

Back Cover Copy

Can Marina learn to have faith in her powers in time to save the people she loves?

Marina's got it made with a new job giving Brazilian waxes in a fashionable salon in the big city of Sydney. Life seems to be looking up for her, that is, until she starts having visions, which come true. Her clients start dying, one by one. Then her roommate, James, becomes a suspect, and suddenly she must fight for the man she cares for. While she tries to harness her powers, people close to her begin to disappear. More victims of the serial killer? This time she can't see, and in the midst of terror, Marina must save the lives of people she's come to love, but in a twist of fate, save herself.

Explicit Sexual content.

Highlight

Marina flinched as Adele's piercing scream ricocheted off the walls of the cubicle and into her brain. The colours in the room became intense, so that the pale yellow walls of her cubicle burned her eyes. A full-on migraine. She blinked and tried to focus. Already a strange aura, like a shimmering light, appeared around Adele's face. Marina had experienced this only once before, when she'd had her vision. Perspiration broke out on Marina's brow. She centered her gaze on Adele's face praying the pain would go away. It didn't. Instead, the yellow of the walls deepened to ochre. She gripped the massage bed to steady herself. Glancing at Adele, she saw that there was a trickle of blood seeping from her nostrils. "Are you okay?"

"Sure. Why have you stopped?"

Marina's vision cleared. There was no blood on Adele's face.

"It's fine to keep going. I can handle pain." Adele bit her fingernail. "I'm sick of my boring life. I'm going to break out. This Brazilian is going to bring out the animal in me. This guy's to die for."

Dirty Sexy Murder

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Dedication

To my darling husband Robert for all his love and inspiration. To my wonderful writing critique partner Kandy Shepherd and lastly to my beautiful friend, Lesley East for always being there.

Chapter 1

"Take your pants off and lie down," Marina Henry told her client before turning to leave the room. She had to fight to suppress a laugh. No way did she think she'd get used to saying that, not after the small-town life she used to live.

"You don't need to leave," her client, Adele, said. "I don't care if you see me half naked. I just want that Brazilian. I read on the net that Gwyneth Paltrow reckons it changed her life."

Marina turned back to Adele, a brunette with a thick blond stripe in the front of her hair. Adele already had her jeans half off in the Darlinghurst Road beauty salon cubicle in Sydney, where Marina had recently started work as a waxer. She smiled. "You want me to leave a landing strip? That's my most popular wax. I do hundreds of them."

Adele grinned back. "No wonder locals nickname this place Salon Clitty instead of Salon City."

Marina laughed. She handed Adele a paper G-string. "Pop this on and when you're ready, park your tush down there." She indicated to the treatment bed. "And legs in the air."

"Thanks." Adele took the paper G-string.

Marina turned a knob next to the light switch so the pulsing rhythm of Brazilian music filled the cubicle, quiet enough so that they could still talk, yet loud enough to muffle Adele's screams.

Marina walked over to her workbench. Adele was older than her, twenty-nine to her twenty-four, and seemed nice. It would be fun to help her take this big step. Chatting with

clients was one of her favorite parts of the job.

When she turned back Adele was lying half naked and totally unselfconscious on the treatment bed. "I'm going on a hot date, so I want to look perfect everywhere," Adele said.

"Perfect I can do." Marina picked up the skin cleanser and prepped her client. Even though she still wasn't used to asking them to drop their pants, it was amazing how fast seeing her clients butt-naked had become pretty normal. "How long have you known your guy?"

"Two weeks. I met him through a dating website. I told him I've got a Brazilian so now I have to go through with this."

An image formed at the edge of Marina's vision. She blinked with disbelief before warning bells went off in her head and she realized that she was about to have another premonition. She couldn't believe this was happening again. She stopped breathing and scrunched her eyes shut. When she opened them again, the vision had gone. Marina let out a sigh. "You don't think that's a bit rushed?" she said, forcing herself to concentrate on the client. She picked up the talcum powder.

"I have to make myself stand out. I'm turning thirty, Marina. I want a family. I can't afford to waste time." Adele looked downward. "Start trimming that hedge. I'm going to use every trick in the book to hook my new man."

Marina frosted Adele's vulva and butt with powder to stop the wax sticking to the skin. "You need to be careful who visits Brazil." When she touched Adele's skin, her hands froze and a wave of nausea made her gag. She coughed into her hand to disguise it.

Adele just shrugged.

Was Adele always this reckless with men? She stared at her with concern.

“So what about you? You seeing someone?” Adele asked.

Marina shuddered. “No way! After what happened back home, I’d rather roll myself in molten wax, and run naked through the streets of Sydney.”

“What went wrong?” Adele asked.

Marina smeared a line of wax on the outside of Adele’s bikini line and tested it with her finger. Rip!

“Owww!” Adele flinched. She took a deep breath. “Your boss, what’s her name, Natalia, told me you ran your own salon back home in Blackheath. Why did you come here?”

Marina spread another line of wax. Dealing with clients was a give-and-take situation. Maybe sharing her story would distract her client. This was going to hurt.

“Come on. Tell me,” Adele urged.

“I ran away. I had no idea how weird men could be.” Marina raised her eyebrows. “I guess my life’s a whole other ball of wax now.”

“That’s it? That’s all?”

Marina bit her lip. Adele was full of man problems and she wasn’t the only one. Maybe sharing her own problem would help Marina move on. “Okay, I call it the wedding domino disaster. First I caught my groom dressed in my wedding gown the same day I was due to walk down the aisle.”

Adele caught her breath. “Don’t tell he had a wedding dress fetish.”

Marina grimaced. "Lace actually." Rip!

"Owww!" Adele's eyes bulged. "Hey! No one said this was going to hurt so much." She took a deep breath. "So what did you do?"

"I cancelled the wedding an hour before and then of course I had to tell my mother why. She had a minor stroke. She told her best friend so the whole town knew."

"You're kidding me?"

"That wasn't the end of it. The final thing that happened was Tony's parents told everyone I'd had a breakdown."

"And people believed them?"

"Easier to believe that than the truth—that the groom wanted to dress up as the bride."

She smeared on the hot wax. Tested it with her fingers. When she found the lip formed by the wax, she pulled.

Adele gave a short, sharp scream. "It hurts." She shuddered.

Marina started at the high-pitched sound. Her head started to throb and she touched her temples. Last time she'd developed a major headache, the horrible vision of her wedding disaster had accompanied the pain. The vision had come true in every detail. She hadn't believed in psychic phenomena then, but that one experience had shaken her belief and now she dreaded it. Something was wrong with Adele. She could sense it. "You all right?" Marina asked.

Adele nodded, though she had shredded the paper that lined the bed. Her knuckles were white, but she gave Marina a wan smile. "I hope my date lives up to his bio."

“What do you mean? Haven’t you met him?”

“Only by email. He’s into Brazilians. In fact that’s why he said he contacted me. I think my online dating name, Barbie Brazilian, got his attention.”

“That’s a bit out there to admit to a Brazilian online, especially when you didn’t have one.” Rip!

Adele slapped her hand on the massage bench, the sound making a thwack.

“Open your legs more,” Marina said. She smoothed the hot wax close to the delicate center and ripped.

“Argh!”

Marina flinched as Adele’s piercing scream ricocheted off the walls of the cubicle and into her brain. The colours in the room became intense, so that the pale yellow walls of her cubicle burned her eyes. A full-on migraine. She blinked and tried to focus. Already a strange aura, like a shimmering light, appeared around Adele’s face. Marina had experienced this only once before, when she’d had her vision. Perspiration broke out on Marina’s brow. She centered her gaze on Adele’s face praying the pain would go away. It didn’t. Instead, the yellow of the walls deepened to ochre. She gripped the massage bed to steady herself. Glancing at Adele, she saw that there was a trickle of blood seeping from her nostrils. “Are you okay?”

“Sure. Why have you stopped?”

Marina’s vision cleared. There was no blood on Adele’s face.

“It’s fine to keep going. I can handle pain.” Adele bit her

finger nail. "I'm sick of my boring life. I'm going to break out. This Brazilian is going to bring out the animal in me. This guy's to die for. His bio said he's interested in Salsa dancing like I am. If a guy can dance, you know he can..." Adele grinned at her.

She shuddered with fear. "Adele, could online dating be dangerous?"

"Dangerous? Nah... Why don't you go online? How are you going to meet a man making pussies picture perfect?"

"Maybe." At the moment the last thing she felt like doing was dating. A wave of nausea hit. She swallowed, determined to be professional, to put her own needs aside and last out the appointment. Adele's 'Clitler', a small moustache shape, needed the final tidy up. She spread a neat strip of wax on either side and mentally prepared herself for the inevitable scream. Rip!

"Argh!"

The scream swept over her. Shrill at first, then blunting to a gurgling sound like the last remnants of water going down a bath tub.

Alarmed, she looked up to see how Adele was doing, but Marina's vision had clouded. She froze. Adele's face was contorted in agony. Her eyes bulged and she was turning blue. There was something around her neck. What was it? A rope? She lunged at Adele to save her.

"Marina. Marina!"

Her vision cleared. Adele was staring at her, her eyes were wide with alarm but she was fine.

"Marina, are you okay? What's going on? Your eyes went all glassy. Why have you got your hands on my shoulders?"

Marina backed off. "I thought I'd really hurt you... Your scream..."

Adele laughed. "I know I'm a baby, but I didn't scream that time. Barely batted an eyelid. It's starting to hurt less."

"But...but..." She'd heard Adele scream. She knew she had. Marina massaged her temples. Her head swirled. The pain and nausea intensified and she thought she was going to be sick. She felt confused. Disoriented. Her fingers strangely numb. "I don't feel well. I have a bad headache." She knew she sounded lame. "It's affecting my sight."

"You poor thing. Do you have something to take for it?"

Marina shook her head. "I've only had one migraine before. I'm done with the wax," she said. Looking down she saw that her hands were shaking.

"Great," Adele said.

Should she say something to Adele? What if she didn't and something horrible happened to her?

Adele smiled before flicking her blond streak behind her ear. She climbed off the bed and pulled on her panties and jeans. "I'll see you in a few weeks. Wish me luck for tonight."

Marina clutched her arm.

Adele backed away.

Marina could see from Adele's face that she thought her behavior was odd, but what if this vision came true? "Adele. Don't go on that date." She tightened her grip on Adele's arm. "You don't know this person."

“Cool it. I’ll be fine. There are plenty of people at Pier One.”

“No! I really think you shouldn’t go.” Her voice was hoarse. She couldn’t get through to her. “I have a bad feeling about it.”

“I’ll be fine. Don’t worry.” Adele prized her fingers off her arm.

“Please Adele. Listen to me. Don’t go anywhere private with this man.”

“Yes, Mum.” Adele laughed.

When Adele left, Marina shivered, feeling frozen inside. Adele wouldn’t listen to her and she couldn’t make her. Peering at her schedule, she saw that Adele’s was the last appointment. Relieved that she could go, Marina gathered up her things. The cheerfulness of her flatmates, siblings Lizzie and James Worth, would be welcome because at the moment, she couldn’t get rid of the foreboding sense of danger.

She’d seen Adele die.

* * * *

“Quick, Marina,” Lizzie called out. “James is looking up a dating site. It’s time you learned how it’s done.”

Marina tucked her honeymoon-that-never-happened bathrobe around her body. She might as well get some use out of it seeing as she’d spent a fortune. The pale blue colour suited her fair complexion better than Tony’s. “What did you say, Lizzie?”

When she entered the study of the three bedroom apartment on Glenmore Road, Paddington, Marina stopped. “Sorry, James, I didn’t realize you were here, too. I’ll go put something else on.” James was drop-dead gorgeous and she

felt self-conscious with him about.

"Don't worry," Lizzie said. "This is your home now. We don't care what you wear, do we, James?"

James's gaze flicked over her. "Looks fantastic from where I'm sitting."

"Jamie!" Lizzie said.

"Don't worry, Marina, I've never dated Lizzie's friends and certainly not one that lives with us," James said. "Don't play where you lay."

Marina smiled, but a glimmer of disappointment pricked her heart. So her attraction to James was one-sided.

"Come sit next to me." James stood and pulled over another chair. "Don't be shy. It can't hurt to see how it all works."

"You're in good hands," Lizzie said before leaving the room.

When Marina looked at James she saw more than just good hands. James was hot. He had cropped dark hair, startling green eyes, a long straight nose and a wide sensuous mouth. She hesitated before sitting down near Lizzie's brother, scared she would become tongue-tied. "I don't use computers much. I hope you're patient," she said.

"Huh? Yeah. Patient. Sure." He took a deep breath. "You smell nice." He turned to look into her eyes.

She stared back, for a long moment, aware that she was naked under her robe. "Thanks." Heat crept into her cheeks. Maybe she should have put on more clothes. "How...how many internet dates have you had this month?" she asked to fill the

silence.

“One. She said she wanted a smart guy with a good job who liked spoiling a woman. She liked Italian food, red wine, Marvin Gaye, Lou Reed and sports cars. I thought it would be a good fit.”

“And?”

“Turns out the woman was married. She took one look at me and demanded sex.” He couldn’t disguise his disgust. “I don’t do married women.”

James’s internet date knew a hunk when she saw one. Suppressing a smile, Marina shifted so that her thigh accidentally rubbed his. She quickly moved away, aware of James’ body heat penetrating her sheer wrap. The cologne he was wearing wasn’t bad either. Spicy. What was going on with her? She was usually shy with men. But that hadn’t got her anywhere, had it?

James started at the contact, too.

Was he feeling what she was feeling?

“Do you think online dating is worth it?” she asked.

“It is for me. I never meet anyone at work. I’m working with computers all day. I think this is a natural progression. It’s quick. I take the lady out for a drink. I soon work out if I like her.”

“So you never meet anyone in the city?”

“No time.”

So was he like her? Lonely! Maybe, just maybe...

Taking a deep breath, James exited the program, closed the lid of the laptop and planted his elbows firmly on top. “You

okay? You look pale.”

Marina stared at him, wondering whether she could confide in him. Although she'd known Lizzie for years from all their summer camps together, she didn't know James. He'd been very sweet to her from the moment she'd moved in, though. “I do feel kind of strange at the moment. I had something weird happen today at work.”

“What?”

“I was working on a client and I had—” She stopped. He'd think she was crazy if she owned up to the vision, but she couldn't stop thinking about it.

“And...” he encouraged.

“My eyesight gets disturbed when I have a bad headache, but I saw something. My client, Adele. I saw her nose bleeding and her face turning blue.” She stopped aware that her hands were trembling. “When I looked again she was okay. I'm worried because I was seeing something that wasn't there.”

James put his arm around her shoulders. “Lizzie told me you had a bad time back home.”

