajoled his penis into full arousal while he thought about the beautiful gypsy girl from Kenji's.

In his mind, she was here in bed with him, her long dark curls tickling his belly as her tongue flicked down the side and then lapped at the sensitive tip of his cock. He groaned. She'd be wearing nothing but spiky black heels and bright red lipstick. Her lips were open to encase him, sliding wetly up and down while he struggled for control. And her hands were busy cradling and caressing his balls. He closed his eyes. She glided up the length of his body, her nipples tracing tantalizing trails on his skin before she encased him into her deep center with one smooth movement. His hand slid faster along his length with the urgency of his need. The orgasm rocketed through him, and he struggled to catch his breath while his heart hammered in his chest. The last few wet strokes were almost painfully pleasurable. He hadn't had an orgasm like that in...well, never.

With a pang of loneliness, he closed his eyes. He could still clearly picture her. Damn, since he didn't seem to be able to forget her. He'd just have to figure out how to see her again. Not knowing her name could

pose a bit of a problem.

But, heck, he was a detective. Solving problems was what he did best.

* * * * *

Sara lit some incense and a chunky white candle before sitting cross-legged on a large velvet pillow. Here at home, she didn't need the flowing skirt, peasant top, golden rings or large hoop earrings; all the theatrical trappings people expected of a gypsy fortune teller. She could wear her raggedy old USC sweats and a tank top. No, tonight there was no audience; it was just her and her crystal ball.

Oh, and a picture of her client, Tony Markham, cut from a recent entertainment magazine. In it, Tony's dark blond head was bent over a white-haired woman in a wheelchair as he flashed his characteristic grin for the camera. Readings always went better if the person involved was there to provide focus and to help interpret her impressions. But perhaps having Tony's things would help, too. She took the empty beer mug out of her bag and placed it on the table with the hair she'd plucked off his jacket.

She closed her eyes and tried to clear her mind of everything except Tony's concern: whether he would get the new acting role.

But thoughts of her shop intruded. Should she keep the shop open?

When she'd quit her psychology practice, she deluded herself into thinking she could make a living selling books. For the first few months, her bank account spiraled downward like a doomed airplane, carrying all her dreams. She had almost given it all up and gone back to shrinking heads. Fortunately, one of her friends, a rich widow, asked for her 'unofficial' advice. Sara had steered her friend into a new direction, enabling her to accomplish career goals and find a new relationship. With a thrill, Sara realized she had found her calling as a life coach.

She put out a few flyers in her shop and started giving advice to working moms on how to spend better quality time with their families. Her business paid the rent on her apartment and the store, as well as

paying for an occasional dinner out. With the addition of a celebrity to her list of references, she could think about focusing solely on coaching.

A mist formed in the center of the ball, and Sara emptied her mind of any expectations in order to let the crystal show her the answer. Then, she realized that she hadn't been thinking of Tony. The first image she saw was the inside of Insights. Standing in the doorway was a tall, shadowy figure. She felt as if she was watching his movements on a fuzzy security tape. Nothing was quite in focus.

Gooseflesh crept up her arms as she watched his stealthy approach to the counter. Then, as he slid through the hanging beads separating the shop from the store room, her vision suddenly cleared. But she was looking at herself, not the stranger. In the vision, she was sitting at her desk wearing a surprised and pleased expression.

What happened next had Sara gasping in surprise.

Gazing into the crystal, she blushed as she watched herself brazenly remove her shirt and bra. The man's head dipped to her breast, and a punch of lust shot from her tingling nipple to her aching pussy. She took a deep breath and leaned closer to the crystal.

A loud thump reverberated though the apartment, and her concentration and passion was immediately replaced by panic. Scrambling to her feet, she raced to the door to make sure it was locked. A quick look through the peephole revealed no one in the hallway. She padded through the apartment, turning on all the lights only to see no one and nothing out of place.

Panting with fear, she pulled a kitchen chair and propped it under the knob of the front door. Tears leaked out of the corners of her eyes, and she couldn't stop shaking.

She didn't want to die.

Chapter Three

Police work was nothing but a lot of fancy footwork.

After being roused out of bed at four o'clock this morning, Parker had crawled around a parking lot littered with broken glass, gathering evidence and taking photographs of a crime scene. He'd spent a few hours strolling up and down the street obtaining witness statements, and was now striding down the hallway of the morgue.

The smell of antiseptic was strong. It filled the air as if to overcompensate for the smell of decay. And it was always so damned cold in here.

In search of the medical examiner, Parker pushed open a door and glanced inside. It had been a busy weekend for death; there were several bodies being prepared for autopsies.

His heart clutched. Right inside the door was the nude body of his gypsy woman. He'd just seen her last night, vibrant and very much alive. Now, there was a bloody hole in her forehead. What in the world? Had she been dying even as he'd been jacking off? He must have made a strangled sound, for Dr. Metcalf peered at him over the top of his glasses.

"Did you say something?" Dr. Metcalf resembled nothing less than a larger-than-life black Santa Claus, and he even dressed up like the jolly old soul every year for the department holiday party. No one would ever guess he was a medical examiner. He looked too cheerful and jovial to be in a career that dealt with death day in and day out.

"I—" Parker gulped. "I just saw this woman last night at Kenji's

Sushi Bar."

"Oh, I doubt that." The medical examiner disagreed. "She's been dead almost a week, a Jane Doe. Now, you may have seen this woman." Dr. Metcalf pulled a sheet back on a nearby table and exposed another woman. "This is Dominique Perelli. She was brought in this morning."

Parker stared from one body to the next. "They almost look like twins."

"Even down to the way they died. Raped, strangled, and then mutilated. The worst wound is this. Looks like he drove a railroad spike through their foreheads."

Right through their third eye. The thought came unbidden, almost as if the dead women had whispered it in his ear.

Parker moved from one body to the next, studying their faces. Up close, he could see neither was the woman from last night, but at first glance, both of them could have been.

"As I said, the first body was a Jane Doe. When they brought Perelli in, I was struck by the resemblance, so I pulled Jane out of the cooler to do a comparison."

"So, you think cases are linked?" It was more of a statement than a real question.

"It would sure be a queer coincidence if they weren't," Dr. Metcalf said wryly while pulling on a clean pair of gloves. He snapped the wrist of each glove, a sign that he was ready to move on. "But you came for my other early morning arrival." He motioned over to a large, covered body on a nearby table. "Parker, this is Mr. Jimmy Barfey, or as I've been calling him, Jimmy Barfight."

It hadn't been hard to piece together the story from the witness statements. A typical drunk, disorderly, and dead. That's what Parker called drunken brawls that ended with one combatant in the hospital and the other in the morgue.

Parker noted the details of the autopsy, all the while his mind whirled around his encounter with the woman last night and what it might mean. Was there a connection between these women? Was someone targeting women who looked like gypsies? Then another, more horrifying

thought occurred to him. What if someone was and found the woman from Kenji's before he did? He couldn't bear to think of her dead, cold and nude with a cruel Y incision scarring her chest. No, he had to find her first and warn her.

All in all, Santa Clarissa was a small bedroom community. Finding one woman shouldn't be too hard. Of course, she might not live in Santa Clarissa, which could be a complication. But he wasn't going to think about that. He just needed to find her, and fast.

Back at headquarters, he made his way to the third floor where all the detectives had their desks. Not that they spent much time there. The room was empty except for one woman sitting near the windows overlooking the freeway.

"Hey, Parker." Detective Sheila Strom looked up from the files on her desk with a flirtatious smile. "To what do I owe this honor?"

"I need a favor."

"Done." Sheila closed the top file and looked at him expectantly.

"Wow, and you didn't even ask what it is." Parker made a show of stepping back and looking astonished.

"I'm going on leave at the end of the week. I can afford to be generous."

"Good, then you won't mind giving me some information on one of your cases?"

"Well...on second thought...I don't know about *that*," Sheila teased.

"I'll owe you, big time."

"Do you baby-sit?" The pretty redhead waggled her eyebrows suggestively.

Parker laughed. Sheila Strom had two small children, and judging from the bulge in her uniform, there was a third on the way.

Sheila's gaze followed Parker's, and she rubbed her tummy. "We're hoping for a boy this time. I'm positive it is, from his appetite. Lord knows how we'll feed him when he's a teenager." She laughed at her own joke. "Seriously though, what information did you need?"

"I was over at the morgue earlier. There are two bodies there that look amazingly like a woman I met last night."

"Sounds a bit spooky."

"It is. One of the victims is a Jane Doe, the other is a Ms. Perelli, both your cases. Metcalf thinks they might be connected."

Sheila didn't answer but her eyes were troubled.

"So the cases are related?" Parker guessed.

Sheila paused and bit her lip before answering. "I can't prove it, but I think so." She pulled out files and flipped them open on her desk. "And, I think there's more than just those two. I ran a search on victims that had the same injury to their forehead. The first victim, Jessica Porter, was an assistant director at Third Eye Productions. Then two more murders turned up. One was Kylie Sumners, who worked as a secretary for Third Eye Productions, and the second was Crystal Montgomery, a hairstylist at a popular salon. She'd been recently fired from—" Sheila paused and pointed at Parker.

"Third Eye Productions?" Parker guessed.

"Bingo! We ran a missing persons search for our Jane Doe. A hit turned up in Columbus, Ohio."

"She came a long way to die," Parker remarked.

"She was answering a casting call at Third Eye Productions. We're waiting on forensics to make a positive ID. Unfortunately, we don't have a suspect." She gestured to the files on her desk. "Right now, I'm going through all the personnel files of studio employees and reading stacks of hate mail."

"Fun." Parker fingered one of the crime scene photos. "What did you discover about the clothing?"

"Clothing?" Sheila's voice took on a wary tone. "How did you know about the clothing?"

"Call it a hunch," Parker replied.

"Well, call yourself psychic." Sheila's green eyes narrowed. "We haven't gotten answers from all the victims, but friends of two of them stated they'd never seen the women wear anything like this. It wasn't their style. In fact, the clothing was too small for one of the victims and the perp cut the waistband on the skirt and slit the seam of the blouse to make them fit. Needless to say, I'm very interested in talking to your mystery

woman. If you'll give me a name and address, I'll pay her a little visit."

"That's the problem. I didn't get her name. I just saw her at Kenji's. It was Mike's birthday Sunday night."

"Was she with anyone?"

"A tall, blond guy."

"Oh, you're a big help." Sheila shook her head. "Kenji's, you say?" She flipped through her notebook. "It was for another case, but we questioned the bartender there. He's actually the owner. His name is Toshio Shigeyama. A really nice guy. I got the feeling that Kenji's was a little like that old TV show, Cheers, where everyone knows your name. He invited me and my husband to come back that evening for drinks, on the house." Her expression saddened. "Of course, that was back when I could drink." Her hand strayed to her midriff. "I'd head over there today, but I have a doctor's appointment." She smiled. "We're having an ultrasound done today."

"Listen, I'll return the favor and talk to Shigeyama for you," Parker offered. He had a sense of urgency about this case that transcended a case of raging hormones. "I'll go see if he knows anything and then get back to you."

The phone on Sheila's desk rang and she nodded her assent before picking up the receiver.

Leaving the station, Parker perched his sunglasses on his nose and climbed into his little red Mustang. It was a quick drive over to the bar.

Parker recognized the bartender from the night before. Toshio was tall and rail thin with multiple piercings and a shock of spiky black hair. Unlike last night, there were only a few customers sitting at the little round tables, and no little boats of sushi floated around the bar.

The bartender flashed him a smile of very white teeth. "A little early for a Bud Light, don't you think?"

Parker was impressed that he'd remembered his drink. "Thanks anyway, but I'm on duty."

"Well then, what can I get you?"

"Some information," Parker replied, flashing his badge.

Toshio's expression went from mild disinterest to wary.

"I'm looking for a woman who was in here last night. I don't think she comes here often, but I thought I'd take a chance that you knew her. She has long dark hair and was wearing a long flowered skirt and a white shirt with loose sleeves."

"Is she in some sort of trouble?"

"She might be." Parker hesitated.

"Damn." Toshio threw down the towel in his hand. "You cops just come down on everyone, and she's such a nice lady. She even helped me out when I opened this place."

"I'm not sure I follow you." Parker shook his head.

"If she's in trouble for telling fortunes, that's a bunch of bull. It's not like she's hurting anyone."

"So, you do know her?" Parker slid onto a nearby stool and took out his notebook, then began a methodical search of his pockets for a pen.

"Sara Dawson."

"I've heard that name." Damn. He couldn't find his pen, again.

"She has an ad in the paper sometimes. She's a life coach. You know, someone who helps people get their shit together."

"Oh, yeah. I've seen her ads. You're sure that's her?"

"She was in here last night." Toshio pulled a pen out of his apron pocket and handed it to Tony.

"With a tall, blonde guy?"

"Yeah, the actor dude."

Parker cocked his head to one side. "Actor dude?"

"He comes in here a lot. He's a piece of work. Rude doesn't even begin to describe him."

"His name is?"

"Tony something. He's on some daytime drama; it should be on right about now." Toshio reached up and turned on a small television hanging over the bar.

The closing credits for the show were rolling.

"Darn, missed it." Toshio shook his head. "Oh, no wait." A blond man's picture flashed on the screen. "That guy?"

Parker nodded. "Yep, that's him."

"Do you have a paper with her ad in it?" Parker asked.

"Better yet, I have her business card." Toshio plucked a white square magnet off the ice chest. "Tell her Toshio said hello."

Parker looked down at the business card and almost dropped it in surprise. It featured a line drawing of a head and centered on the forehead was a third eye. Coincidence?

He didn't believe in coincidences.

Chapter Four

Sara woke with a raging headache and three voice mail messages from Tony. The first was polite, the second sounded downright threatening, and the third was beguiling. She flipped the ringer switch on and the phone jangled in her hand. Good thing she'd turned off the ringer last night.

"Hello, Tony," Sara said evenly. She had no doubt as to who was calling her.

"You promised me an answer."

"Tony, it's six in the morning. You woke me up." She yawned and stretched and then padded into the kitchen.

"I've been on the set since four."

Well, bully for you. Sara leaned against the counter and rested her head on her hand. It was way too early to engage in verbal sparring.

"What am I supposed to do?" Tony persisted.

"Give me time."

"How much time does it take? You just look in the damn crystal and tell me what you see," Tony snapped.

"If you think it's that easy, you do it yourself." Sara started to hang up the phone.

"I'm sorry." Tony's voice took on a wheedling tone. "Please, just tell me what to do."

"Stay with *Sins and Secrets*." Sara opened a cabinet and searched for a can of coffee. The rattle of the scoop inside confirmed her suspicion. The

canister was empty.

"That's all you can tell me?"

"That's what the research has shown. Plus, as a psychologist," Sara emphasized, "I don't think you are secure enough about yourself right now. You know as well as I do that with hundreds of actors vying for a few parts, most auditions end in rejection. You're successful in this part right now. Enjoy it, build up some contacts, and get some face time with people who can help you with your career."

"Be Margo Hutchinson's pet, you mean."

"No, that's not what I mean." From what she knew, Margo was many things: stern, demanding, and exacting, but never one to play favorites. "Tony, I think now is a good time to tell you—" The sentence was left unfinished when Sara heard the dial tone.

The louse had hung up on her! Well, enough was enough. She snagged a bottle of chilled cappuccino out of the refrigerator and searched through the cabinets for medicine for her headache and the stiff neck she'd developed sleeping upright on the couch. Owning your own shop meant you couldn't call in sick.