“Look James, before I saw my fiancé in my bridal gown, I had a terrible headache and—this is going to sound weird—a vision that he was wearing it. That can't have been a coincidence, can it? It's too weird.”

“Hey, I have a computer science background. I don't believe in that stuff.” He gave her shoulder a squeeze. “You were getting married. You were stressed and you said it yourself, your eyesight was disturbed with the headache.”

He thought she was crazy. She could see it in his eyes. “I

didn't have a nervous breakdown. I didn't!"

James patted her back like she was a frightened child. "I'm not saying you did, but you did have a shock. You need to rest up. Go out and have fun."

So he wasn't taking her seriously. A sense of disappointment hit her heart.

"On the weekend, I'll take you out, we'll catch a movie, or I'll show you around the city." He looked straight into her eyes and she could see compassion in his expression.

Her mouth clenched. Damn it, she didn't want his pity.

Lizzie came back into the study. She was wearing a whitish face mask that matched the colour of her bleached-blond hair. "Do you have anyone you can introduce Marina to? She likes conservative types like you."

There was an awkward silence and Marina squirmed on her seat.

James shrugged. "Ask your boyfriend."

"Fabio," Lizzie said.

"That's all right, Lizzie," Marina said. "I'm not ready to date." James must think she was a nutter.

"I'm not leaving you at home while I go out," Lizzie said. "You can come out with Fabio and me tonight."

"You still taking your date to Sebelles at Pier One for dinner?" Lizzie asked.

James nodded.

"You must be serious about this one," Lizzie said.

James grinned. "This date's special. We have so much in common. She's spiritual. I feel like I've known her all my life."

His face brightened. "She's like us, Lizzie. She likes music. She calls herself Robin on her bio, like the bird that sings." James looked from one girl to another. "I don't even know her real name yet."

"Puh-leeze," Lizzie groaned. "What do you call yourself online? Batman?"

"Ah, Sex Cowboy actually," James said under his breath.

"Sex Cowboy! You! That's disgusting."

"She started with the sexy stuff, not me."

"You picked the gross name," Lizzie said, "which means it was you who started it."

The Sex Cowboy moniker suited him, thought Marina. He had wide shoulders, a flat tight stomach and slim hips. Thick dark eyelashes surrounded his eyes and she couldn't stop looking into them. No wonder she had wanted to confide in him. He was mesmerizing.

"I knew it," Lizzie said. "You're just after sex. Spiritual indeed."

James looked from girl to girl. "Look you two, it's like this with men. I'd like a Ferrari straight away, but I'd appreciate it more if I had to work for it." He raised his hands. "Get it?"

"He's right," Lizzie said. "Mingle, mingle, mingle. You're coming out with me tonight."

Marina got up and walked over to Lizzie. Her wrap was slightly open. Flustered, she pulled it shut, but when she glanced at James, she saw that he wasn't even looking at her. Don't play where you lay. His words came back to her. He probably thought she was crazy.

But she knew she wasn't. The first vision came true. Would this one come true too?

* * * *

Marina hadn't met Lizzie's boyfriend, Fabio, a gym instructor training for the Mr. Sydney contest, but the bronzed man who strode toward them could only be him. He was enormous. Lizzie had confided that Fabio could lift her small frame above his head with one arm.

"Hey, Marina. Glad you could join us," said Fabio, bending down to peck her on the cheek. "Lizzie Lu," Fabio called out, picking her up and pressing her body to his.

"Fabs," she said, kissing him.

"This your first visit to Pier One?" Fabio asked.

Marina nodded. "It's so lively here." She motioned around her. She could hear the boats clinking as they shifted in their moorings, the lights of the Harbour Bridge reflected in the water. Across the water she could see the lights twinkling from the exclusive North Shore, where the wealthy people lived, though she knew that Lizzie called it North Snore because nothing ever happened there. "Sydney's beautiful."

"Yeah." Fabio gave her a thumbs up signal. "What do you want to eat tonight, girls?"

"I'm not sure," Lizzie said.

"What would you like, Marina?" Fabio asked, politely including her.

"I don't mind. Just make sure we don't go near Sebelles, that's where James is meeting his date."

"Hey, Fabs. Get this." Lizzie nudged him. "James is calling

himself Sex Cowboy online.” Lizzie rolled her eyes.

Fabio grimaced at the mention of James’ name and shook his head. He looked at his watch, seeming distracted. “Just wait here a moment, girls. I’ve got to get something for you, Lizzie. A present.” Lizzie was about to reply but he raced off up the escalator at the side of the pier.

Marina turned to Lizzie. “Doesn’t Fabio get on with James?”

“It’s not Fabio’s fault. James hates him.”

“Why?”

“James rhymes with pain. He said there’s no way Fabs could get so big without using steroids. James reckons guys like Fabs get ’roid rage.”

“Maybe he’s just teasing you. You know how you two go on.” James could be right; Fabio was bigger than Arnold Schwarzenegger in *Terminator*.

Lizzie sighed. She looked at her watch. “I hope Fabio doesn’t take too long. I’m getting hungry. It’s already been ten minutes.” She stood tapping her foot to the twinkling sound of the carousel. “Where is Fabio? I’m going to look for him.” She went up the escalator in search of him.

Marina turned to the brightly coloured carousel when Lizzie left. The decorative lights flashed off and on making her squint. Her eyes still ached from the migraine. Children with their parents hung on tightly as it went around and around. She swayed. She couldn’t seem to take her eyes off it. Round and round the carousel went. It appeared to be going faster, spinning, so that she could no longer see the children. Her stomach clenched. The carousel became a haze of revolving

colours. Marina rocked on her feet. God, what was happening to her? Then she heard it. A high-pitched scream, a wail, which was suddenly cut off. Strange choking sounds filled the air.

She clutched her throat. *Pain. No air.* Her throat seized. The edges of her vision darkened. She was dying. Could no one help her? God, what was happening to her?

"Marina," a man called. "Marina!"

Slowly her vision cleared. She gasped. Her throat felt sore as if someone had squeezed it.

"Marina. What's the matter?" Fabio grabbed her shoulder.

She stared at him, unable to speak. Sweat was beaded on his temple. His shirt was open to the waist. There was a scratch on his chest.

"Did you hear a scream?" She clutched his arm.

Fabio nodded at the carousel. "Plenty of screams there."

"No. A bad scream. A woman. Did you hear it?" Her whole body trembled and she wanted to cry. She'd never had a vision like this before, not one where she could feel the pain.

Lizzie skipped up and joined them. "Where did you go, Fabs? I was looking for you? What happened to your shirt? It's all undone."

"I was buying your present and a fight broke out in the footy shop. Anyway, don't bother about that, I think Marina's sick."

Lizzie turned to her. "Has your migraine come back?"

"Someone's in trouble. There was a terrible scream," Marina said. She knew that sound. It echoed in her mind like an old-fashioned record stuck in a groove.

Lizzie patted her. "Everything's fine. Look around you."

She did. People dressed in jeans and bright tops were sitting at cafes. A father was buying his three children hot dogs from a vendor; other people were eating takeout Chinese from cartons. It was a normal Friday night.

Marina hugged herself feeling foolish. "I couldn't breathe. I thought someone was choking me." Unsettled, she looked at her watch. It was nine o'clock. Her heart was hammering and she thought she was going to be sick. "I don't understand what just happened."

"Come on, Marina. I'm going to take you back to the apartment," Lizzie said, her voice full of sympathy. "You had a rotten time back home. Maybe you're having some reaction to stress."

Marina looked from Lizzie to Fabio and back again. Was that it? Did she just have some sort of a panic attack? "I'm not feeling well. Not physically sick." Truly concerned about her own sanity, she rubbed her forehead. "I'm frightened what they said about me is true. I'm scared I'm going crazy."

* * * *

The hammering on her bedroom door awoke Marina. She rolled onto her side and looked at her watch. It was eight o'clock, which was early for a Saturday morning. "Marina. Are you awake?" Lizzie called.

Lizzie's voice sounded hoarse. "Come in, Lizzie," she said, struggling to a sitting position. She knew Lizzie loved her sleep. She usually slept until ten and not even James's humming or clattering around the kitchen roused her. Her early appearance could only mean one thing—something was

seriously wrong.

Lizzie came in and sat on the bed. She still had mascara under her eyes and the remains of smudged ice-pink lipstick on her lips. The fact that she hadn't cleansed her face meant things were seriously wrong. "I had the worst date last night after you went home."

"Did Fabio dump you?"

"No. I dumped him." Tears welled in Lizzie's eyes. She snatched a handful of tissues and dabbed her eyes. "I really like Fabio."

"What happened?"

Lizzie leaned forward, her face close to Marina's. "Fabio's into other women. Anyone but me."

"What other women?" she asked, studying Lizzie with concern. Lizzie had a slim elfin body with no curves and an out-there personality.

"He's got these porno magazines full of pictures of naked women next to his bed."

"I think all guys look at those things some of the time," Marina answered gently.

"You don't get it." Lizzie sobbed. "It's so humiliating. He was actually doing 'it' to me and looking at a magazine full of women with enormous breasts at the same time."

"That's creepy."

Lizzie was just about to answer when James stumbled into the bedroom wearing a clean dressing gown that looked rumpled. He handed Marina a cup of coffee that she knew he had made especially for her, though he claimed his espresso

machine made two cups and seeing as he only drank one in the morning, it seemed a shame to waste the other.

"Thanks." Marina took the cup and sipped it. "Mmm. Perfect."

"I had the worst date last night," James said.

"No, you didn't," Marina and Lizzie said together.

"Lizzie did," Marina added.

Lizzie gave him a watery smile.

"You too, huh?" James asked, looking at his sister concerned.

"Fabio's addicted to pornography," Lizzie said. "I hate that word." She shuddered. "He'd rather look at you-know-what than me." She pushed herself up the bed and sat on Marina's other pillow, her back hunched against the wall.

James put his hands on his hips and frowned. "He can't treat you that way. Do you want me to speak to him?"

Lizzie rolled her eyes. "I don't want you interfering. He'd kill you. What happened with your date?" she asked, changing the subject.

"Lizzie. It was hell. My date was with Mum," James said.

Marina's mouth dropped open. She saw her reaction mirrored in Lizzie's face.

"You dated Mum?" Lizzie repeated, eyes wide. She straightened out of her hunched position.

"That wins. That's definitely the worst date," Marina said.

"How could you do that?" Lizzie cried.

James leaned against Marina's bedroom wall, looking around the room, his gaze not meeting Lizzie's. He picked

imaginary dirt from under his fingernails. "She was my Robin, my online date."

"That's disgusting, James." She reached over and hit her brother on the shoulder.

"Hey," James said.

Lizzie's blue eyes narrowed as she looked at him accusingly. "Of all the people to choose online, why did you pick her?"

James covered his face with his hand and groaned again. "I don't know. She seemed familiar. I liked what she said. I couldn't believe it when she turned up."

"Maybe something she said in her emails touched a nerve, reminded you of someone you loved. Maybe you felt comfortable with her," Marina said.

"Not anymore he won't," Lizzie said. "Anyway, if she's in Sydney why hasn't she come to visit me?"

Marina knew Lizzie had never got over being abandoned by her hippy parents when she was sixteen, especially by her mum.

"I don't know." James's voice was hoarse. "I was so shocked to see her standing there, I couldn't ask her home. I don't even know if she's still with Dad."

Marina looked at Lizzie and James's shocked faces and decided she needed to do something to cheer them up. They had been so kind to her, welcoming her into their lives after her troubles. "Come on. Get dressed," she said. "We're going out to have some fun. I think we should take a walk from the Opera House to where we were last night."

Lizzie brightened. "That sounds like fun."

"We certainly need it," James said.

Several hours later, replete with coffee and fresh croissants from one of the harbour-side coffee shops, Marina, Lizzie and James strode along the Harbour foreshore, past Circular Quay, along the promenade to Dawes Park. Marina stretched her legs and took in the yachts with their white sails flapping in the breeze. In the distance she could see a ferry heading toward Taronga Zoo. A throbbing pain started at her temple and she frowned. Damn it. Why did she have to start getting a headache now? She noticed a crowd gathered at the water's edge. "What's going on?"

A large man blocked her view, but he turned to look at her. "They're pulling a body from the water."

"Let's keep going," James said. "I don't want you girls to see this."

Marina shivered. The hairs on her arms stood on end and her legs wouldn't obey his command to move.

When the paramedics put the body into a body bag, she caught sight of the mottled face and hair which had a telling thick, blond stripe.

Lizzie grabbed her arm.

Marina staggered as the vision of a woman choking swarmed through her mind. Her head swirled and she held on to Lizzie for support as she saw her vision had come true.

Adele was dead.

Chapter 2

“Check this out, Marina, the Herald is calling Adele’s murder the ‘Brazilian Wax’ murder.” Lizzie grabbed Marina by the hand and pulled her into her cubicle at work. “It’s made the front page.”

Marina’s stomach tightened as a wave of nausea took hold. She looked at her watch and saw that her next client was running late. “Quick, let me have a look.” She took the paper from Lizzie and flattened it out on the massage table.

There was a flattering head-shot of Marina’s deceased client, Adele Walker, who the newspaper described as a school teacher desperate for love.

“I wonder how she died,” Lizzie said. “The article doesn’t give many details.”

“He strangled her.” *Swiftly.Brutally.He enjoyed doing it.* Marina brought her hand up to her throat. “Oh God. Poor Adele. Poor, poor Adele. She didn’t deserve to die like that.” Her heart started beating faster and her throat went dry. The room seemed to swim in front of her. She reached out and gripped the massage table.

Lizzie looked at her strangely. “How do you know that? It doesn’t say how she died in the Herald.”

Marina shook her head unable to free herself from the thoughts that bombarded her. Ice flooded her veins, rushing through her bloodstream, gripping her lungs.

“I...I think...” She stared at Lizzie. Of all her friends, Lizzie loved reading about and trying crazy things but she suspected

that Lizzie sensed that she was on the edge like James did. A nervous breakdown nutter. "It just came to me." She turned to Adele's photograph and touched it with her forefinger. Fear shot up her arm and gripped her chest so tightly she couldn't breathe. The face distorted in front of her. *Help me!* a voice that sounded like Adele's echoed in her mind. Marina snatched her hand away and the vision faded to nothing.

"Marina, what's the matter?" Lizzie's voice rose in alarm. She put her hands on Marina's shoulders. "Are you okay?" Lizzie asked, frowning with concern. "You're freezing."

Marina let out a large breath. "Lizzie, I had a bad feeling about Adele's date. I told her not to go. That poor girl. She was so excited about meeting this man. The paper is making her look like a desperate old maid, but she wasn't dumb. She was lonely."

Lizzie looked at her hard. Within seconds, she gave Marina's shoulder a squeeze. "It wasn't your fault," she said. "You couldn't stop Adele going. Any dating is risky at first until you get to know the person. They don't have 'nut case' written across their forehead."

"Or 'looks great but is a pornography addict,'" Marina added.

"Or 'cross-dresser who specializes in bridal gowns,'" Lizzie said.

Marina was glad for the comfort of Lizzie's arm around her shoulder. Her touch made the horrible images go away. "Actually, he loved lace. Oh, leave Tony out of this," she said. "His was a harmless habit that I couldn't cope with."

"So send him a David Jones dress voucher," Lizzie said.

"Lizzie!" She turned back to the Herald. She frowned and pulled at her lower lip thoughtfully. "Do you think I should go to the police? Tell them she was online dating?"

Lizzie shrugged. "The paper said Adele's flatmate's already told them that. I mean, what else are you going to tell them? Did she describe who she was meeting? Did she give you a name?"

Marina tried to think back. She shook her head. "No. No name. I just remember her excitement at finally meeting someone she liked the sound of. She said she was meeting him at Pier One, then she wanted to go dancing afterward."

"She can't have made dancing seeing as they found her in the Harbour." Lizzie paused, her eyes narrowed. "She told you she was meeting him at Pier One?" she repeated slowly.

Marina nodded. "You know, the night we were there with Fabio, I heard a scream. I know that Pier One is noisy, but Adele had that distinctive scream."

"Yeah, but how could someone get murdered in a crowded place like Pier One? Surely someone saw something," Lizzie said.

He wanted to make a statement. Marina pushed the unwanted thought away. She shook her head vigorously, determined to clear it. It was like her mind wasn't her own. She had no idea where the horrible thoughts were coming from.

"I don't know," she said in a whisper. Her throat was dry and constricted again. Her shoulders ached from tension. There was a biting pain in her stomach.

She didn't want to be psychic. But what if she was? If she'd

listened to herself, could she have made a bigger effort to stop Adele going? Her stomach rolled and she clutched at it. She thought she was going to be sick. "I don't want to talk about this anymore." Careful not to touch Adele's photograph, she folded the newspaper into quarters and shoved it into the waste paper basket. "Have you heard from Fabio?"

Lizzie raised her finely plucked eyebrows. "He's sent me five emails and two text messages telling me he loves me." She gave a small smile. "He's bombarding me with love messages."

"Are you going to see him again?"

Lizzie shrugged. "I'm playing it cool." She clearly tried to look like she didn't care, but failed when her mouth turned down and her blue eyes glittered. She twisted her nose piercing. "The trouble is I really like Fabio. I can't stop thinking about him, but there doesn't seem to be even a short-term future there. I can't stand the way he looks at those awful magazines." She peered down at her small breasts. "Anyway, I'll never measure up to what he wants."

"You don't have to," Marina said. "Forget him. You are beautiful as you are." Lizzie had once told her that her academic father had told her she was stupid. Would Lizzie ever gain some self-esteem? No matter how many times she complimented her friend, her words ran off Lizzie like rain off a raincoat.

"I'm so glad I have you as a friend. Gosh, you're cold. Go put a jacket on."

"I'm glad I have you." She hugged her back, grateful for the comfort of Lizzie's touch. Marina looked at her watch. "I'd

better get downstairs and see if my next client has arrived. We'll talk later."

She went downstairs to greet her client, passing Natalia's husband, Michael, who was sponging yellow paint onto a wall. "Hi, Michael. The foyer looks nice."

He nodded. "I'm done here now."

Marina had scarcely heard Michael speak more than a few words at any given time, but a pleased expression crossed his chunky face at her comment. She smiled. Michael had yellow paint splattered on his bald head, which made him look like a cracked semi-boiled egg. Although Marina didn't find his sturdy-workman look attractive, Michael was a hard worker and his wife clearly adored him.

"It looks vell," Natalia said. "He do such a good job, my husband. Such a hard vorker." Natalia shot him a loving look. "Vot you think of colour, Marina?"

"Lovely," Marina agreed.

"Ve hang mirror now," Natalia said.

Marina saw that over the shelves that displayed the Thalgo product range, Michael had hung a large gilt mirror which complimented the yellow wash, giving the salon a stately old-world look. The foyer wasn't large. There was just enough room for the reception desk, shelving and the two gilded chairs in the far corner where her next client, Mrs. Saxon sat.

"Hello, Mrs. Saxon. Would you like to come upstairs?" Marina asked.

Mrs. Saxon, a wealthy blonde merchant banker's wife in her forties, stood and adjusted her pink designer suit, which

looked too tight for her. Mrs. Saxon was a difficult client, not because of her wealth which was enough to allow her to live on Woolloomooloo Wharf, an upmarket development on Sydney Harbour where movie stars bought apartments, but because most of her lower body was peppered with coarse pubic-like hair.

"I really need this waxing. You'll never guess what's happening now," Mrs. Saxon said the moment she entered Marina's cubicle.

Marina had a good idea, but she didn't say anything. Poor Mrs. Saxon had married a cheater, a bastard who didn't care that he was tearing out her heart. She shot Mrs. Saxon a sympathetic look, and left the room momentarily so her client could change.

The moment she returned, Mrs. Saxon, who lay gowned on the table, started detailing her problem. "He's at it again."

Marina stirred the wax and placed her strips on the bench.

"Mr. Saxon?" Marina filled in the blanks. Lizzie reckoned beauticians were therapists with a waxing implement.

As Mrs. Saxon talked, Marina cast her professional eye over her. Despite her tight suit, Mrs. Saxon looked well put together when clothed, with faultless make-up and beautifully highlighted blond hair, which was cut into a layered bob. But when she undressed, she needed a lot of waxing done.

"This time he's saved an online dating site in favorites. You have no idea the pain I feel that he's so blatant about his infidelity. And the thing is, he doesn't think looking up these sites is being unfaithful. But it is, I tell you. It is! It breaks my heart. He's at it every night after I've gone to bed. Do you

online date?"

Marina thought of Adele lying dead in the city morgue and shook her head. Her stomach rolled again. "No. I don't think it's for me."

"Watch the ones who email you after midnight," continued Mrs. Saxon as if Marina hadn't answered. "They're the married men looking for sex on the side. I'm sure that's what my husband is doing."

"I'll keep that in mind," Marina said, making a mental note to tell Lizzie. She prepped Mrs. Saxon with tea-tree oil, then sprinkled some powder onto her pelvic region.

"The man's a sex addict," Mrs. Saxon continued. "First it started with pornography. I looked up history on the net to see what sites he's been visiting. You should see them. There should be a law banning this sort of thing. Lewd. Horrible. Women peeing. Women with enormous breasts doing things together. Disgusting! I hope the children never discover him doing this stuff. My girls adore him."

Marina's ears pricked up. This was what Lizzie had complained to her about. Only Lizzie was still free to dump Fabio whereas poor Mrs. Saxon had a wedding ring that had become golden handcuffs.

"One knee up." She started work on Mrs. Saxon's inner thighs where the hair was no different from her pubic region. She liked it that she could make Mrs. Saxon look beautiful on the outside, but hated that no one could mend her inner pain.

"Now he's moved over to the online dating services," continued Mrs. Saxon. "He's on the internet every night. He doesn't even try to say it's about business anymore. I don't

know where to turn. This is going to destroy our marriage.”

“Can’t you talk to your husband?” Marina asked. She smoothed the strip of wax on Mrs. Saxon’s thigh, pressed the cloth over the wax and ripped. Mrs. Saxon didn’t flinch. Her emotional pain went far deeper than any waxing.

“What am I going to say? That I’m spying on him? Checking up on him? No. I’m trying to seduce him all over again.” Mrs. Saxon raised her head and looked down. Her eyes were large and sad. “I had my breasts enlarged and he doesn’t even seem to have noticed. All that pain for nothing. When you get to my privates take the lot off. Don’t leave the Clitler like you normally do.”

“The Full Brazilian?” Marina said.

“I’m desperate. I’m trying to be a new woman to keep my husband, but the trouble is I don’t have a twenty-year-old’s body. Not after two children. I’ve lost some weight, and I can just squeeze into my suits again, but after forty you have to choose between your face or your butt.”

“True.” Marina smiled at Mrs. Saxon’s words. She’d seen clients diet to the point where their butts were small, but they needed a truckload of collagen to fix the lines in their faces.

She finished waxing Mrs. Saxon’s thighs and started the Brazilian. Most clients were silent when she got near their frilly bits. Some would grit their teeth in pain, others like Adele screamed, but Mrs. Saxon kept talking.

“I checked that online dating service. I mean, a woman might as well be dead after forty. I looked at what the men want. It doesn’t matter how old they are. They all want a woman around twenty-five. I’m sure that’s what my husband is

going for."

Marina wrinkled her nose. "That's a big age difference."

"Ha! Men don't care. They never think they're getting old."

Marina shook her head. She worked quickly, applying the hot wax and pulling off Mrs. Saxon's pubic hair. Because it was the first time she removed the runway of pubic hair, she made the strips smaller so it would be less painful, but Mrs. Saxon remained oblivious.

"Why can't he just love me? I gave up my career. I stayed at home to look after him and the kids. I never look at other men. Sometimes I feel like giving up on him. Maybe I should start going online myself."

A shiver passed through Marina. "I don't know if that's such a good idea," she said, trying to remain calm. "There's a murderer out there." Waiting. Just waiting. She sensed it in her bones. Marina bit her lip not wanting to think about it. If only she could stop the terrible thoughts that plagued her. She wondered if the stress of running out on her wedding was driving her mad. But Adele's murder had happened, and Marina knew it wouldn't be the last.

* * * *

Marina and Lizzie left the salon on Darlington Road at five to walk home. Traffic blocked the street. Horns blared. The footpath was busy with people dressed in grunge black but Marina didn't pay them any attention. She was used to the frenetic pace and the mixed smell of car fumes, coffee and people once she stepped out of the salon. Instead, she stopped as she always did to talk to the cat lady who sat in a wheel chair a few shops down from the salon. She patted the

kitten on the lady's lap and searched her bag for coins to donate to the woman's cause of finding homes for orphan cats.

"Wait here, Marina," said Lizzie, and then did something Marina had never seen her do—she walked into Forever After Books, a bookshop that specialized in used and obscure books on spirituality, psychology and the like.

Marina frowned, wondering what she was up to until a tiny movement caught her attention.

"You've got a new kitten," Marina said, reaching to pat a gray, furry bundle. She always wondered how the woman managed to sit there all day with the kittens on her lap. The kittens weren't constrained in any way, but they never seemed to run off into the busy street.

"Yes," the cat lady said. "Someone dumped a litter on my doorstep. I've found homes for three of them. This is the last one." The woman held the kitten out to Marina to cuddle.

"He's a darling," Marina said, tickling the kitten under his neck. "I wish my flatmate James wasn't allergic to cats, otherwise I'd take him home immediately. I've missed having a cat since mine died. I like the way they're so independent but affectionate at the same time."

"You'd take them all home and put this lady out of a job," said Lizzie, who returned with a book in a paper bag.

Marina gave one last pat to the kitten and returned him to the lady with a few dollars. "See you tomorrow," she said.

The lady nodded and smiled.

Marina eyed the bag Lizzie was carrying. "You taking up

reading books?"

Lizzie gave her a look. "No. I hate reading."

"But you bought a book."

"Yep." Lizzie gave her a mysterious smile. "I'll explain after you get your coffee."

The girls turned the corner from Darlington Road into Oxford Street, past the busy Victorian cafes and people wearing hip black. Marina loved this section of Oxford Street where Darlington became the trendy suburb of Paddington, a Mecca for shoppers and food lovers. She breathed in the smell of roasted coffee beans as they passed her favorite coffee shop, The Unicorn Café. She ducked in to buy a cappuccino from the cute guy who served in the shop wearing his black bowler hat.

"I'm doing some research," Lizzie said, when she returned.

"Research?" Marina looked in her canvas bag, which had a large picture of Marilyn Monroe on the side. She found her keys as they neared their apartment. Being tidier than Lizzie, she always found her key first, so Lizzie no longer bothered.

The girls walked upstairs to their apartment and Lizzie waited as Marina unlocked the door. Marina stepped aside to let Lizzie walk through. "You never know, you might enjoy taking up reading," Marina said. "I'm not sure a psychology book is a good place to start."

Once Marina was inside, Lizzie closed the door firmly. "Psychology? I haven't bought a book on psychology," Lizzie said. She opened the paper bag and handed her book to Marina. "Look. I've bought a book on witchcraft. Wicca actually. The study of white witchcraft. I've read all about it in

Street Cred magazine.”

“I wondered what you’d be up to next.”

“I’ve decided to try scrying,” Lizzie said. “You shouldn’t underestimate the power of the universe sending you answers you seek.”

“I don’t believe in that stuff,” Marina said with a grin. In the short time she’d lived with Lizzie, her roommate had already Feng Shuied the apartment and made her a Talisman. She insisted Marina keep it near her bed at night in order to induce sweet dreams.

“I’ve kept my love Talisman in my pocket for three weeks and I haven’t found anyone yet,” Marina continued, reaching into her pocket and pulling out a green silk pouch with a rose quartz love stone inside. “I don’t think it’s working.” James’s handsome face came to mind but she shoved the image aside. James liked her. Respected her. He’d be horrified if she came onto him. God knows, she’d lost the respect of everyone back home. She didn’t want to lose James’s.

“You’re supposed to wear it around your neck,” Lizzie said. “It should be touching your skin. This stuff doesn’t work at once. You have to be patient. I meditated a long time to charge that Talisman. At least five minutes. It’s a battery for cosmic energies. It’s supposed to increase your telepathic capabilities—”

“Pass,” Marina said.

“And protect you from evil and get rid of ghosts.”

“Oh. Great. I can see it’s going to be very handy then.”

“Ha! I’ve found just what I’m looking for,” Lizzie said,

ignoring her response. "And I'm going to need your help."

"Do I have a choice here?"

"We need a skull." Lizzie looked at her expectantly.

"You're not getting mine."

Chapter 3

"I need a crystal skull." Lizzie flicked a glance at Marina who placed her Marilyn Monroe bag on the telephone table in the hallway. "So I'm afraid yours won't do."

"I'm glad to hear that. I'm rather attached to mine. Since when did crystal balls go out of fashion?"

"Skulls are used in magic ceremonies. Don't you know anything?"

"I'm not interested in magic." Marina walked down the corridor into the kitchen and started rummaging in the refrigerator. She already had enough problems with strange stuff happening to her. "I think we should have a vegetable stir-fry tonight. There are enough bits and pieces here."

Lizzie settled down on a stool in the kitchen and continued studying her book. "Seeing as we don't have a crystal skull handy, the book says I can use a mirror or even someone's eyes."