Heading back to the bedroom, she stripped off her clothes, letting the rising sun warm her flesh as she sat on the edge of the bed. She flipped the pills into her mouth and washed them down with the chilled cappuccino. It wasn't as good as the real thing from the coffee shop on the corner, but it would have to do.

She was so tired of making do without the real thing. And she wasn't talking coffee. She wanted good, old-fashioned, sweaty sex. It had been, well, too damn long since she'd gotten naked with a man. And then, at the first opportunity she'd had in months, she blew it. She thought about the guy, Parker, who had tried to pick her up at Kenji's.

I'm waiting for a friend. Could it get any more lame than that? He, of course, jumped to the conclusion she was waiting for a boyfriend. She cringed when she remembered the disappointment on his face. She couldn't have hurt him more if she had slapped him.

Too bad her chances of seeing him again were slim to none. But she couldn't help fantasizing that Parker was the lover from her vision. She

hadn't seen his face, so the only way to tell would be to have him fondle her breasts. And wouldn't that be fun?

She could almost still feel the tug of the mysterious lover's mouth on her nipple. Oh, so wet and soft. And was there just a little bit of a nip in that suckle? She closed her eyes and sighed, picturing Parker's face while her fingers teased her nipples. As she touched herself, she pictured him watching her. His black eyes shining with lust, and in her fantasy, he'd be wearing nothing more than a wicked grin.

She moaned and sighed, letting her fingers find her wet center. She slid a finger between her slick folds, pushing it in and out. It just wasn't enough. Craving release, she fumbled in her bedside drawer until she found her seldom-used vibrator. As she slid it in and out, she imagined Parker's smooth, skin hot against her own. When she flicked on the power switch, she was rewarded with an intense wave of pleasure. Oh, so close. She rubbed her thumb over her clit, and the wave crashed over her. She lay breathless and satisfied as her orgasm ebbed. And who would have guessed? Her headache was gone, too.

She showered and felt like a new woman.

A quick glance at the clock revealed she still had almost an hour to get to work. Perhaps it was enough time for a reading.

She wrapped a towel around her hair and debated on what to wear. Should she go ahead and get dressed for work now? Then, with a shrug and a slight grin, she decided was comfortable now, why change? Perhaps wearing nothing for the reading would be best. Closing her eyes, she focused on Tony, his smile, his voice, and his annoying mannerisms.

The real world dropped away. In the far distance, there was an odd humming. But Sara refused to be distracted. To her relief, the humming finally stopped. The tingling started at her toes and spread until she felt as if every atom in her body was alive and waiting. With a sense of anticipation, she opened her eyes, leaned over, and looked into the ball. A face filled the crystal, grotesquely pressed against the inside. Before Sara could move back, the image moved into the center of the ball with a jerk. Now she could see large hands encircling a slim, white neck. The woman's lips were blue, and the eyes... Sara couldn't take her gaze away

from the eyes. Their brown depths were terror filled, and small pinpoints of blood speckled the whites. Then, in the blink of an eye, the face was gone, and the image was replaced by a panoramic view of the body, lying sprawled in the middle of a hallway.

Her hallway, the one right outside her door! She heard a sickening thud, and then the sound of someone running down the hallway to the stairs.

Usually her visions were premonitions. But, with a start, she realized what had been familiar about the odd humming sound. It had been a woman screaming. Her hand at her throat, she stumbled up from the chair, grabbed her bathrobe, and made her way over to the door.

"Oh...my...goddess." Sara stared with horror at the woman. Blood gushed from a horrible wound in the woman's forehead.

Although she knew there was really nothing she could do, she knelt and felt for a pulse. The woman's muscles convulsed as her life force drained, and under Sara's probing fingers, the pulse faded away.

She heard more screaming, then realized it was her own voice. Suddenly there were people all around, yelling to call 9-1-1, or sobbing and crying hysterically. Another of her neighbors, an old man from India, knelt next to her murmuring prayers over the body in his native tongue. Sara couldn't cry, couldn't focus on anything but one fact. If she hadn't been so caught up in Tony's reading, she would have heard the woman screaming. She could have saved her.

* * * * *

Parker was just around the corner from Insights when the call came in. He pulled into a metered spot down the street from the apartment building since there was an ambulance idling in front. Parker had a momentary stab of hope that was dashed as the coroner's van pulled up, and Dr. Metcalf alighted.

His heart in his throat, Parker showed his identification to the officer guarding the doorway and then took the stairs two at a time. It just couldn't be her.

When he got to the top of the stairs, he stared in horror. It was her. She was standing in her doorway, bloodstained and crying. Then he noticed the body on the floor.

"Sara?" Parker said.

A uniformed officer turned to him, fixing him with a pale blue stare. He looked vaguely familiar, but Parker couldn't put a name with the face. His gaze dropped to the badge pinned on the man's chest. Sergeant Jackson. Still didn't sound familiar. Maybe he was new.

"Yes, that's Sara Dawson." Sergeant Jackson said. "I questioned her already. Seems she didn't see anything. She heard an odd humming, but she was in the shower. When she got out, she heard a thump and someone running away. Said she thought it was kids. When she opened the door, she found the body."

"And the victim?"

"No ID. She says she didn't know her. The vic didn't live in the building, and so far, no one has recognized her."

"Can I talk to Ms. Dawson? Detective Strom had a doctor's appointment, so I'm filling in for her. She's the primary on the other cases."

"Sure thing." Sergeant Jackson looked over his shoulder toward Sara and lowered his voice into a theatrical whisper. "You know, there's something odd about her story."

"What's that?"

"Well, she said she'd just gotten out of the shower. Her hair is barely damp. My wife has hair like that, and it takes forever for it to dry. It may be nothing, but..." The officer shrugged.

"Thanks." Parker skirted the crime scene. "Sara? I'm Detective Parker Ling. Could I ask you a few questions?"

"I—" Sara began, then recognition dawned across her face. "I saw you at Kenji's the other night."

"I was there for a friend's birthday. Why don't we go inside? I'll fix you some coffee, and you can tell me what you heard."

"I'm out. Of coffee, that is." The words came out in small bursts and Parker recognized the symptoms of shock.

“Tea, then? Please.” Parker took her elbow and began to move her inside.

“We’ll need her clothes,” Sergeant Jackson called after them.

Parker had a sudden vision of Sara, nude.

Well now, this was going to be a very interesting interview with that image firmly planted in his head. However, the question still remained.

Was he questioning a witness or a suspect?

Chapter Five

He was a cop?

Sara sat at the kitchen table watching Parker put water in the kettle and forage through the cabinets for tea bags and sugar. Shit. Of all the professions in the world, Parker had to be a cop.

Her bloody bathrobe and towel were now in a large paper bag labeled with her name. She hadn't even balked when he'd told her she'd be required to provide a DNA sample, fingerprints, and a sample of her hair. It was obvious she was a suspect. It made sense; she was the first one to find the body and all. And when they found out about her father—

Damn and double damn.

It wasn't her fault Daddy had been in trouble with the law since he was a teenager. Trouble followed him like a shadow. He'd always proclaim his innocence; he hadn't known the car repair shop he worked at was selling stolen parts, or that the cosmetics he thought he was selling were actually drugs in fancy boxes. Needless to say, the police showed up on their doorstep at regular intervals to roust him for some offense or another.

It was the drugs and the three-strike law that sent her father away for good.

Looked as if this time, trouble had come looking for her. And no one was going to believe her daddy's genes hadn't rubbed off on her.

"I need to ask you a few questions." Parker put a steaming mug of tea in front of her and then slid into the seat across the table.

"I really don't know anything." Sara sat with her legs crossed, trying to look cool, calm, and collected while her insides shook like Jell-O.

Parker flipped something out of his pocket and slid it across the table at her. "Can you explain this?"

Sara stared down at her business card. "It's my business card."

"I'm interested in that." Parker put his finger on the artwork.

"It's just a drawing." Sara shrugged.

"No, that. The third eye."

"The third eye represents enlightenment. I thought it went well with the name of my shop, the type of books I sell, and my job as a life coach. I help people find enlightenment."

"That's all it means?" Parker's voice was disbelieving.

"As far as I know," Sara asserted. "If it has any other meaning, I'm not aware of it."

"So, you aren't associated with Third Eye Productions at all."

"N-no," Sara stammered.

"You don't sound sure."

"I know someone who works there, that's all. But I'm not *associated* with them."

Her mind raced. Third Eye Productions. She hadn't wanted to think about *her* since the day she'd walked out of her mother's house and out of her mother's life. Never to return. Then, after ten years, Margo's name turned up twice. Just coincidence? Sara didn't think so.

"Can I get the name? It might be important." Parker pulled out his notebook and searched his pockets for a pen.

Sara pushed a pencil across the table at him. "How? You couldn't possibly think she has anything to do with it."

"Just give us her name, and we'll decide that."

"Margo Hutchinson, but I haven't seen her in, oh..." Sara scrunched up her face as if she were calculating a difficult math problem. "I'd say ten years or so."

"Do you have an address for her?"

"As far as I know, she still lives in a suite at the Georgian Hotel in Santa Monica."

"Thanks." He scrawled a note in the book and then closed it with a snap. Only then did he look across the table at her. "Are you okay?"

"Just shaken up." Sara put a hand to her forehead. "I just don't understand any of this. That poor woman." She blinked back tears. And that wasn't even the scary part. When she'd looked at the woman lying dead on the floor, for just a second, she had thought the body was her own, that she was caught up in some out-of-body experience. However, smelling the blood and touching the body had dispelled that feeling in a flash.

"You weren't startled by her resemblance to you?"

"I—" What should she say? She so desperately wanted to tell him the truth. She was scared to death. This woman's murder on her very doorstep brought things too close, and she was desperately afraid she was going to be the killer's next victim.

"There have been other murders, but then you know that, don't you? How many?"

Was his question just a stab in the dark? Did he expect an answer, or was he just hoping to scare her? She was so tired of being afraid to die. And death had come entirely too close for comfort. And, if she really was next on the list, she needed help. She didn't want to die. Not the way she'd just seen that woman die. So, she took a chance and told him the truth. Would he believe her? Probably not, but she had to tell someone what she'd seen. "Five others. There have been five other murders."

Parker jumped up from the table and paced around her small kitchen. "How do you know this?" he demanded.

"I just know things sometimes."

Parker answered her with a glare, then pulled out his cell phone and began dialing.

"I'm taking you in for questioning." Parker informed her after a short conversation with Lieutenant somebody-or-other. Damn it, she almost wished Parker would just arrest her and be done with it. The murderer wouldn't be able to get to her if she was in jail.

* * * * *

"My daughter is *not* a murderer." Margo Hutchinson's clipped British accent had assured him, and now it looked as if she was right.

While Sara waited in the interrogation room, Parker had placed a call to the Georgian Hotel. At first, Margo Hutchinson wasn't available. However, upon mentioning Sara's name, he'd been admitted into the inner sanctum, as it were, and his call had been forwarded to Margo's cell phone.

"She's your daughter?"

"Yes."

"I still don't understand how she would have known about the murders."

"She's psychic. If you don't believe me, call Captain Miller. If that still doesn't convince you, Special Agent Jeffrey Davis."

"Psychic?"

Parker hung up the receiver with a sense of being caught in the Twilight Zone.

Still doubtful, he'd called his captain, who not only confirmed that Sara Dawson was a registered psychic with the FBI, but also berated him for interfering in another officer's case.

His ears still ringing, Parker stalked back to the interrogation room and threw open the door.

Sara looked up at him, her eyebrows raised.

"We're done here. So, come on, I'm going to take you home."

"What?" Sara exclaimed.

"H.O.M.E. Home, you know the place. And when we get there, you're going to tell me everything."

"I don't want to go home," Sara said as Parker took her elbow and pulled her toward his parked car. A chilled finger of fear trickled down her spine. She desperately didn't want to go home, didn't want to face the bloodstained carpet outside the door, and didn't want to know that the murderer was sending her a clear message that she would be next.

Parker opened the door and motioned her inside. "I'm under orders to deliver you to your doorstep and issue an apology from the

department. Where you go from there is your business."

She felt numb. Was this how death felt?

As they drove through town, Sara stared out the window, watching people pass by. Everything looked so normal. Why couldn't she have been blessed with normal? She wrapped her arms around herself and began to make plans to find someplace safe to stay. Perhaps a hotel? Or would it just delay the inevitable? Would murderer just wait until she returned? Maybe, maybe not? Probably. And did she have the courage to look in her crystal again to try to find the answer?

"So, are you really psychic?" Parker looked at her out of the corner of his eye.

"It's not something I volunteered for," Sara snapped.

Slamming on the brakes, Parker pulled out of traffic and over to the curb. "Listen. There's an animal out there killing women, and you seemed to know an awful lot about the case. What did you expect me to think?"

She was tired of skirting around the truth. "Yes, I'm psychic." Sara swiveled in the seat, looking Parker full in the face. "I see things. Most of the time, I've learned to block them out. But, if I open myself up through meditation, I get visions, premonitions. And I've seen a couple of the murders. The first one was about three months ago."

"And this morning?"

"I saw the woman murdered in my crystal almost simultaneously to it happening."

"Did you see who did it?"

"No. Mostly I'm observing a scene, standing outside the action. But the last few visions have been spooky. I've been looking through someone else's eyes."

"The killer's?"

"Maybe. Probably. I don't know." Sara shuddered. Was the lover in her vision also her killer? And if so, was it Parker? But, looking up into his eyes, all she saw was concern. She was going to follow her heart and hope it didn't get her killed.

"So, three months ago, which victim did you see?" Parker asked.

"I didn't see any of the other victims then. It was me; I saw myself

get killed.”

Chapter Six

If they already hadn't been stopped at the curb, Parker was sure he would have wrecked the car.

He stared at Sara in astonishment. She looked so calm. Not the way he'd be feeling if he knew his days were numbered.

"You what?"

"I saw my own death," Sara repeated. "Don't look at me that way."

"I can't just take you home knowing that. What if he's waiting for you?"

"The first few days, I was petrified. I didn't want to get out of bed in the morning. What's the use if you know you're going to die? But after about three days of feeling sorry for myself, I realized I couldn't live like that." Sara shrugged.

"Well, I'm not taking you home. You're coming to my place."

Parker whipped the Mustang into a neat U-turn.

Sara didn't say anything as they sped toward his apartment building on the other side of town.

It wasn't until he was opening the door to his apartment that Parker finally asked, "You aren't going to protest staying here?"

"If you're the killer, I'm dead anyway. If you're not, I'm safe for one more day," Sara replied.

"You sound resigned to your death. Personally, I don't believe in fate."

"Oh, I'm going to fight death, tooth and nail. But, I'm really hoping

you aren't the killer." Actually, she was hoping he was the lover she saw in her vision. Then, embarrassed at her thoughts, she changed the subject. Looking around the apartment's red leather furniture, antique rugs, and exquisite artwork, she exclaimed, "Wow, who did your decorating?"

"Hey," Parker chided. "You say that as though you think men aren't capable of having a nice apartment."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Sara sputtered.

"Don't be. My mother decorated it."

"It's gorgeous." And nothing like hers with the couch that sagged on the left side, the recliner that was missing a patch of fabric where her cat, Romeo, had used it for a scratching post, and the bed that was still half made.

"I can also cook, after a fashion. Why don't you take it easy, and I'll whip up some dinner?"

"Thanks."