Marina pulled her head out of the refrigerator and blinked. "Forget it. I'm attached to them, too."

"Don't be silly." Lizzie twiddled with her nose ring, twisting it around as she read. "Divination. Seeing into the future."

"Don't." Marina tensed, resisting a sudden urge to slap Lizzie's hand away from her nose. She knew next week Lizzie would be out sighting UFOs or whatever was coming up next in the magazines she read. The whole thing was harmless. "I don't want to know the future."

"But I do. I don't want to waste more time with Fabio if it's

going to go nowhere,” Lizzie said, looking up momentarily from her book. “And you should look into it, too. Let’s face it, if you were psychic, you would have made your wedding gown in your groom’s size seeing he split all the pearl buttons when he got stuck in it.” Lizzie giggled.

“Hmph!” Marina took down the chopping board, pulled out a sharp knife from the kitchen drawer and started dicing a carrot with such intensity the pieces spun off the board. “Don’t start on about Tony. It’s not his fault he’s a cross-dresser.”

“So post him a pair of Manolo shoes. I doubt they have them where you come from. He’ll be thrilled.”

“I mean it, Lizzie,” Marina warned, waving the knife dramatically. “I loved that man. Maybe I just didn’t love him enough.”

“The point is you wouldn’t have dated him in the first place if you were psychic,” Lizzie said. “You must have lost your knack since camp, you sure were intuitive then. The book says psychic abilities can be developed and if anyone needs to develop their psychic abilities, it’s you. Let’s face it, you don’t have any judgment in men and it’s time you did.”

Marina turned on her. “You can talk. What about Fabio and his you-know-what problem? He’s destroying your confidence. You haven’t been happy with your appearance from the moment you met him.”

Lizzie looked at her calmly. “Exactly. If I can develop my psychic powers I’ll know more about people and I won’t make mistakes like choosing a man who loves Big Boobs Magazine more than me, and you won’t be attracted to cross-dressers.”

Marina attacked the pepper, determined not to discuss the

issue further.

"Now, all I need is a dark bowl, some candles and a quiet dark place to develop my powers." Lizzie gave Marina a meaningful glance. "If you're not interested in joining me, I'll search around for the things I need and go scry in the living room." Despite her words, Lizzie didn't move.

Putting down the knife, Marina opened a kitchen cupboard and reached for the wok. The back of her eyes burnt and she couldn't help getting upset. Lizzie had hit a nerve. "Why is it that men have this secret life?"

"That was a life lesson for you. You escaped. You passed."

Marina glanced over at the kitchen table where Lizzie kept a stack of magazines. Lying on top was a Street Cred magazine. Its pink heading screamed 'Life tests: Will you pass?'

"Lizzie!" Marina reached for some celery and commenced chopping.

"The trouble with you is that you look for the good in everyone."

"What's wrong with that?" Marina asked, sensing criticism in Lizzie's tone.

"You're way too trusting and you only look on the surface. You need to open your mind more. Explore. Learn to read between the lines." Lizzie stood and opened a cupboard, clinking the china as she shifted it around. "Wouldn't you know it? Not one black bowl. No matter. The book says I can fill the bowl with water and use ink. I'll just have to extract some ink out of a pen."

"I just said I don't want to know the future. That's all."

"Forget I said anything," said Lizzie. "I don't want to upset you."

Marina stopped. "No. Talk to me. I want to know what's on your mind." She placed one hand on her hip. Waiting.

Lizzie stopped and seemed uncertain as to go on. "When we were growing up and did all those summer camps together, you used to try everything. You don't get any joy out of trying new things like you used to. You won't try online dating. You won't even send an email. You're scared of life. You're frozen. I reckon Tony did that to you." Lizzie gathered up a pen, a bowl, some candles and retreated from the kitchen leaving Marina, knife in hand, staring at her mutilated vegetables.

Except she wasn't in the mood to cook anymore. Lizzie was right. Since her break up the only way she could cope with her fragility was to play life safe. She felt scared of her future when she should be embracing it, making a new one. Marina put down the knife and marched down the hall. "Hang on, Lizzie. I'm coming to scry," she called out. "Not that I believe in it," she muttered.

Lizzie grinned at her like a pixie, her spiked blond hair standing on end. "Great. That's the Marina I know and love. In that case we need a bigger bowl so we can both look in it." She skipped up the hall into the kitchen, upended the fruit bowl, returned with it filled with water and placed it on the living room floor.

"So, why is it so important that I do this with you?" Marina asked.

"I think it's creepy doing this on my own."

Marina pulled her hair band off her wrist and tied her wavy hair back. "And you call me scared? Luckily I don't believe in this stuff."

"Can you close the blinds? We're supposed to have a dark room," Lizzie said as she moved around preparing the room by lighting candles and incense. "James is going to hate coming home tonight. He can't bear the smell of incense. I think it reminds him of when our parents used to hold love-in sessions."

"Love-in sessions?"

"Don't ask. I was too young to know what was going on, but James crept out of his bedroom and never got over what he saw. I'm certain that was what shocked him into conventionality for the rest of his life. He started training in Tae Kwon Do after that because he knew Dad would hate it. I think it was his way of rebelling." Lizzie took the ink tube out of her pen. "Now, all I have to do is get the end off this, so I can pour the ink into the water to make it black."

Marina watched Lizzie pull hard at the end of the pen so that the nib broke off and black ink splashed onto her face and hand. She grabbed a tissue off the mantelpiece. "Here," she said, holding it out to Lizzie. "Wipe your face before the ink dries."

Lizzie wiped the ink managing to smear it across her face so that she looked like a strange creature emerging from the sea.

"You've made it worse."

"Never mind. Let's get started," Lizzie said, dripping ink from the broken pen so that the water went cloudy then black.

"I'll scrub my face when I cleanse tonight. Now, turn the overhead light off, will you?"

Marina did as she was asked.

"Okay, what we have to do is put our palms onto the sides of the bowl and stare into the water," Lizzie instructed.

Marina sat opposite Lizzie, her palms touching the sides of the bowl. She stared into the water.

"The book says we have to breathe deeply and imagine a white light coming from our hands, going through the bowl and taking all the negative energies away," Lizzie whispered although Marina had no idea why Lizzie was whispering.

"What am I supposed to be looking for?" whispered Marina who also didn't know why she, herself, was whispering.

"Signs." Lizzie nodded her head, looking more imp-like than sage-like as she did so.

Marina considered this for a moment. "What sort of signs?"

"I don't know. You're projecting imagery from within. Symbols, I guess." Lizzie leaned forward peering into the inky blackness in the bowl. "Argh!"

Marina jerked her hands away. "What! What happened? What did you see?"

"An eye. A big white eye," Lizzie wailed. "It filled the whole bowl."

Marina leaned forward, looked into the bowl then up above her. "That's not an eye. That's a reflection of the light globe above us."

Lizzie looked upwards. "Oh, so it is. Sorry. It scared me." Her face looked contrite.

"Sheesh, Lizzie," Marina muttered. "And you said I was scared to try new things."

"Let's move the bowl over. I can't scry while that big light globe overhead is reflecting in the water."

The girls resettled themselves. Marina placed her hands on the bowl and breathed deeply. She could feel Lizzie's fingertips lightly touching hers, her touch comforting. She imagined white light flowing from her fingers through the bowl. With every deep breath, she relaxed as she stared into the inky water. Strangely, the colour of the water changed to a pale yellow, then back to black. "The water is changing colour," Marina said, her voice low.

Noise from outside the apartment faded away as she concentrated on her breathing. Shapes grew in the water though there was nothing she could discern, just clouds of gray. She looked deeply through the water, her gaze slightly off center. And then she saw it. A shape moving in the water as it began to take human form. Was it a man or a woman? Moving closer, she stared deeper into the blackness.

Her throat tightened. The figure mover closer. A man. A foreboding sense of evil filled her. The killer. She knew it. *He is looking for his next victim.* She gave out a sharp hiss of breath.

"I can't see anything," complained Lizzie. "Not a sausage. And my eyes hurt."

At the sound of Lizzie's voice, the figure disappeared leaving an inky blackness.

Marina jerked backward sucking in air. She rose, raced to the doorway and turned on the light. "I saw a shape." She

touched her throat massaging the bony ridges beneath the skin.

"That's not fair," Lizzie said. "You saw something and you don't even believe in this stuff. I'm the spiritual, psychic one and I didn't see a thing."

Marina sank onto the sofa, glad to feel its softness under her weight. "I saw a man."

"Ha! Your next love."

"No, Lizzie. It wasn't like that at all." Marina was about to explain further when she heard the key being fitted into their apartment door.

"I told you I don't know anything," James said, opening the door to the apartment. His face wore a deep frown.

Who was he talking to? "Hi," Marina called out, glad to see him. There was something solid and calming about James. He was always so sweet to her. Always asked her about her day after work. Made her a cup of coffee in the morning and brought it into her bedroom. She loved being around him, enjoyed his banter with Lizzie, but from the expression on his face, he clearly wasn't in the mood for jokes now.

"Hey, James," Lizzie said, getting to her feet to greet her brother. "We're scrying."

"Not now, Lizzie." James's voice was so sharp that Lizzie jumped and her welcoming smile dissolved.

Marina had never heard James be so sharp with Lizzie, not even when she was probing into his love life; then she saw the reason why. Following behind James were the police.

Chapter 4

Two policemen followed James into the apartment. One of them, who introduced himself as Detective Davis, was heavysset with a pugnacious face. The other, Detective Herbert, was tall and wiry.

Marina felt their gaze needle her, then saw them look at Lizzie who stood staring back at them. Lizzie still had ink smeared over her face. She looked strange. Marina saw the expression on the policemen's faces as they checked Lizzie out.

She glanced around the room with its flickering candles and pungent incense still smoking. On the floor the scrying bowl sat full of inky water reflecting the light of the candles. Next to it laid the book on witchcraft. This couldn't look good.

"We just have a few routine questions regarding the homicide at Pier One on Saturday evening," said Detective Davis to James.

James frowned and looked at his sister. "Lizzie, clean this stuff up. And clean your face." He strode over to the windows and pushed them open. "I can't stand the smell of incense."

James turned to Detective Davis. "I don't know anything about the murder."

"You were there," Detective Davis said.

James shifted from foot to foot and even to Marina he looked like he was hiding something. "I was meeting a date. It's not a crime to date."

Detective Davis took out a pad from inside his jacket. "The

woman's name?"

"Didn't work out," James said.

Marina couldn't blame James for not wanting to discuss his date, but his tone was far from friendly. In fact it was downright rude.

"Lizzie, I told you. Clean this mess up," James ordered.

Lizzie and Marina began to snuff out the candles and incense. Detective Herbert bent and picked up the book on witchcraft off the floor. His eyes narrowed as he read the title. "This yours?" he asked Lizzie.

She took the book from him then pressed it to her chest.

"Witchcraft," he said and glanced at the other policeman.

"Wicca," Lizzie corrected.

"Not now, Lizzie," James said.

"Come on," Marina said. "Let's give James some space."

"It's white magic," Lizzie said. "There's nothing wrong with that. Plenty of good can come out of wicca magic. Did you know that fifteen percent of Australian women have tried some form of wicca magic?"

"Lizzie!" James shouted.

Lizzie jumped and stared at James in surprise.

"I said not now."

Marina, too, was surprised at James's tone, but she also knew how protective he was.

Armed with incense and candles, Marina started to usher Lizzie from the room.

"Stay," Detective Davis said.

Lizzie stopped and turned so quickly that Marina nearly bumped into her.

"They don't know anything about the murder. Marina was at home and Lizzie was on a date. You don't need to question them," James said.

"That will be for us to decide," Detective Davis said. He looked at them. "You have no objection to assisting us in this case by answering a few routine questions," he said, more a statement than a question.

"I suppose not," Marina said, before quietly taking a seat.

"Not at all," Lizzie replied eagerly, plopping herself down on the sofa.

"Just great." James groaned and sat in an armchair. Both policemen looked at him sharply.

Marina's stomach clenched. She couldn't explain it, but she felt guilty, and from looking at James's angry expression, the police were obviously having an effect on him. All the things she could have done came to mind. Perhaps she should have gone down to the station and volunteered what she knew about her client, Adele. She was certain it was all about to come out, especially as Lizzie was straining dangerously forward on her seat.

"Information has come to light that indicates you were near the crime scene," Detective Davis said to James. "You were seen hanging over the railings at the end of Pier One, looking as if you were searching for something."

"Or someone," Detective Herbert added.

"I was at Sebelles restaurant. I heard a woman scream and

I thought someone needed help, so I stood up and looked around, but I didn't see anything. That's all I can tell you."

"My report has it..." Detective Davis looked at his notepad. "Possible witness was seen to leave restaurant location at the approximate time of the murder."

James stiffened in his chair. "I told you I didn't see a thing."

"Is there anyone who can verify your story?" Detective Davis asked.

"No!" James said.

"The manager of Sebelles said you had a booking for two," Detective Herman pressed.

James's eyes widened as he stared at him. "My date didn't show."

Marina shot James a sympathetic glance. He was a terrible liar, but she understood his embarrassment. He was very conservative and wouldn't want to own up to dating his mother, but surely in these circumstances he should say so.

"So you were meeting someone," Detective Davis said.

"A date," James muttered not looking at him. "As I said, she didn't show."

"Why was that?" asked Detective Herman.

"I don't know... I didn't know her... It was an online date."

Marina clenched her knees together in embarrassment for James. She bit her lower lip. This was sounding worse by the second.

"I see." The detective looked at James keenly. "We have information that the victim was also meeting an online date that evening."

"Thirty three percent of Sydney residents under thirty have tried online dating," Lizzie butted in.

"It wasn't me," James said. "I wasn't dating her."

Marina could see perspiration beading on his forehead. He glared at the policemen as if challenging them.

"You seem very certain of this."

"Dead certain," James growled.

Marina flinched. Not such a good choice of words. He looked like a caged panther. All dark and angry. Perhaps she should jump in and give him some help. "He wasn't dating Adele," Marina said. "I knew Adele. In fact, I spoke to her about her date."

Detective Herman exchanged glances with Detective Davis. "Now we're getting somewhere," Detective Davis said.

"And you are?" Detective Herman inquired.

"Marina Henry. James and Lizzie's flatmate. I work at Salon City on Darlinghurst Road as a beautician. I did Adele's wax job and she told me about her date so I know it wasn't James."

"Did you get a name?"

"No. I'm sorry. I just knew she was meeting him at Pier One and going dancing if she liked the look of him."

"Then how do you know she wasn't meeting your flatmate?" Detective Davis asked. "The meeting place is the same."