Sara drifted over to the bookcase and thumbed through the titles. Rows of bestsellers were scattered among criminology textbooks and gun catalogs. Looking at the titles of the bestsellers, Sara reflected that they had one thing in common. They both liked Patterson, Deaver, and King. Too bad all the writers also had one thing in common—death. A subject she dearly wanted to avoid for, oh, the next sixty-odd years.

"It's not much." Parker carried a tray out of the kitchen.

"Not much?" Sara felt her eyes go wide as she viewed the plates of crisp fried egg rolls and lo mein noodles with stir fried chicken and vegetables. It smelled delicious, and her mouth began to water. She was hungrier than she thought.

"You cooked all this?"

"No, they were leftovers. Come sit down and eat." Parker placed the tray on a small table and pulled out a chair for her with a flourish.

"From no Chinese restaurant here in Santa Clarissa. I know, because I've eaten at all of them, and none of their food looks this good." Sara slid into the seat, and her back grazed his fingers. Instead of pulling away, his hand lingered on her back for longer than was necessary, the heat from his fingers dancing directly to her womb.

Parker laughed. "No, from my Mom."

"You're close to your mother?" Sara took a big spoon of noodles and transported them to her plate. When Parker nodded, she added, "I envy that."

"I take it you aren't. Ms. Hutchinson said it had been ten years since she'd seen you."

"It's a long story." Sara shook her hair back. "I'm sure—"

"I'd love to hear it," Parker interrupted. "Please."

"Well, first off, Margo isn't psychic. Her mother was, though, and Margo grew up in a carnival. All she really knows is how to read people." Sara sighed, thinking of all the little clues people gave off that revealed their thoughts. Looking across at Parker, she was startled to see that he was leaning forward, his gaze fastened to her lips. With a slight shiver, she realized that he was giving off very clear signs that he was interested in her.

"Go on," Parker prompted. "There has to be more to your animosity than that. You left when you were what, eighteen?"

"Yeah, but it started when my father went to jail. I was just three and had been told over and over never to look into Mama's crystal. But, of course I did." Sara shivered slightly.

"What did you see?"

"Death. I saw the president get shot. It was three days before it actually happened. So, Margo quickly figured out that I had inherited the gift. Then, she used me. I'd look in the crystal, tell her what I saw, and then she'd tell her clients."

"Pretty rough on a little girl," Parker remarked, breaking an egg roll open.

"When I was sixteen, I had a vision of a missing girl. That summer, I went to work for the FBI."

"But, you haven't worked for them in years? Right?"

"I worked for them for two years, until I broke down and couldn't do it anymore."

Revulsion was written clearly on Parker's face. "My God, you were just a kid."

"Yeah. It was awful— death, dismemberment. You name it. I saw it."

"Yet you turned out normal."

"Normal?" Sara paused with a fork halfway to her mouth. Pointing it at him, she accused, "Didn't you take me in earlier because you thought I was the killer?"

"Well, I..." Parker looked abashed.

Sara reached across the table and took Parker's hand. It was as if an electric current passed through them. Looking into his eyes, she could see he felt it, too. A rush of desire deep in her core dampened her panties. "As soon as I was eighteen, I walked out and went to college. I got a Ph.D. in psychology, but I wasn't happy. Books make me happy. Helping people who really want to be helped makes me happy. So, I bought a bookstore and became a life coach." Reluctantly, Sara withdrew her hand from his and picked up her chopsticks. "And yes, I still consult my crystal occasionally, but I don't do it for money any more." As soon as the words left her mouth, Sara felt guilty. Wasn't that what she was doing for Tony?

But tonight she wasn't going to think about Tony. She was going to focus on Parker. She watched him skillfully manipulate chopsticks and suddenly wanted his long, dexterous fingers caressing her. And his mouth. Oh, what she would like him to do with that mouth. His eyes met hers and for a moment, and the food was forgotten as they stared into each others eyes. She'd never seduced a man before, but, hell, if she was going to die soon, she was going to go out with no regrets.

Parker produced two crunchy cookies from a small bowl on the table and presented her with one. "And, to finish the meal, your fortune."

"Isn't that my job?" Sara quipped. "Well, let's hope mine predicts a long life."

Parker sobered immediately. "We have to figure out how to keep you safe until the killer is caught."

"I don't want to talk about that now." Death was the last thing Sara wanted to talk about. In fact, she didn't want to do any talking at all. Just moaning, panting, and perhaps a bit of screaming when she came.

She picked up her glass of wine and then moved over to sit on a red

futon. Parker followed, sitting beside her. His thigh brushed hers, and the heat from his body seared along her thigh. Oh, to have that heat all over her body. Only, how in the world could she make that happen?

Then she looked up into his eyes, and she realized the details didn't matter. She just wanted him in her life, in her bed, in her body – now!

She chewed her bottom lip as she thought, then lifted her glass to her mouth and drank it down in one long gulp.

Mistaking her intention, he stood up and held his hand out to refill her glass.

Instead, she put her glass on a nearby table. Slithering over to perch on the edge of the futon, she put her hands on his hips, pulling him close.

Looking down at her with eyes heavy with desire, he stroked her head.

Before she could have second thoughts, she unfastened his pants and pushed them down. She let her hands slither over his black silk boxer shorts and heard his breath catch. His erection strained against the slick fabric, and she took him into her mouth, silk and all. She slid her hands around to cup his butt, feeling his muscles tighten. His hands rested on her shoulders, and his eyes were half-closed in ecstasy. And she had only just begun.

With a deft movement, she yanked his boxers down and looked up at him. She took him into her mouth again, this time with excruciating slowness.

He groaned and tangled his fingers in her hair.

Parker struggled for control, wanting to thrust deep and hard into her mouth. Her gaze was still locked onto his as she licked him and teased him to distraction. Then, as if she'd been in his fantasy, she licked her palms and caressed his balls. He was going to come if things didn't slow down.

He reached down and pulled her up. He sucked on the sensitive skin at the base of her neck while he ran his hands down her back to cup her behind. He could feel her fingers fumbling for the buttons of her shirt, so he let go of her sweet curves to stop her hands.

"I want to undress you," he said, his voice hoarse.

With a yank, he tore open her shirt. She was wearing a rose colored corset that pushed up her breasts but didn't cover her nipples. He brushed his lips over them from side to side until they puckered tightly. Had she really been wearing this when he'd arrested her?

If he'd have known that... He lost his train of thought as the sweet tips of her breasts distracted him. He wanted to taste her. With tongue, lips, and gentle nips, he concentrated on first one breast, then the other, wanting to take his time and have her begging for release. Her breath was coming in small puffs, and he could feel her heart pounding under his palm.

Her belly was flat below the line of the corset, and he ran his fingers down her smooth, silky skin, feeling gooseflesh form under his fingertips. He smiled and captured her mouth in a kiss, sucking on her bottom lip as his fingers unbuttoned her jeans. With a wiggle, Sara slid them off her hips. Parker caught his breath as he looked at her. She was wearing a rose-colored thong garnished with a feather.

Well, he definitely knew what he wanted to do with that.

He tipped Sara back onto the couch so he could kneel between her legs. The heady scent of her desire had him wanting to rip off the small scrap of cloth and take her right then and there. Instead, he spread her legs and cupped her buttocks, lifting her to meet his mouth. He kissed her through the lace, pushing his tongue against her. She squirmed and moaned his name, then her eyes went dark when he pushed her panties aside and slipped one finger inside her. Letting her buck against his hand with her need, he swirled his tongue over her clit and was rewarded when she moaned. He licked deeper into her.

"Please, Parker. I need you, now," she begged.

But there was still the matter of that feather.

Parker slid her panties down, and then smiled at her discomfort as he picked up the feather and began teasing her with it. He ran it over the length of her body, lingering with soft strokes on her lips, her nipples, down her sides. Then he drew ever tightening circles on her belly until the feather was focused over the mound of dark curls between her thighs. She spread her legs, but instead of focusing on the wet heat of her core, he slid

the feather down first one thigh, then the other, and would have focused on her feet if she hadn't snatched the feather from his hand. With an impatient groan, she pulled him down to her.