It was a fair question and Marina thought for a moment about how she was going to answer it. "Because James is a fantastic man." She stopped and looked at him.

His face softened as he looked at her, light shone in his

gorgeous green eyes.

She could feel her heart starting to beat faster. These cops had it so wrong. She turned her attention back to them. "This man she was meeting..." Marina paused, trying to think of an explanation that would help James. "I don't know. He wasn't decent. I didn't like the sound of him at all. I told her not to go."

"What exactly did she say?" Detective Herman questioned.

Marina tried to think. She had seen so many clients over the week, all with their different stories. "It wasn't really what she said. It's just that she didn't know this man, but I got the impression he was expecting sex. It just didn't sound right to me."

"Why do you think sex was the outcome?" Detective Davis probed.

"Because I was doing her wax job and she wanted nearly everything off, down below. I've noticed that when clients request a Brazilian, they're expecting sex. I mean that's not always the case. Some women do it because they like to wear hipster jeans, but Adele talked about it."

Detective Herbert nodded and he seemed to be thinking. He turned to James. "What is your online dating name?"

Lizzie giggled nervously.

Marina nudged her with her elbow to keep quiet.

"Sorry," Lizzie said.

James closed his eyes in a long blink. "Sex Cowboy."

The heavysset policeman added that to his notes. "Sounds like a perverted sort of name to me," he said. "Sounds like the name of someone expecting sex."

Marina had a tight feeling in her stomach. She hadn't meant to make things worse for James.

Detective Herbert gave him a hard stare. "We also have a report that you were seen arguing with a woman at Pier One near the crime scene."

James's chin jerked up. "Who is saying this crap? I feel like I'm being spied on."

"We have a murder to solve here. A woman was beaten and strangled. I'm not interested in your sensitive feelings," Detective Davis said. His bulldog-like face darkened. "You had a date. She showed up. Who was it?"

"So who were you dating, Sex Cowboy? Who were you arguing with?" Detective Herbert joined in.

James stared at him a long time before he answered. "No one."

Detective Herman walked over to James, who stood and, despite his tense posture, put his hands defiantly on his hips. His face jutted forward, his expression furious.

Lizzie had always said that when push came to shove, James was brave. Marina froze, not knowing what to do as James stood eye to eye with the detective.

"Don't leave town in the near future," Detective Herman said. "I have a feeling we'll be seeing you again."

Chapter 5

Marina looked at her list of bookings. She was halfway through the day and she had a full leg and Brazilian, an underarm, full arm, brow, lip, chin, back, eyebrow shaping, ten minutes of impulse light treatment and fifteen minutes of electrolysis booked in. The trouble was it was all on the same lady. When it came to body hair, some people were born unlucky.

Her client, Dani Caponari, was a ball of energy packed into a short frame. Marina looked forward to her next appointment because Dani was as amusing as she was hairy. At twenty-two, Dani had more dating experience than Marina thought she'd be able to put into her whole lifetime. She was a veritable 'what's on in the city' guide. Perhaps sensing that Marina was lonely, she'd promised to take her out to the Cha Cha club on Oxford Street and Marina warmed to her kindness. Her appointment, no matter how long, always passed quickly.

No doubt it would go better than the one she'd just completed where the client insisted on viewing her vagina with a mirror just like in a hairdressing salon and then complained her freshly waxed vulva looked like a steamed clam. Marina hadn't known what to say.

She went to reception to greet her client and Dani hugged and kissed her on the cheek. "Ciao, Marina. How has life been treating you?"

Very strangely, she wanted to say. "Fine. And you?"

“Things have never been better. I’m turning my life around. The results are in,” Dani announced happily.

Marina led the way to her cubicle. “Results? What results? Remind me,” she said handing Dani a gown so she could disrobe. “I didn’t sleep well last night.” That was an understatement. She knew James had slept no better when he’d brought her a cup of coffee that morning. He’d sat on her bed with eyes like dark bruises. Who was spying on him? The same sicko who had murdered Adele? She’d wanted to pull back the covers of her bed and ask him to hold her.

Only Lizzie had seemed unaffected by the police interview, refusing to let it get to her because, as she stated, “We are all innocent and the police should go and find the killer instead of wasting their time interviewing innocent people”.

Marina stepped out of the room and waited outside while her client Dani disrobed. When she glanced along the corridor she saw that Lizzie’s door was closed. She was busy doing a non-surgical face-lift, which would take her the best part of an hour. On the doorstep sat a bunch of elaborate flowers, which Marina guessed had been sent by Fabio. This was the second time this week he’d sent Lizzie flowers with the aim of getting her back. Their manager, Natalia, wouldn’t allow interruptions, but Lizzie would get a nice surprise when she found them on her doorstep.

“I’m ready,” Dani called and Marina walked back in.

Marina gave her a grin. “Do you want me to tidy your eyebrows first?”

“No. Do the impulse light treatment. Get the painful bit over first. I hate having hair on my nipples. It’s such a turn off for

men. I'd rather face zapping rays of light and the smell of my own hair burning than let a man see my nipples surrounded by dark, wiry hairs." Dani shuddered. "I mean, the one part of me I like is my breasts. I wish they weren't so hairy. I've shaved off the worst of the hairs."

Marina glanced over her client. Dani did have an impressive cleavage, which Marina knew to be completely natural.

Nice big titties. Marina froze. Where had that thought come from? She shook her head trying to ignore the weird thought that seemed to come from nowhere.

"Why don't you try laser, Dani? I know it's expensive but it does get rid of body hair more effectively."

Dani shook her head. "No. I don't like the idea of laser. Things can go wrong."

Marina maneuvered the impulse light machine over her client, then studied the pretty, young girl lying before her. Dani was one of her hairiest clients, but it was satisfying work to know that with treatment and waxing, she'd been able to get the worst of the problem under control.

"Tell me about the results thing you mentioned earlier," Marina prompted to take Dani's mind off any pain.

"Sure" Dani beamed.

Marina pressed the button. Zap!

"Ouch!" Dani stiffened with pain.

"Sorry," Marina said. *Hurt her again.* Marina gasped at the sudden intrusive thought. She looked around her. There was no one. She'd have to see a psychiatrist if this kept up.

"Don't worry. I'm coping," Dani said. Marina felt her relax. "Remember I told you I was going to dress up as each of the Spice Girls and take photos to post on dating sites?"

"That's right." The memory came tumbling back and Marina was glad. Anything to get her mind off the horrible thoughts. Dani wanted to find out which look would be more popular with men online, so she took different photos of herself and posted them on different dating sites. "How did it go?"

"Great. I got some very interesting results. I did a sophisticated look like Posh Spice. You know, a little black dress number and slicked back hair."

Marina zapped Dani's breast.

"Ouch! That hurt."

"Sorry," Marina said. *Good. Do that again. Hurt her.* She looked around the room again, which was ridiculous, because they were the only ones there.

"Then I did a sweet Baby Spice look where I posed wearing a pink top and holding my stuffed bunny. A sexy Ginger Spice wearing my low cut black top, my red mini skirt, fishnet stockings and boots. Last was a Sporty Spice look wearing my t-shirt, shorts and runners."

"Isn't there another one?" asked Marina who tried to remember who was in the now-defunct British pop group. She focused her gaze on a large, black hair just below Dani's nipple and zapped.

"Ouch!" Dani winced from the pain. "I didn't bother with Scary Spice. I figured four different looks were enough."

"That was a particularly thick hair. Did you do a different

bio for each?" No voice this time. Nevertheless, her heart thumped with fear.

"No. I put the same bio on each site. 'Hello. My name's Dani. I'm twenty-two and I work in the travel industry.'"

Zap!

"Argh!" Dani screamed, her face creasing in pain.

"Sorry," Marina apologized.

Blast her breasts.

Marina jumped. She was hearing voices. She was going insane.

"Where was I?" Dani's face relaxed. "Oh yes, my bio. I wrote that I love travelling, seeing live bands and movies. I'm looking for a fun person to do things with."

Marina moved to the other nipple to give Dani a break from the area she was doing. She hated making her client scream. After five minutes she could smell burning hair, even though Dani had shaved the site and it made her feel nauseous. Her head started to throb.

"I'm inundated with replies," Dani said.

Zap!

"Argh!" This time Dani screamed so loud, Marina looked at her in concern.

Hurt her. Hurt her. She could feel a sense of excitement building, but it wasn't her feeling. She didn't like hurting a client. "Do you want me to keep going? The breast is a sensitive area."

"Yes. Yes. Keep going. I've got a date on Saturday night. I mean I know it's a first date and I don't even know if I'll kiss the

guy, but I can't stand having hairy breasts. I know the hairs are there and I don't feel confident inside myself."

"So all these different looks produced results," Marina said, encouraging Dani to talk. The voice had to stop. It had to.

"Incredible results," Dani said. Her face creased as Marina maneuvered the machine and she closed her eyes. "But guess which one produced the most?"

Marina thought for a moment. The sexy Ginger Spice look was the most obvious answer because men went for a sexy look. "I'm guessing the Posh Spice sophisticated look."

"Wrong." Dani laughed.

Zap!

"Ouch," she grimaced in the next breath.

"Sorry," Marina said.

"Baby Spice won. Men went for the cute look. I must admit—"

Zap!

"Ouch!" Dani screamed louder this time.

Marina winced.

"I thought sexy would win, but that came third."

Good. So good. The thoughts were like a groan of sexual pleasure weaving in her mind. Marina's fingers trembled with disgust. They were not her feelings. What was happening to her? She forced herself to continue working.

Zap!

"Ouch!" Dani's body jerked. "Sophisticated came last."

Marina tried to concentrate on what Dani was saying. "So

cute was first, then sporty, then sexy, then sophisticated.”

“That’s right,” nodded Dani. “In one week, I had one hundred and five sweet emails from guys who liked the cute look and wanted my bunny to make baby bunnies with theirs and eighty-two for the sporty look from sports fanatics who went on and on about the sports they loved. Boring!”

“So, how many for the sexy look?” Marina asked intrigued.

“Thirty oversexed replies from guys who told me how hot they were in bed. Like who’d believe that? I never believe a man when they advertise themselves. You should read the names some of them signed on with. One guy called himself Sex Cowboy. Is that desperate or what?”

There couldn’t be two Sex Cowboys. “Um...I think Sex Cowboy is my flatmate.”

Dani giggled. “I didn’t reply to that one. There were so many emails I’m still going through them. Is he cute? Your flatmate.”

Marina thought of James, his broad shoulders, the expression in his green eyes when he brought her coffee in bed in the morning. “I don’t think he’d be your type.”

Dani’s eyes narrowed. “Do you like him?”

Heat flamed Marina’s cheeks.

“You do, don’t you?”

“He’s my flatmate.”

“Wouldn’t stop me shagging him.”

“Dani!” She focused on the electrolysis.

“Ouch! Ouch! That hurts.”

Yeeees. The word came like a whisper of pleasure in her

mind.

Marina stopped. She couldn't bear the voice in her head. Little hairs rose on her arms like a terrified cat. "Are you okay?" She didn't want to continue, not with the alien thoughts that slid unwanted into her head.

"Keep going," Dani insisted.

She didn't want to keep going. The voice sickened her.

Dani raised her head. "Marina! There's a horrible wiry hair there." Her client pointed to her right breast.

Marina took a deep breath and kept going. "Okay. What happened with the sophisticated look?" Zap! She waited. No voice. She expelled a deep breath and got on with her job.

"I had about ten replies. The interesting thing was that most of the guys who replied to the sophisticated look were over forty. One guy said he still had all his hair and teeth. I mean, is that meant to be a turn-on for me? Get real." Dani rolled her eyes and Marina smiled.

"That's a lot of replies in one week. Is that normal?"

"I had heaps more this time than when I put my bio and no photograph. One of the guys sounded nice, so I'm meeting him on Saturday night."

Zap!

"Argh!" Dani screamed. "I don't think I can bear it anymore."

Marina glanced at her client. She was choking. There was spittle on her lips.

She slammed the impulse light gun down. "Dani!"

"Sorry." Dani wiped a tear from her eye. "It seems extra

painful today, but I want you to keep going.”

“But you were choking.”

Dani stared at her. “No, I wasn’t. I screamed, that’s all.”

She had heard a choking sound. She knew she had.

“Are all those dark hairs gone?” Dani raised her head and looked at her breasts. “Yuck. There’s one more. Dammit, why do they keep growing back? Women aren’t meant to be so hairy.”

“That’s enough for today.” She packed away the equipment before Dani could argue. Her hands trembled and her mouth had dried. She grabbed her water glass from her work bench and gulped some down. If she couldn’t seem to tell the difference between what was real and what wasn’t, was she going mad? She closed her eyes for a moment. Her whole body felt like a mass of jangling nerves.

Dani adjusted her gown to cover her breasts.

The waxing. She had to get back to the waxing. She put thick pink wax on a spatula and smoothed it under Dani’s brow line. Testing the wax with her fingers until it was no longer tacky, she peeled back an edge and ripped it off, leaving a nice clean line.

Dani winced but she didn’t scream out.

Marina listened to the silence, conscious of the buzz of the freeway in the background. No evil voice. Nothing. Just her own thoughts.

Two hours later, she finished waxing Dani’s face and body. Her headache wasn’t any better, but she’d done a good job and that pleased her. “Well,” she said as she finished up,

“you’re done. Enjoy your date on Saturday night. Hope you feel nice and confident now.”

“I do,” Dani insisted, looking down to survey her smooth legs. She ran her fingers along her arms and over her face and chin. “No more spikes and prickles. I can’t tell you how much better I feel knowing I’m smooth and clean. Especially down there.” Dani giggled. “I shouldn’t tell you this because it sounds promiscuous, but the guy I’m seeing Saturday night is totally into Brazilians.”

Alarm shot up Marina’s spine. Adele had told her something similar. “How can you admit to that stuff when you’ve never met the guy?”

Dani giggled as she climbed off the bed. “I don’t normally, but he knew I liked to travel from my bio and he said he loved Brazil, so it kinda came out. I couldn’t help flirting, he sounded so nice.”

Marina shook her head. “Don’t go. Not on this date.”

“Why?” Dani looked stunned.

“One of my clients was murdered last week. She met her date online. He told her he liked Brazilians.”

“I read about that in the paper.”

“Don’t go. I mean it. I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

Dani shrugged. “I’ve done heaps of online dating. Don’t worry about me. I’m very experienced at this stuff. I’ve been dating for years.”

“Dani, please. I have a bad feeling about this.”

“I don’t want to cancel.”

“Please,” Marina begged. “I don’t want you murdered.”

Dani sighed. "Okay. I'll cancel. But only because I like you."

Marina narrowed her eyes. "What's this guy's online name?"

"God, Marina, you're getting like my mother. I told you. I'm going to cancel."

She'd overstepped the mark. Dani was a client and she had no right to tell her what to do. "Fine." She reached out and gave Dani a hug. "I'll let you get changed and see you at reception."

She walked to the lobby. A heavy sense of foreboding hung over her like a dark cloud. It occurred to her for the first time that perhaps she was depressed since her broken engagement. Or worse, perhaps she was experiencing some sort of psychosis. That would explain the isolated bad thoughts that floated through her mind and the reoccurring fear of what might happen.

Yet Adele had been murdered.

Was she going crazy or was there a serial killer waiting to strike again?

Chapter 6

Lizzie went to Fabio's studio apartment on Albion Street, close to the World Gym where Fabio did his personal training and fitness classes. Fabs was almost a cult hero in the neighborhood but Lizzie didn't think much of the area. Full of bars, clubs and pubs, it was a suburb of Sydney where she could walk down the street almost naked with Fabio and most of the guys would whistle at him. She knocked on Fabio's apartment door and Fabs greeted her enthusiastically, pulling her into a bear hug. She sauntered into his apartment. Although enjoying the attention he gave her, she was here to sort things out and that meant changes.

Fab's king-size bed dominated the room making up for the absence of a lounge. Barbells with enormous weights lay on the floor up against a wall. A wardrobe was next to the bed crammed with clothes and pornographic magazines. Lizzie knew because she'd once sneaked a look when she'd been checking out his clothes.

"Fabio. No more. You've given me enough presents. Stop sending me flowers. My bedroom is starting to look like a florist's and all the girls at work are jealous."

"I promise I'll make you happy. I'll do anything if you just forgive me. I love you." Fabio sat at her feet pleading with her to take him back. "I'm not proud of what I do. It's just that I've been doing it all my life and it's hard for me to stop."

"I don't care, Fabio. I know guys buy pornography and do..." Lizzie hesitated. "You-know-what. Just don't do it with me

here. I mean—" Lizzie sat fiddling with her nose ring, trying to find the words to express her disgust. "It's insulting. I feel like when we're making love that you're using me and that you really want the girl in the magazine."

"I don't, Lizzie, and I'm not trying to insult you. It's just that after years of going it alone, the magazines are useful. It's like a habit. A bad habit," he mumbled. Fabio could barely look at her. He was flushed with embarrassment and Lizzie's heart softened. It was hard to keep up her anger in the face of Fabio's genuine shame.

How could she stay mad at this man who was trying not to cry? Yet if Fabio wanted her back, then it was going to be on her terms.

Lizzie took a deep breath. "Look, I like you, but I'm obviously not what you want in a girl." She peered down at her small breasts.

"Lizzie, you've got it all wrong," Fabio said, reaching up to hold her hand. "You're exactly what I want in a girl. I love your energy and we like the same things. I've bought us season tickets to all the NRL games. Who else likes going to the gym like I do? Please give me one more chance."

It was kind of sexy having this big, powerful-looking man begging her to take him back. Lizzie's mouth tightened in resolve. "I'll give you one more chance, but I'm not going to put up with the pornography. It's got to go. All of it. Every single magazine. If you can't make love to me without pornography then we can't be together. You have to choose. It's the magazines or me."

Fabio blanched at her demand.

"I mean it, Fabio."

"But what about my body building magazines?"

"They can stay. That's a healthy obsession, but all the yuck ones have to go now. I'm not going to come here anymore if they're here."

Fabio nodded. "I'll do anything you want. I love you, Lizzie."

Lizzie surveyed him, thinking how tanned and fit he looked. Her heart did a little leap as his hand slid higher up. It was so nice having a boyfriend. She'd prove to James that her relationships could last more than a few weeks. She slapped her hand down on Fabio's to stop it moving further. "Come on," she said standing. "I want every magazine out of this place."

"What? Now?" Fabio got to his feet. Towering over her he scratched his head with disappointment.

"Yes. Of course now." She opened his bedside drawer and pulled out a collection of magazines featuring models with breasts so oversized they barely left room for the girls' heads. She threw them on the floor and turned to Fabio who stood motionless beside her. "Get the ones you've stuffed in the wardrobe. I know you've got some in there and I bet there are some hidden under the mattress."

"Yes, boss woman," Fabio said, but he said it without rancour.

Half an hour later, Lizzie had unearthed a stack of porn magazines and had great satisfaction making Fabio throw the lot into a garbage bin. Not one offending magazine remained and as far as Lizzie was concerned that was the end of the problem.

Back in the apartment, Fabio took her hand. "Lizzie, I feel like I've had a religious experience."

"Huh?" asked Lizzie, unable to see anything vaguely religious about the dumping of pornography.

"I feel like I've been cleansed. I'm free. It's like all the bad things I've done have gone away and I don't feel guilty anymore. You know, guys think bad stuff about women in those sorts of magazines."

"Fabs, they're just models earning a living. Not that I'd ever pose like that," she hurried on.

Fabio stroked her face. "I know. You're like a saint."

"You are a dope," Lizzie said, embarrassed by his praise. No one ever praised her except James and Marina. It was cool having Marina staying with them, except Marina was so upset by the police visit, she didn't want to do fun things like shopping for bargains at the moment. She was a total nerve basket since her disaster wedding. Why take those dumb cops seriously? Who cares what they thought. James was pissed off by their visit too.

"Something wrong, Lizzie?" Fabio asked.

"No. Why?"

"You're frowning."

"Nothing," she said, giving Fabio a hug. It was wonderful having a boyfriend who was prepared to change for her. Apart from James, no man had ever given a damn what she thought.

She picked up a pile of Fabio's client training files that he'd stacked neatly on the bed and dumped them on the floor next to his body building magazines. "To shagging without

pornography. To us.” Slowly, she peeled off her top and tiny yellow shorts until she was naked.

She was rewarded with a grin so wide, she knew that this time the sex would be terrific.

In a moment Fabio’s own clothes were a pile on the floor and he lay kissing her and stroking her breasts. “You’re not like those other women,” he whispered. “You’re sweet. Loving. Pure.”

Now that was going too far No one had ever called her pure before, but Fabio’s fingers had moved between her legs and were working magic with her senses. She had no problem with Fabio putting her on a pedestal if he wanted to, she thought, arching her back with pleasure as he caressed her.

She snuggled up close, loving the feeling of his large protective body against hers. He smelled good, a mixture of soap and the sandalwood cologne she’d bought him. Her hands caressed his smooth chest and she traced her fingers around one nipple and then the other. It peaked and Fabio closed his eyes in pleasure as she leant forward to take the hardened tip between her teeth, gently biting him.

A low groan met her ears. A little pain was always good. She circled his nipple with her tongue savoring his slightly salty taste, then reached further down with her hand. He was big and hard and his penis jerked when she ran her hand lightly along the shaft to the tip. An overwhelming sense of desire shot through her knowing Fabio’s contrite mood meant she was in control. This time, she was going to make sure there was no one in his mind except her.

“You’re so small, Lizzie,” he said, sliding a finger into her. “I

don't know how you take me." She could feel his hot breath hit her face. He smelled of desire. His green eyes were narrowed into slits of arousal.

He slid another finger into her and it was her turn to moan as he rubbed his thumb lightly over her clitoris.

"Don't stop doing that," she urged, arching forward and rocking to the motion of his fingers. She could feel the tension building in the small of her back. He entered another finger stretching her. Lizzie writhed in pleasure. The bonus of going out with such a big guy was that his fingers felt like a penis. "Suck my breasts, Fabs," she gasped on the edge. "I need to come."

The feel of his moist lips and tongue teasing her nipples was enough to tip her over. A rush of heat exploded inside her and she arched against his slippery fingers. His thumb kept strumming her clitoris. It was so erotic she became boneless with ecstasy. Her whole body tensed and she was aware of nothing but what he was doing with his fingers and mouth. A moan reached her lips as she cried out with pleasure. Soon, she lay panting near his side. "That was heaven," she said, fighting to catch her breath.

She was rewarded with a smile. She loved the way his teeth were white and evenly spaced. His green eyes were shining and she knew it was because he was proud because he could turn her on so easily. One of his hands cupped her bottom pressing her hard against his erection.

"Of course it was like heaven," he whispered. "You're an angel."

She smiled and kissed him. He was sweet. An almost

perfect boyfriend. Most men would have leapt on her by now, but Fabio always held back for her pleasure no matter how much he seemed to want her. "Your turn now. Lie on your back." She sat up and pushed him flat. It gave her a sexual thrill to order this big man around.

"You're a pushy girl, Lizzie," he said, sounding delighted despite his words.

Her gaze roved over his large pectoral muscles and ridged stomach. "I want to do this my way. I've never been on top." This time when they shagged she was going to make sure he looked at her the whole time because she was determined to be number one in his mind.

She knelt astride him guiding him inside her. Fabio lay back, his eyes hooded as she rose up and down taking more of him inside her. This time there'd be no more other women with their false breasts to spoil her pleasure, she thought with satisfaction.

Fabio moaned and thrust into her, picking up the pace. "You want this, don't you?"

"Uh huh." Lizzie sighed, her lips curving to a smile.

"You whore. You slut." Fabio grabbed her by the hips, physically lifting her up and down so that the rhythm she had created was no longer her own.

What happened to pure? Lizzie wondered, her imaginary pedestal crumbling.

"Shove your big tits in my face. I want to see 'em. Come on, slut."

Lizzie's smile faded from her face. Fabio was no longer

looking at her. Instead he was staring at the floor. She looked over to see what had caught his attention. Fabio's client files lay scattered and open, but one file was different from the others. It held pictures of women with big breasts downloaded from a dating site. Lizzie stared at a printout of a female wearing a red skirt, black top and fishnet stockings who sat posing seductively, only it was impossible to recognize her because her face had been scrubbed out.

"You big-titted slut," he groaned as he climaxed, unaware that she no longer moved to his rhythm. His whole body spasmed until finally his hold on her loosened and he dropped his hands from her hips.

Lizzie pushed herself off him in disgust. "You lied to me."

"Lizzie?" Fabio's green eyes focused on her.

She stepped off the bed and screamed at him. "You sick, rotten bastard. You didn't get rid of everything, did you?" With tears in her eyes she reached for her clothes, pulling on her shorts and top.

"Lizzie," Fabio wailed. "The folder was open. I couldn't help looking. I didn't plan it. These women don't mean anything, they just add to the fantasy. They're nobodies. Just women who advertise themselves online. Please don't go. Don't leave me."

"Is that what you think? You met me online. Is that why you called me a whore?"

"No! I was getting off. That's all. I don't think that about you."

Lizzie turned on him, her stomach clenched with anger. "I told you that you had to choose—the pictures or me. But you can't do without them, can you? You're sick."

“Lizzie, please forgive me.”

“It’s over.”

“But I love you.”

Fabio’s words were lost as Lizzie slammed the door of his apartment behind her. She didn’t want him to see her despair. No matter what she did, no man, except for her brother, ever loved or respected her.

The loneliness of that fact tore into her heart.

Chapter 7

“Lizzie, could you give me a hand with the massage bed?” Marina asked, walking into Lizzie’s pink bedroom. It wasn’t Marina’s favorite colour but she knew Lizzie liked the room because her mother had spent time with her decorating it when she was young. The trouble was that, like the rest of the apartment, the colour was overdone. Lizzie had a pink comforter and pink lace curtains. Cross-stitch pictures with pink frames hung on the wall and, while most women would have grown out of this years ago, Lizzie refused to change a thing. Only the beige carpet broke up the unrelenting pink.

Lizzie looked at her watch. It was seven o’clock. “Sorry, Marina, my mind was elsewhere. I forgot Peta’s coming tonight for her wax job.” Lizzie was referring to their transgender client who came regularly for a complete body wax. “Did I tell you Peta used to do the massages at the salon?”

“Is that how you met?”

“Yes. She had to stop when she had her implants. Said they hurt too much. Plus,” she whispered, “I heard she had a falling out with Natalia. Something about stealing.”

“What did she steal?” Marina was surprised to hear Peta was involved in something underhanded, but then she always thought the best of people.

Lizzie shrugged. “Can’t remember.” She looked down at her breasts. “Wish I could afford implants.”

“You don’t need them. Come on.” Marina gave Lizzie a

friendly pat on the shoulder. She'd been almost catatonic with misery since her fight with Fabio earlier in the week, but she seemed to have snapped out of it since she'd bought a pump-up bra. Marina didn't think a pump-up was the answer to Lizzie's relationship problems, but Lizzie had replied it was cheaper than implants.

"I need you to help me set the bed up. I've already lined up my Elvis CDs to take Peta's mind off the pain. I've tested the wax. It's nearly ready."

Lizzie pushed herself off her bed and helped Marina.

"Is that guy who wants to be a girl coming over?" James called from the kitchen. "The beautiful one."

"Yes, it's back, sack and crack time again," Lizzie said.

Both girls heard James groan. "Can't you leave some mystery? Men don't want to know those things."

"And miss out on teasing you? No way," Lizzie called.

Marina and Lizzie laughed and did a high five. They loved grossing out James with the intricacies of their job. When Marina first moved into the apartment she had been too shy to tease James, but now that she knew him better, she joined in too.

James came into Lizzie's bedroom. "How can he bear it? I pull one hair off my head and it hurts, let alone pulling off one of my pubes."

"She has to cope," Marina said, emphasizing the pronoun. "Peta's a dancer at the Cross. Have you ever seen a hairy dancer?"

James paused to consider for a moment. "Can't say I

have. Glad I'm a computer engineer. I couldn't stand thinking about having all the hairs ripped out of my chest."

"What, all six of them?" teased Lizzie.

"A guy's back is the worst. It bleeds," Marina said.

James's face paled. "Too much information." He started to leave the room.

"I must admit, I'm still not comfortable doing the sack," Lizzie added winking at Marina. "The skin is so tender."

James put his hands over the front of his jeans, his green eyes wide with horror. "You girls don't really rip all the hairs out there?"

"Of course we do," Lizzie said. "No part of the body is sacred to a beautician. You want to know what else? It doesn't matter whether they are gay or not, you touch that area and they get an erection, even if they are in pain." She shot Marina a cheeky look as she prepared the massage bed with a clean sheet.

James's hands dropped from his front. "Lizzie!" Although Lizzie had an active sex life, James still behaved as if she were an innocent.

"Peta keeps his...her thong underwear on and we ask her to move her jewels as we wax him...um...I mean...her. It's less painful if the client keeps the skin taut. Marina can demonstrate on you if you want to see how it's done."

"Lizzie!" Marina caught James's stare. Clearly he had the same picture of them naked together from his look. If she were ever going to touch James, it wouldn't be to wax him. She could imagine being naked with this big hunky man.