Parker took her then, letting just the tip of his penis slide into her. Sara shifted desperately under him, trying to coax him into her depths. He resisted, knowing that once he was deep inside her, he wouldn't be able to stop. Kissing her, he wondered if she tasted her own desire as his tongue licked the inside of her mouth. He shifted to focus on her breasts. She writhed as he teased each nipple with his teeth and tongue. Then, when she was begging for release, he let himself slide fully into her wet depths. She wrapped her legs around his waist and pulled him in tight, forcing him to fill her completely.

Time stopped as they stared into each others eyes. Then, Parker pulled himself almost out of her, teasing her by holding the position just a second too long, and then plunging back into her. On the third thrust, her orgasm hit. Parker let her pull him deep inside her while she shuddered in his arms. Her pussy milked his cock, and he answered her rhythm, rocking back and forth, clinging to the last vestige of his control. He should pull out. This was the time. Then, he looked down at her face. He'd wanted this, he'd wanted her, from the first moment he saw her. With a trill of emotion, he realized it was either all or nothing. And he wanted it all.

He pulled her legs over his shoulders. His fingers pulled and tugged on her nipples while he took her with hard deep thrusts. Through the haze of his desire, he heard her whisper his name as he climaxed.

Sara looked up at him with sleepy blue eyes.

"Wow," she whispered.

He couldn't think, couldn't speak. Not yet, anyway. He took another ragged breath, and his muscles shook as he extricated himself from between her long legs.

There was no way they were going to make it to the bedroom. He tugged on the edge of the futon, unfolded it, and he stretched out beside her.

"Sara," he whispered.

But she only twitched in reply; she'd already fallen asleep. Parker smiled and turned over. His body was sated, but his mind was restless. He needed to figure out how to keep Sara alive until the killer was caught.

He wasn't sure he'd be able to fall asleep until he pried his eyelids open and realized it was morning already. Sara was spooned up against his back, her arm over his body, and her hand held his penis while her thumb stroked his sensitive tip.

He was late to work, but for the first time in years, he didn't care.

Chapter Seven

She really hated to lie.

But Sara also hated having a man insist on locking her up to keep her safe. So she had promised to stay at Parker's apartment all day. It was a promise she had no intention of keeping. She wasn't going to stop living her life. To do that would just be another type of death.

"I'll be fine," she insisted for the tenth time.

"If you say so, but I don't feel good about leaving you alone."

Parker opened the door and then shut it again.

If he didn't leave soon, she was going to have to push him out the door. Finally, he opened the door and stepped into the hallway. He looked at her, and she could see the indecision in his eyes.

"Go. I'll be fine." Sara cradled his face in her hands.

Parker pulled her to him. His kiss was gentle at first, then it deepened as his hands roamed down her body. He cupped her breast and rubbed his thumb over her nipple.

Sara giggled and pushed his hand away. "Stop."

"Okay," Parker said grudgingly. She could see regret and worry in his eyes. "I hate to leave you." But he walked backwards down the hall while she wagged her fingers at him. As he pushed the elevator button, he called back, "Lock the door!"

Sara shook her head before closing the door and twisting the deadbolt. Then, she glanced at her watch. She'd wait ten minutes, call a cab to the store, and be home before he got off shift. Hopefully no one

would be the wiser.

* * * * *

Parker jangled the keys in his pocket as he rode the elevator downstairs. Twice he almost changed his mind about going in to work. No one knew Sara was here. She'd be safe, right? And the more people out looking for this sick bastard, the quicker he'd be caught, and the safer Sara would be. Right?

With a sigh, he started the Mustang and steered it out into traffic. His cell phone rang, and he punched the button on the hands-free phone device on the dash to answer it.

"Detective Ling."

"Hey, Parker. You got a minute?" Detective Sheila Strom's voice carried clearly over the ringing of phones in the background.

"Sure. How'd the ultrasound turn out? Did you get pictures, and is it a boy or a girl?"

There was silence on the other end and for a second, Parker wondered if the call had been dropped.

"Oh, I have some pictures to show you all right, but, well, you need to see them for yourself."

"Okay. I'll be there in a few." Parker shook off a vague sense of unease. Hopefully Strom didn't want to tell him off for interfering in her case yesterday. Parker bit back a grin, thinking it had been the best bit of *interference* he'd done in years.

Arriving at the station, he took the stairs to the third floor. Detective Strom wasn't at her desk, but pinned to the phone was a note that she was in the video conference room.

"Whatcha got for me?" Parker slid into the darkened room and then stared at the screen. It was Sara, sitting in front of a crystal ball. Or was it?

"After you left yesterday, Sergeant Jackson got to thinking about the Dawson woman's statement. He went into the apartment with the manager to lock up. And look what he found sitting right on the kitchen

table." Sheila motioned to a stack of six video tapes, each clearly labeled with a victim's name.

"What?" Parker shook his head.

"Yeah, looks like a type of audition tape. The victims were all dressed up like gypsies and appeared to be looking into the crystal and reading from a script. You can see a corner of it right there." Sheila used a laser pointer to indicate a white object.

"This isn't making sense." Parker sat down.

"I sent Sergeant Jackson right over to the courthouse to get a more extensive search warrant."

"Wait a minute. I was sitting at the kitchen table yesterday when I questioned her. There were no tapes. I would have seen them."

"Well, that's where he said he found them."

"You know, I didn't recognize Sergeant Jackson. Is he new here?" Parker felt cold all over.

"I don't know him personally. He just showed up at my desk this morning with the tapes."

"Shit." Parker stood up so fast that his chair went over backwards and hit the floor. "He's not over getting a warrant. He's an actor." Parker snapped his fingers. "Now I know why he looked so familiar. He's the actor I saw meeting Sara at Kenji's, the one from *Secrets and Sins*."

"What?"

Damn it, there's just too many coincidences to ignore. I think he's our killer."

"That's a bit of a stretch isn't it?" Disbelief tinged Sheila's voice.

"No, it makes sense. These women were auditioning for a part for someone connected to the studio. That's how he lured them into dressing up. "

"Margo Hutchinson is Dawson's mother. Isn't that enough of a connection?"

"Maybe, but look at the way these women are acting. Simpering and smiling in between takes. They aren't auditioning for a woman."

Sheila watched in silence for a minute. "You're right. I'm going to call over to Judge Harrison's though, just to make sure we're not jumping

the gun on this. If Jackson's over there..."

"He won't be." Parker insisted. He pulled out his cell phone and dialed his apartment. Getting no answer there, he called Sara's apartment and then the bookstore. Damn, where was she?

Sheila hung up the phone and turned to him with a worried look on her face. "You're right. Jackson never showed up."

But Parker didn't hear her; he'd already raced out of the room. He had to find Sara, and fast.

* * * * *

Sara opened the shop. It *felt* different. She looked around. Nothing was out of place. Perhaps it was just her who was different. She smiled to herself. She certainly felt different. With a shrug, she turned on all the lights.

At the counter, she pulled out a stool and sat down with a sigh, cracking open the latest James Patterson bestseller. Nothing like reading about a fictional serial killer to keep her mind off a real one.

"Where were you yesterday?" A voice demanded.

Sara jumped as a police officer came out of the back room. It was Sergeant Jackson. Why was he searching her store? Was she still a suspect?

"What are you doing here?" Sara demanded.

"You didn't answer any of my phone calls, either."

"What?" What the hell did he want? She'd already given her statement to the police. Her skin crawled, and she had a distinct feeling of déjà vu when the man crowded up to her by the register. No, it couldn't be. He'd changed the color of his hair and his skin tone, but after taking a closer look, she recognized him.

It was Tony! What the hell was going on?

As she watched, Tony peeled off his fake eyebrows with a predatory grin. Why in the world was he impersonating a cop? Then, she looked up into his eyes, blue and cold.