James's face coloured. "If Marina touched me, I'd disgrace myself."

"Me too," she said.

The doorbell rang, but she ignored it.

She couldn't stop staring at him. He was gorgeous. So strong. Protective. As far as she could tell, he was the type of guy who would appreciate her in underwear and not want to wear it. Just being around him cheered her up, especially after what had happened at the salon with Dani. Thank God, Dani had agreed not to go on her date. What if she was psychic? Was that better than being nuts? Creepy visions or going crazy. Yuck! What a choice.

"Peta's here," Lizzie said. "Is one of you going to get it or are you just going to stand there? Don't worry. I'll get it." Lizzie marched past them, walked up the hall and opened the door for Peta who walked in wearing a silver halter-top and mini. Her blond hair was beautifully styled into a shaggy bob. Her smoky gray eyes were made up with shades of purple graduating to silver at the brow. She kissed Lizzie on the cheek. "Lizzie, honey, you look like you're getting some."

Lizzie laughed. "Not since I dumped Fabio."

"At least he didn't dump you. It's much better being the dumper than the dumpee, I always say."

"That's true," Lizzie said, looking more cheerful.

"Hi, Peta," Marina said from the doorway of Lizzie's bedroom. She liked the way Peta was always upbeat and could turn a negative situation into a positive one. Both girls enjoyed chatting to Peta about their love lives and getting her advice because she could give them both a man's and a

woman's point of view. She also had an acerbic wit and was totally intrusive without being offensive.

As Peta walked down the hall toward her, Marina stared at her in envy. She had the longest and sexiest legs Marina had ever seen in a mini. She made a better-looking woman than most of her clients at the salon. "How are you?" she said, offering Peta her cheek to kiss.

"You know how it is." Peta sighed. "Busy days and lonely nights since my lover dumped me. He can't accept that I'm a woman inside. It's a crazy world." Peta shook her head.

"I couldn't agree more," Marina said. "Life would be so much simpler if people were more honest about their needs."

"Don't tell me you're still not getting any," Peta asked.

Marina laughed. "Is it that obvious?"

"Yes," Lizzie said, closely following behind Peta. "I'm working on getting her out of her shell."

"If anyone can do it, it will be you, Lizzie," Peta said.

She turned to James. "Honey, I've seen you here several times, but I don't believe I've had the pleasure of meeting you." Peta had a way of purring out the letter p in pleasure so that her lips pursed to form a kiss.

James stood with his mouth open catching insects as if he couldn't quite believe Peta was real. "James Worth," he said at last. He offered his hand to shake but Peta raised it to her lips and kissed it.

"Aren't you the gorgeous one. Absolutely good enough to eat."

"We haven't waxed him yet," Lizzie said, shooting an

impish glance at James.

James's eyes opened so wide, Marina could see the whites.

"I guess we could do a double session, see who copes the best," Lizzie said, trying to keep a straight face.

"Only hurts the first time, honey," Peta joined in with a giggle. "You have to push through the pain barrier. After that, the pain becomes pleasure," she purred.

James blanched. "I'm out of here."

Marina watched him retreat down the hall to his bedroom and close the door.

"You girls are wicked," Peta said, "teasing that nice man like that. Mind you, he doesn't look like he's getting any either." Peta sashayed into Lizzie's bedroom and started taking off her clothes. With most clients the girls usually left the room, but Peta insisted that as an exotic dancer she was used to taking off her clothes in front of people, so they might as well stay.

"We're a celibate household," Marina said, rolling her eyes.

"So you won't be setting Sydney on fire this Saturday night?" Peta said. She always asked what they were doing over the weekend because she enjoyed hearing what happened in the 'straight' world as she called it.

"fraid not," Lizzie said.

"And what about that hunk of a man?" Peta asked, her eyes gleaming with sexual interest. "Doesn't he get tired of two girly roommates and want to spend some time with the boys?" Peta often asked what James was up to on the

weekend and Lizzie was convinced she had a crush.

"Nothing going down for him either," Lizzie said.

"Or no one." Peta giggled. "Such a waste."

"Let's get started," Marina said, and clicked on the CD player. Elvis's upbeat music played softly in the background. She was rewarded with a nod from Peta whose grandmother had left her the complete Elvis collection when she'd passed away. Sometimes it took only a small thing to make a client happy and Peta, who always talked about her troubled love life while they waxed her, coped better when she listened to Elvis. She took a small spatula to do Peta's eyebrows and loaded it with wax and started working to give Peta the perfect brow line.

"James likes our company," Lizzie said. "We love him too."

"I can see that," Peta said, shooting Marina a perceptive glance as she lay on the massage bed. "He's delectable. Don't you think so, Marina?"

Marina shifted uncomfortably on her feet. Peta didn't miss much. She gave a noncommittal grunt.

"James teases me about my boyfriends," Lizzie continued, missing Peta's knowing look, "so I tease him back." She smoothed wax on Peta's legs, placed a linen strip on the wax, and pulled hard.

Peta seemed oblivious to the pain. "What I don't understand is what is a handsome honey like that doing single? In my world he'd be snapped up in a moment."

"James's gone off dating at the moment. One of his online dates didn't go so well," Marina said. She took some tweezers

to Peta's eyebrows to pull out the last resistant hairs. She didn't mention the police visit, or the fact that the police had also gone to see his employer for a character reference. James was furious at the thought he could be a suspect and had sworn off online dating.

"Now that's a shame," Peta continued. "Fancy having to use a computer to find a date. I never heard of anything more ridiculous. Can't stand computers myself. He should get into the real world to meet someone. A man with a mouth like that would know just how to give pleasure." Peta opened her eyes wide and looked straight into Marina's. "If you know what I mean."

She blinked. Peta's gaze was hypnotic. Her gray eyes were like swirling clouds and she was being drawn into them. In Peta's eyes she could see a shape forming. A person. A man. *You know me, don't you?* Her throat clogged as fear clutched her. What was happening? The man was back, taunting her, reaching out to her. But she didn't know him. She didn't!

"Marina. Marina!"

Marina's head snapped up to see Lizzie motioning to her to get on with the job. She couldn't say how long she had been staring into Peta's eyes. Shivering, Marina rubbed her hands to warm herself. This was madness. It had to be.

"If you've finished Peta's eyebrows, do you want to start on her underarms?" Lizzie tilted her head and looked at her.

Marina could see concern in her eyes. She rarely told Marina what to do because she knew how experienced Marina was.

“Yes, of course.” Muddle-headed and weary, she took a larger spatula and started smearing wax on Peta’s underarm. Peta had closed her eyes and was quietly singing along to Elvis, her mouth occasionally twisting as the girls did their work.

Marina put the linen strip over the setting wax on Peta’s underarm, waited a moment and pulled hard, repeating the process several times until she had a clean result. Peta could be picky about any remaining hairs so she always went over her with tweezers.

While she tried to concentrate on each underarm, her mind was in a frenzy. Why had the image of the man who had appeared in the scrying bowl returned? Trying to understand was like struggling in deep water because she was totally out of her depth. She shivered again as tiny hairs on her forearms raised like on a terrified animal. Something bad was going to happen and the image of the man had something to do with it. But she didn’t know him.

She ran her fingers along Peta’s jaw feeling the fine hairs under her fingers, her thoughts running higgledy-piggledy. Why was it that, with the clients she bonded with, she sensed danger? Was Peta in trouble?

She waxed Peta’s jaw noting that she had less facial hair each week she visited, due to her regular hormone shots. She stopped and stared at her. Peta’s beauty moved her because Peta’s face had a delicate fragility. The thought struck her that Peta could easily be mistaken for a woman.

Lizzie moved up beside her, gave her a gentle nudge with her elbow and started waxing Peta’s chest. “You okay?” she

whispered.

Marina nodded.

Peta, perhaps sensing something was wrong, opened her eyes and looked at Marina.

“So I guess we’ll never see you on online dating, Peta?” Lizzie asked, engaging the client.

Peta stopped singing along to Elvis. “No, honey, not me. I’m a ‘shim’. That makes me in high demand already.”

“I knew you’d be very popular. Sydney has the second highest gay population in the world. If you went online, you’d be answering emails night and day like one of Marina’s clients,” Lizzie said with a giggle. “Tell Peta about your client who tried out different online dating looks.”

Marina related the story trying to keep her voice light. Her back ached and she wanted to lie down. Instead, she managed a professional smile.

“No, girls. You won’t see me online dating. I’m a computer-phobe. I’m not interested in staring at faces on a screen. As it is, I have men come on to me every night when I’m dancing at the Cross.”

Marina shivered. “I hope you’re careful. I wouldn’t like anything bad to happen to you.” Occasionally when she waxed Peta, she saw bruises on her arms and legs, but she never asked about them.

Peta gave her a sweet smile. “Don’t worry, honey. I don’t go home with them. Others think people like me are promiscuous, but it isn’t true. Inside, I’m a woman born in the wrong body and I want a man who loves me, not some guy

who is going to use me for his own perverted needs.”

“Hey, that’s what I want,” Lizzie said as she worked her way up Peta’s thighs. “You’ve got a few ingrown hairs. Do you exfoliate?”

“Sure I do. I want to look perfect. There’s one man in the audience who comes to every show I do. He has short, dark hair and wears Italian suits. He’s always impeccably dressed. Too stylish for the Cross.” Peta sighed. “I want a man like that to love me. I think about him all the time and I don’t even know his name.”

Marina’s hands started trembling; she flexed her fingers trying to control it. Tucking her curls behind her ear, she forced herself to concentrate on the underside of Peta’s chin. Of all her clients, Peta seemed the most vulnerable. Despite her skillfully applied make-up, the skin was blue under her eyes as if she hadn’t been sleeping.

“Funny how we all want the same thing,” Lizzie said wistfully. “I mean, Fabio says he loves me, but you should have heard the stuff he called me in bed. Whore. Slut. It was horrible.”

“That’s a man with problems, honey. You stay away from him. Some men just pretend to love women, but inside, they hate them.”

Marina noticed the change in Peta’s voice. It was harder. Cold.

“Do you like women, Peta?” she asked.

Peta stared at her. Her eyes narrowed. “I hate that bitch of a boss you work for.”

Marina's eyebrows shot up. The venom in Peta's voice surprised her. "Why do you hate Natalia?"

"She accused me of something I didn't do. Said I was stealing the nail polish. I was only sampling them. I wish her and her business all the worst luck in the world. She's nothing but Euro trash with cheek implants."

"Peta! She's our boss. We like her," Lizzie said. "And her cheeks are real."

"She's always been nice to me," Marina added. "She's pregnant now."

"What? You mean she managed to catch some poor shmuck?" Peta rolled her perfectly made-up eyes in disgust.

"Poor is the right word," Lizzie said.

Marina knew Lizzie was talking about Michael, who she didn't like because he'd spoken to her once when she was late for work.

"Her husband is as rough as guts," Lizzie added. "You should see how he dresses. Stomps around the salon wearing boots and shorts. What a loser. He looks like a brickie's labourer."

Gosh, this was turning into a bitch session, thought Marina. "It's not Michael's fault that he's from a poor background, Lizzie. He's a hard worker. There are plenty of guys like him back home."

"Pah! He doesn't bring any money in," Lizzie shrugged. "Why doesn't he go out into the real world and get a job instead of doing up the salon? We're working all day to fund that."

"He's improving Natalia's business," Marina said. Lizzie could be so unreasonable when she took a dislike to someone. "He's doing exactly what Natalia wants him to."

"Ha! Natalia got herself a bludger then?" Peta asked.

"Lives off her," Lizzie said.

"Hope the whole thing goes bust. Serve that Euro trash right."

"Don't say that, Peta," Lizzie said. "We'll lose our jobs if the business goes bad."

"Anyway, it's bad Karma," Marina added, who didn't like saying nasty things about other people. "It will come back on you too."

"Sorry, girls." But Peta didn't look sorry. Instead her mouth had a petulant look. "Since we're on the subject, I hate my mother too," she added.

Peta's jaw tensed under Marina's fingertips. Marina looked at Peta concerned. Raw anger and pain shot up through her fingertips exploding in her brain.

She snatched her hands away from Peta, confused at her ability to feel Peta's emotions. A pulse began to beat in her temple, the first sign of a migraine. The ends of her fingers tingled with energy.

"You finished?" Lizzie asked her. She gave Marina a look.

Marina felt cold. Too cold. "Y-yes."

"Some mothers hate their sons too. Mine only wanted daughters. She made me wear dresses from the day I was born. Now she complains that I wear them all the time."

Standing close to Peta, Marina could feel the anger

emanating off her. She looked at Lizzie, but Lizzie didn't seem to have noticed the change in Peta's mood when she talked about her mother. Instead her forehead was creased in the tight little frown she got when she was concerned with her own problems.

"I don't know what kind of relationship Fabio has with his mother. He never mentions her," Lizzie said, twiddling her nose ring thoughtfully. She took up a pair of tweezers and plucked a few errant hairs from Peta's nipples. "You've got fantastic breasts, Peta. Who did them for you?"

Peta relaxed and chuckled. "My last boyfriend paid a fortune for these beauties. Cost him ten grand. I wanted to do the full op for that man. Cut the whole thing off."

Marina glanced at Lizzie who was staring at the bulge in Peta's G-string, tweezers poised. "But aren't you rather attached to your penis?" Lizzie asked.

"Lizzie!" Marina bit her lip hoping Peta wouldn't mind Lizzie's nosy question. Her head started to throb.

"Honey, all I ever wanted to be was a woman. You don't know how lucky you are to have that perfect little body. Promise me you won't change it for a man who doesn't appreciate you."

Lizzie smiled and for the first time in days, Marina saw her smile reach her eyes. Peta had a way of making a person feel good.

"I'll think about it," Lizzie said.

"Good," Marina said, shooting a thankful glance at Peta. "You tell her, Peta. She won't listen to me."

She moved down to Peta's thighs. "Time for the Brazilian. Can you move your bits to the left for us, Peta?" Marina asked. "Pull your thong over tight and keep your hand on your bits for traction. The tighter the skin, the less the pain. That's it." Marina tucked a tissue under her thong and dusted down the area with powder, relieved that Peta never became too erect like other male clients she had done. She worked with fine strips, which Lizzie applied, while she waxed to make the process faster.

Peta's legs jerked as Marina worked over her pubic region, particularly as she waxed the delicate testicle area, but her facial expression didn't change. Her eyes were closed as she sang along to the Elvis CD. Marina began to relax, no longer feeling Peta's anger. So she had issues with her mother. So what? Most people did. Though her head ached, her vision was fine and Marina sucked in a sigh of relief. Perhaps she wasn't going to get the threatened migraine after all.

"Open your legs Peta, one knee up, so I can get in between," Lizzie said, moving the G-string aside. Lizzie applied the wax to the area under Peta's testicles.