"So, Sara...do you know who I am now?"

"Tony, what are you doing here?"

"Oh, I think you know perfectly well why I am here." With that, Tony placed a stained railroad spike on the counter.

Oh my goddess, Tony was the killer. She'd been so stupid. All she had seen was his celebrity status and his money. Why hadn't she seen the madness?

Heart pounding, she snatched up the phone to call the police, but Tony grabbed it out of her hand and, with a jerk, threw it across the room.

Her breath caught in her throat, and she backed away.

He grabbed her arm and twisted it behind her back until she gasped. "'Yes, officer, no officer.' I'll bet you didn't even recognize me yesterday. Heck, even the cop didn't look at me twice. But then, why should he? There really is an officer Jackson, he's just missing his uniform."

"You didn't kill him, did you?"

"Wouldn't you like to know? But if I told you, you'd go blabbing to that pretty-boy cop friend. Where is he, anyhow?"

"Looking for you." Sara said through gritted teeth.

"Looking for a serial killer, you mean. Originally, you were just going to be one of my victims. But, I got to thinking that it would be even better if I delivered their killer to them. You'd have made such a pretty prisoner too. Too bad you have a conscience and will be overcome by remorse and kill yourself." Tony snickered. "Such a pity. I'm sure you would have been the most popular prisoner on the cell block."

"You're sick Tony. Turn yourself in. No one's going to believe that I killed those women."

"Sure they will. I've left them the audition tapes, and there will be plenty of other evidence found in your apartment."

Her apartment. That's where it was supposed to happen. If only she could get out into public, she could scream, call for help. But, she was shaking so hard she wasn't sure she could stand much longer, let alone walk or run to safety.

Tony pulled the gun out of his holster. "So, let's get going."

"Where?" Sara hoped her face didn't betray her panic.

"Don't play stupid with me. You know I'm going to kill you." Tony smiled. "But, I need one last thing."

Sara's knees wobbled, but she steadied herself with one hand on the counter, hoping she didn't collapse at his feet.

"I know you've seen it."

"Seen you kill me?" Sara held her head up. If she was going to die today, she was going to go out with a blast and make sure that she left enough evidence to convict Tony. "Yes, I saw it."

"I knew it." Tony gloated. "When? I have to know the details."

"Why should I tell you?"

"You don't have to tell me. But, if you do, perhaps I'll let that police officer live a little longer."

Parker. Sara's breath caught in her throat but she managed to croak out, "Three months ago."

There was a long period of deadly silence, and then Tony laughed. It was a horrible sound, mirthless and cruel. "What a coincidence. Do you know what happened three months ago?" Without waiting for an answer, Tony continued, "Well, you obviously don't watch very much daytime television." Pushing her forward with his gun at the small of her back, he steered her through the storeroom and out of the store to his car, parked in back. "My character's been in a coma for the last three months while my contract negotiations stalled. For three months that bitch has refused to pay me." He pushed her into the passenger seat. "Well, Margo's going to regret it. But I need to make sure I've covered all the bases. And that's what you're going to tell me."

"Where are we going?" Sara asked, although her heart knew their destination.

"Back to your apartment. You need your crystal ball."

He slammed the door. Sara made a grab for the door handle. This was her chance to escape. Her palms left wet streaks on the leather. Damn it, where was the handle? Then she felt something under her fingers. An empty screw socket. He'd removed the handle! She scratched at the leather, pounded on the window, and screamed for help.

Tony slid into the driver's seat. "Shut up." He backhanded her with

the gun and then started the car.

Blinking back tears, she held her hand to the throbbing area on her face. Blood. The son of a bitch. It was a three-block drive to her apartment, but in that time, she picked off part of a fingernail and dropped it in the seat. Then, when Tony's attention was on traffic, she wiped her blood all over the inside of the door, concentrating on the area around the little screw hole. That would be hard to clean.

After parking in front of the apartment building, Tony dragged her out of the car. "Scream, and I'll shoot you," he muttered.

"Shoot me, and you won't get your future told." Sara snapped back. Oh, why hadn't she stayed at Parker's apartment? Thinking about him made her heart lurch in her chest. She blinked back tears. She'd waited so long to find him, and now... No, dammit, she wasn't dead yet.

The door to her apartment was locked. Tony pulled the crime scene tape loose and stood over her while she unlocked the door. Once it was open, he shoved her inside. "Now, do your magic."

She nearly fell, but caught herself, taking the opportunity to smear blood on the wall. On shaking legs, she moved over to the table, whisking the black silk cloth off the crystal ball. Were those sirens she heard in the distance? No, it couldn't be. No one knew where she was or that she was going to die.

Stalling, she fumbled with matches, trying to light a stick of incense. She didn't need it, but Tony didn't have to know that.

He picked up the crystal and held it up to the light. Even from a distance, Sara could see a mist forming in the center. Tony, too, seemed mesmerized by what he saw. His jaw dropped open and he stared.

Oh, baby, here was her chance. Could she make it to the door?

With surprising speed, he dropped the crystal onto its stand and caught her, pulling her backward by her hair. Then, his hands closed around her neck and squeezed.

"Three lousy months waiting on an answer." His hands squeezed tighter, and Sara struggled to stay conscious. She clawed at his hands, drawing blood with her ragged fingernail and felt back further, hoping to claw him in the face. Then, time seemed to slow down, and the world

began to go fuzzy around the edges. White. She felt heavy, and although her mind was screaming for her to fight, she could see that her limbs dangled uselessly.

The sirens sounded close and then faded. By the time they arrived, it would be too late.

Parker crept up to the door of the apartment. He'd taken a gamble that Sara would be here and not at the bookstore, and he'd even called for backup. If they arrived and found him guarding an empty apartment, he was going to feel mighty foolish. Holding his breath, he tried to listen through the door. Was that an odd shuffling noise inside, or just his imagination? Taking a deep breath, he kicked open the door.

What he saw inside made his heart stammer. Tony was holding Sara by the neck like a stray kitten.

"Police! Let her go." If he could get a clean shot, he'd blow the bastard's head off. But Tony swung Sara around, using her as a shield.

"Drop the gun," Tony replied in an overly calm voice, "or she's a dead woman."

Sara was close to death already. Parker could see her eyes were beginning to bulge and glaze over. If he didn't do something and do it quickly, she'd be just another dead gypsy girl. No, he'd play Tony's game. He put the gun down slowly and raised his hands.

"Now kick it away from you."

When the gun clattered across the floor, Tony threw back his head and laughed. "Now, go sit over at the kitchen table like a good little cop."

Parker held his hands up, moved over slowly, and sat down. Rage welled up inside him. He had to save Sara somehow.

"What's that?" Parker pointed.

Tony's attention immediately snapped over to the crystal ball and then bounced back to Parker.

To Parker's relief, Tony's grip on Sara loosened, and he could hear her rasping breaths.

Tony shoved Sara down into the chair in front of the crystal. She slumped over, but Tony pulled her upright, holding her up by her hair, the gun held to her temple.

"Tell me what you see now," he demanded.

"I don't see anything."

"Look again, bitch. There's something there. Look!" Tony moved closer, so that he, too, could gaze into the ball.

"Maybe I do see something," Sara whispered.

When Tony looked down again, Parker made his move. He pulled a gun out of his ankle holster and hid it on his lap.

"Tell me what you see," Tony demanded.

Sara's voice shook. "You're in front of an audience wearing a suit."

"Is it an award ceremony?" Tony asked eagerly.

The man was definitely a loon. Award ceremony? Parker stood up and pointed his gun at Tony. "No, more like your sentencing hearing. Step away from Sara."

"Oh, our boy's a real Charlie Chan," Tony quipped. "Looks like a standoff. You shoot me, I shoot her."

"Even if you shoot her, you're dead." Parker inched closer.

"Look." Sara rasped.

Tony looked back down into the ball, and Parker leaped across the room, pressing the barrel of his gun against Tony's temple.

From the sound of the sirens, the police had arrived. But could they get a sniper set up before Tony pulled the trigger?

"Sara, get out of here," Parker instructed.

Tony made no move to shoot her as Sara stumbled away from the table.

"Run for the door, baby. Then, it's just me and Mister Madness, here."

"Oh, the folly of foolish cops," Tony said theatrically.

With one smooth movement, he slid a foot behind him and elbowed Parker off balance. Then, Tony grabbed Parker's arm and wrenched it up, pulling it into an awkward, painful position. The gun dropped to the floor.

"I took Jujitsu." Tony said in a superior voice. "Perhaps you should pay a bit more attention to your heritage."

Just when Parker figured he was a dead man, Tony's eyes went

blank and his grip loosened.

“What the—?” Parker exclaimed.

As Tony collapsed to the floor, Parker could now see that Sara had been standing behind Tony. There were tears streaming down her face.

“What did you do, put a spell on him?”

“No, I hit him with this.” Sara hefted her crystal ball. “I hope I killed him.”

Epilogue

Four months later

After Tony's arrest, she vowed she'd never have another surprise visitor.

She consulted her crystal ball nightly to see what the following day would bring. But, not having complete faith in the paranormal workings of her brain, she also had an electronic surveillance system installed at both the store and the apartment.

It was almost seven o'clock when the electronic chime on the front door rang. She was back in the stockroom, so she looked over at the small black and white monitor to see who had entered. It was Parker. He looked stunning in his dark gray double-breasted suit, and the best part of it was he was all hers.

The way he moved through the store reminded her of something, but what? Then, she remembered—her vision! And oh, what a vision it had been. Her nipples puckered with desire, and she felt her panties dampen. With a flick of her finger, she automatically locked the front door. She felt a shiver of anticipation.

Parker walked through the store and pushed through the hanging beads.

"It's over," he said.

She smiled at him and rose from the table. He pulled her to him and claimed her mouth in a passionate kiss while his hands went straight

to her breasts, flicking his thumbs over her nipples before pulling her shirt loose from her skirt and whisking it over her head.

Parker stood back to look at her.

But Sara pulled a face and put her hands on her hips. "Don't just tell me it's over and then not tell me what happened."

Instead of talking, he wanted to throw her down on the table in the back, spread her long shapely legs, and sink into her warm wet center while she undulated wildly under him. But, he relented and told her the news. "He pled guilty."

"So, he won't get the death penalty?"

"No, but he's in prison for life without the possibility of parole." Parker assured her, taking her hands and twining his fingers through hers.

"Did he say why?"

"When Tony was younger, sometime in his teens, Margo did a reading for him. She told him that he'd be a famous movie star. Well, he reminded her of this when he auditioned for *Secrets and Sins*."

"Margo gave him a job based on that?" Sara shook her head. "Not the woman I knew."

"You may not know her as well as you think. When Margo was fourteen, she gave up a son for adoption. That son was Tony."

"Did he know?"

"He found out about a year ago. And he hated her for it."

"I'm surprised she didn't see all the anger and hate in him. I didn't, but then I didn't look below the surface. I just wanted his business and his money." It hurt to say it, but it was the truth.

"He was her son. Perhaps she's blind when it comes to family."

"No, Margo doesn't suffer fools. If he didn't work out, she wouldn't have hesitated to throw him out on his ass."

"Or put him in a coma on the show," Parker pointed out.

"What about the other show he was auditioning for? What was that all about?"

"That's what gave him the original idea for the murders. Remember the poisoning case, where a man killed a bunch of people to

cover up his wife's poisoning? Well, Tony was using the same principle. He figured that if he killed a bunch of women who looked and dressed like you that no one would realize you were his intended victim. So, he found women who had a passing resemblance to you, sweet-talked them into auditioning for a nonexistent part on *Secrets and Sins* as a gypsy fortuneteller, and then he killed them." Parker reached out and touched Sara's cheek.

"I still don't understand why."

"In Margo's will, she planned to leave everything to her children, you and an adopted-away child that she didn't name. I suspect when she wrote the will she had hopes to one day be reconciled with the son she'd given up. And Tony was that child; his birth certificate proved it. Since he had a legitimate claim, he was in line to inherit half of her fortune. But he got greedy once he realized the extent of Margo's fortune, and especially when it came to light that you two were estranged. He didn't feel you deserved to inherit anything. So, if you were dead..." Parker trailed off. "He's also admitted that he had plans to kill Margo, too, but he had to make sure you were dead first."

"If he wanted to make my death look just like the others, then why did he try to frame me for the murders?"

"I arrested you. That gave him the bright idea of framing you for the murders. He thought if you were convicted of the murders, you wouldn't be able to inherit the money, but he was mistaken. You can't profit from a crime, but you could have inherited your mother's estate. When he found out that you were released, he figured he could kill two birds with one stone. Frame you for the murders, kill you, and make it look like suicide. He figured he'd tie it up in one pretty package. Then, no one would keep looking for the serial killer."

"He's crazy."

"Yeah, because if anything had happened to you, I wouldn't have stopped looking for him. Not until I found him, or I died trying."

Wrapping her arms around herself, she was hit with a wave of guilt. All those women died for because of her.

Almost as if he read her mind, Parker put his arms around her and

pulled her close. "Sara, you didn't kill those women. He did."

"I know." Sara tried to smile. It was all just so sad. But, she wasn't going to be just another victim. And she couldn't always be leaning on Parker. Tossing her hair back, she looked at Parker with a teasing glance. "You know, after all the publicity of this case, I think I should change my look. Should I start wearing a caftan and a turban?"

"Personally, I think you should wear nothing at all," Parker replied.

They'd been lovers for months now, but he still got a charge out of seeing her blush. She was wearing a sheer black lace bra, and he didn't bother taking it off as he dipped his head and took a taut peak into his mouth. If he knew her as well as he thought he did, he was sure she'd have on a matching pair of lace panties, and he couldn't wait to get inside them. He pushed her skirt down off her hips and slipped his fingers under the lace.

He slid two fingers deep inside her, and she arched and ground herself against his hand. Her pussy was wet and ready, and his cock throbbed in anticipation.

Then she surprised him by pushing his hands away as she began undressing *him*. She pushed his jacket off his shoulders, pinning his arms in its sleeves. Once his hands were immobilized, she unknotted his tie and flipped it over her shoulder. Shivers of pleasure washed over Parker. She hadn't seduced him since that first night. He closed his eyes, enjoying the feel of her body pressed against his while she unbuttoned his shirt with slow, deliberate movements.

Once his shirt was unbuttoned to the waist, she pushed it open and traced her fingers along his stomach muscles. His belly clenched in desire as she slid a hand under the waistband of his pants.

Her fingers slipped out and then back in, each time venturing lower, teasing him. His breath caught when she finally reached for his belt buckle. She unhooked it with a flourish and unbuttoned his slacks. She slid down his body in a smooth, graceful movement and pulled open the zipper with her teeth.

As his pants fell to the floor, he heard her gasp. Her eyes, large and

blue, stared up at him, and then filled with tears.

“Will you?” Parker asked.

Sara looked back down at his boxer shorts, simultaneously laughing and crying. Written across his bulging erection were the words *Will you marry me?*

She stood up and held him tight as she kissed him. “The answer is yes.”

“So, you didn’t see this coming at all?”

“No,” Sara lied, “It was a complete surprise.”

The End

Author Bio

Ericka Scott wrote her first novel in junior high school. It wouldn't have won her any literary awards, but it did garner her an A in English. She's been a reader of romance and romantic suspense since her college days at the University of Illinois, where reading anything but a textbook was a guilty pleasure. She currently lives in Southern California with her husband and three children. *Crystal Clear* is her first published novella. You can visit Ericka at www.erickascott.com