Marina tested it with her fingers, peeled back the edge and ripped. A scream, sharp and shrill, hit her ears, making her head jerk back. She stared at Peta. "Are you okay?"

Peta opened her eyes. "Sure, honey. Keep going."

"But you screamed," Marina said. "I thought I hurt you."

"I didn't scream, honey. You're very gentle. Hardly hurts at all now."

"Marina." Lizzie gave her a friendly nudge. "Get on with it."

Peta's fine."

"But Peta screamed. I know she did. I heard it." Her voice rose in agitation.

"She didn't." Lizzie gave her another nudge with her elbow. "Come on, Marina," she urged. "Finish the job."

Both Peta and Lizzie stared at her.

A sickening feeling settled into the pit of Marina's stomach. She'd heard a scream. A scream of pain. Of terror. The trouble was—no one else had. The last time she'd heard a scream like that, Adele had been murdered.

Chapter 8

Marina was certain she was being watched, yet the notion was ridiculous because she was in her cubicle on Saturday evening alone. Nevertheless, she worked faster to finish tidying her cubicle so that it would be fresh for Monday. From her window she could see the neon street signs springing to life. Soon Darlinghurst would be teeming with Saturday nightlife and music would be beating out of the bars, yet the salon was eerily quiet. She was restless and couldn't shake the edgy feeling that something bad was going to happen.

She walked over to the doorway and peered out, but the landing was empty. Downstairs she heard the reception phone ring and someone answer it.

She sighed. "Get a life, Marina." Glancing at her watch, she saw it was almost six o'clock and James and Lizzie would be waiting for her, probably fighting over which pizzas to order.

She didn't normally work Saturdays and had done this one as a favor to her manager, Natalia, who did the waxing on Saturdays. However, Natalia, having recently announced her longed-for pregnancy, was already feeling the effects of morning sickness.

Footsteps on the bottom of the stairs signaled the presence of Natalia's husband, Michael. His work-boots made a sliding, clumping sound. "Are you ready to go, Marina?" he called.

"Yes, I'm done."

"Good. I don't want to overwork my best waxer."

She gave him a grin as she walked down the stairs. She knew Natalia was pleased with her work, but she rarely talked to Michael, who didn't do much of the day-to-day running of the business.

"The renovations are looking good." She nodded as she joined him in the foyer. Michael had also put up gilt mirrors on the landing wall and in the cubicles.

"Looks classy now," Michael said. "Suits Natalia." He crossed his muscular arms in front of himself and surveyed the freshly painted salon. He beamed with pride.

Marina couldn't help beaming back at him. Wouldn't she just love it if she had a husband who adored her like Michael adored Natalia? She was all class to his brawn, but they were terrific together.

"You painting the new attic rooms next?" she asked.

"Yeah. I'm gonna work all Sunday. Don't wanna disturb clients with paint smells."

"You're a hard worker, Michael." Despite Lizzie's nasty comments about him, Marina liked Michael. He reminded her of her cousin's husband, a horse trainer, who worked on a property in the mountains. He looked rough too, but he was a hard worker and dead honest. Country folk were easy to read. She missed that.

Michael shrugged. "Have to work hard. Didn't have a dad. Started with nothing, but my kid's gonna have the best."

"That's nice." She would bet he was going to be a great dad to that new baby. Adore it, just like her dad had adored her, and she'd loved him right back, unless he started preaching. Talk about boring!

"Come sit a minute," Michael said, running a hand over his bald pate. "I wanna talk to you." Dressed in worker blue shorts and vest, he sat looking uneasy in the ladylike salon chair. He gestured to Marina to take a seat.

She sat studying him. She'd never gone for guys with tattoos right up their arms. She knew the other beauticians, who worked casually in the salon, found him sexy with his shaved head, slate-gray eyes and full mouth. Marina had heard them discuss in hushed tones what the short yet chunky 'bit of rough' would be like in bed. Marina looked at her watch, impatient to be home, as she knew James and Lizzie were waiting for her.

"Got plans?" Michael asked, intercepting her glance.

She nodded. "Pizza night with my flatmates."

Unconsciously, he cracked his knuckles and Marina noticed the calluses on his hands. "Won't keep you long. Been looking at the books. The customers like you. They say good things to Natalia about you. Natalia says nearly half the clients who come in for waxing want a Brazilian now. The waxing business is up thanks to you."

"Terrific." A sharp thrill of pleasure lighted inside her. This was so great. She measured up in the big city. She'd wondered if she had what it took.

Michael leaned forward, his fingertips drumming on the glass coffee table wedged between them and she sensed something was bothering him. "Would you train a waxer? Natalia says that the girls practice on each other." He shifted uncomfortably in his seat and barely met her gaze. He gave his index finger a sharp pull and the knuckle cracked

obediently. "I think it's a personal kind of thing. I know you get on with Lizzie. I thought maybe you'd like to work with her."

Why was Michael asking her about training a waxer? Shouldn't Natalia be having this conversation? Marina frowned. Lizzie had warned her to stay away from him because he was sleazy. She wasn't comfortable talking to Michael about waxing, yet he didn't appear fine about it either. He gave his forefinger a sharp tug and Marina winced.

"Sorry. Horrible habit."

"I guess I could ask Lizzie."

"Appreciate that." Michael met her gaze and grinned.

It struck Marina that when Michael smiled he was attractive because he had perfectly white, straight teeth. Even though he had off-putting tattoos, he was extremely manly with well-defined muscles and big strong hands. The type of man who could carry anything and not complain that it hurt his back.

"Natalia's sick. So I'm asking you for her. Don't want my wife working so hard. Gotta help with the staffing now. I'm not good talking about this stuff."

Ah, that was it. Michael was concerned about Natalia working too hard now that she was pregnant. She let out a sigh of relief. "I'm happy to do whatever I can to help Natalia. She's been very good to me. I don't know if Lizzie wants to wax full time."

"Lizzie could do the overflow. Take on the customers that you can't manage. You girls could use the salon, after hours, to train. I'd pay you for the extra time you put in. Both you and Lizzie."

“Okay.” Marina thought about it. Lizzie, permanently broke due to her extravagant taste in funky streetwear, would welcome the extra money. “I’ll ask Lizzie tonight.”

“Yeah. That would be good. Give Natalia a break from the business.” Michael cracked his knuckles again.

Marina glanced at his hands.

“Sorry, Natalia’s said I’ve got to stop that. Real bad habit. I’m not good at this staffing business. Gotta learn though. Gotta take the pressure off Natalia now.” He grinned again and Marina answered his smile with real warmth. The man was a sweetie. He wasn’t sleazy. Lizzie had got it way wrong. And what was unusual about that?

“Terrific.” His fingers formed a steeple and he looked into her eyes. “I’d appreciate it. You see this baby is real special to us. I want to make everything right for Natalia, so she relaxes. I want to make us a good home. Gonna fix up the wife’s house next. Make it nice. A good home for the baby. Not like the one I had.”

Did Michael feel he had to work so hard to prove himself after coming from nothing? She could tell he didn’t want to disappoint Natalia. Whoever would have thought such a rough-looking man could be so caring? No wonder Natalia was so in love despite Michael looking more suited to riding on a Harley-Davidson than sitting on one of her ornate chairs. One day, Marina hoped she’d have someone who cared about her as deeply.

“I’ll let you into a secret, but you have to promise not to mention it to anyone.” He leaned close, smelling of aftershave and sweat. His shaved head shone in the light. “Natalia’s ten

years older than I am. She's finding the pregnancy hard. She's forty. Not that you'd guess there's an age difference. I'm not much to look at." He gave his knuckles a good hard pull. "Sorry," he added.

Marina bit her lower lip, trying to stifle a laugh. Who was he kidding? That wasn't a secret. The whole salon knew that Natalia was a good ten years older than her new husband. She worried incessantly about it, trying out every anti-aging product in the store.

"When Natalia told me you'd run your own salon back home, I thought 'good, here's a girl who might help the wife out a bit. Maybe manage the business, so she can spend more time with the baby when it comes.' I mean, I know that Lizzie has been here longer, but Natalia likes you and she said Lizzie's not interested in management."

Natalia was right about that. Lizzie would hate the idea of managing the salon. "Thanks, Michael." Marina's voice rose with happiness. She chided herself for uncharitable thoughts about Michael's ugly tattoos. Maybe it was time she grew up and learned to look beneath the skin.

Michael stood and motioned her toward the door. "Thanks, Marina. I knew I could count on you."

* * * *

"That's so like Michael to corner you when you were alone," said Lizzie to Marina waving a pizza brochure at her, their take-out order momentarily forgotten.

"No, he didn't!" When Lizzie made her mind up about someone there was no changing it. She could be really mean about how people looked sometimes. "You're just angry with

him because he told you off for coming in late for work.”

“I only did it five times. Natalia never said anything about it. He should mind his own business. Natalia owns the salon, not him.”

Marina didn't bother replying. There was no use fighting with Lizzie. She hated Michael and that was that. “Look, Michael asked me would I train you to do Brazilians because Natalia's pregnant and she needs to work less. He's concerned about his wife.”

From the petulant look on Lizzie's face, Marina could see she remained unconvinced.

“What's he going to do? Stand at the cubicle door and watch us work on each other?”

“Oh, really, Lizzie.” Marina prickled with irritation.

“I'm telling you,” Lizzie insisted, “the man's a pervert. I don't like the way he looks at me out of the corner of his eyes when he thinks Natalia's not looking.”

“Michael looks at you. So what? You're beautiful. Of course he's going to look at you. You turn men's heads when we walk to work together.”

“They're looking at you,” Lizzie countered.

“They are not.”

“Michael looks at me like he's imagining what I look like without my clothes. That's sleazy.” In a parody of Michael, Lizzie slid the tip of her tongue lasciviously over her top lip. She narrowed her eyes and slowly looked Marina over from head to toe, concentrating on her crotch.

Despite her irritation, Marina laughed. “That's ridiculous.

I've never seen Michael look at you like that. He's always busy working. He just says good morning. That's it. Actually tonight was the first time I've ever had a real conversation with him."

"I don't like him." Lizzie crossed her arms and stared mutinously at Marina. "Natalia hardly knew him when she married him. Next minute he's taking over the salon. Rebuilding, expanding."

Marina sighed. "The business is growing. Natalia's very pleased about it."

"No thanks to Michael," Lizzie said. "What's he bringing in? And how long does it take to add another couple of cubicles? The man's living off her."

"Forget it," Marina said, not wanting to fight.

"The trouble with you, Marina, is that your father brought you up to be too trusting. You see the good in everyone."

"And you concentrate too much on looks," Marina countered.

Lizzie put her hands on her hips. "I'm not going to take over the waxing. I'd never do anything for Michael on principle."

Marina threw up her hands in defeat. "Just said I'd ask. It's not like you to refuse easy money."

"Money?" Lizzie's blue eyes opened wide.

"Yes. Michael said he'd pay us to stay late."

"Pay us? For you to train me to do what I already know?" asked Lizzie, her expression brightening immediately.

"That's right. But never mind. I wanted to work with you, but I'll ask one of the other girls." Marina made sure her voice sounded disappointed. "I'm sure they could use the extra

money.”

“Extra money,” Lizzie repeated.

Marina tried not to smile. She could almost see the wheels turning over in Lizzie’s mind. “Littles has their new autumn stock in the window,” she added nonchalantly, knowing it was Lizzie’s favorite store. “And the Pied Piper Boutique’s sale’s still on. I saw a great bargain on that little skirt you liked.”

“I’ll do it!”

“Thought you would,” Marina answered benignly. “So much for principles.”

Lizzie shrugged. “I’m going to do it because it will help Natalia.”

“What are you going to do?” James asked, coming out of the bathroom. He had a white towel slung low over his hips. The hallway was small and the girls stepped back as he walked toward them so he could pass. The smell of fresh soap and clean male body tickled Marina’s nostrils, stirring something deep inside her.

James stopped next to her, close enough for her to feel the warmth of his body. Water dripped from his cropped dark hair and Marina watched it weave a pathway from his cheek, down his neck and onto his chest. He had started training every night at his Tae Kwon Do classes, although to Marina’s eyes, his body was a well-honed fighting machine.

Marina swallowed trying not to be too obvious as she eyed his washboard stomach and the strong muscles on his arms.

“So?” he asked again.

When the water drop hit James’s stomach, Marina willed

herself not to follow it downwards. She failed miserably. He had a little line of dark hair starting under his belly button. She swallowed again as heat flooded her pelvis.

Fortunately James was looking expectantly at Lizzie, unaware of the effect he was having on her.

"Marina's going to train me to wax," Lizzie said.

"Right." He paused and tilted his head to the side. "I thought you already did that stuff. Why do you need Marina to teach you?" He shot a quick look at Marina and smiled. "No offense, Marina. I'm sure you'd be a patient teacher."

"Sure." She returned his smile. "None taken."

She had to stop thinking about seducing her flatmate. He'd be shocked if he knew how much she wanted to touch him right now. Would his skin be as smooth as it looked? She wondered what he'd look like without his towel. She found herself wishing it would drop off. James would be horrified at the way she was thinking.

"I'm going to start doing the Brazilians at the salon," said Lizzie. "Wax. Rip! Wax. Rip!" She imitated the procedure.

James looked heavenwards. "Why did I ask?"

"So, I'm going to practice on Marina because I've never done a full Brazilian except on myself."

"There goes my simple bikini line," Marina joked.

"There goes the lot," Lizzie said.

"The lot?" James looked at Marina.

"Yes you dope. The lot. You should know what a Brazilian is by now," Lizzie said. "You live with two beauticians."

"I do know," he added defensively. "I just wasn't thinking

about Marina.” He stared at her.

Her pulse leapt and she stopped breathing.

“Everything off this time,” Lizzie teased.

“Man,” he groaned putting his hands to his face. “That’s so sexy. Don’t say that stuff to me in front of Marina. Marina is off limits.”

But he didn’t deny the attraction, Marina thought, slowly letting out her breath. She smiled unable to resist the sexual energy that surged between them. She gave an embarrassed laugh, her cheeks hot.

“Or do you think I should shape a love heart on her? Do something creative,” Lizzie continued cheekily, winking at Marina.

“Enough, Lizzie! You’re embarrassing me,” Marina said. Lizzie never knew when to stop teasing.

“I don’t want to know that stuff about Marina,” James said. “Stop it! Don’t you know what saying that kinky stuff does to a guy?”

Marina closed her eyes, willing herself not to look at the front of James’s low slung towel. She looked. Lizzie pointed and laughed. “Gross! I think you’d better go play with your Xbox, James.”

James looked down dismayed. “Lizzie!” His green eyes flashed. He pushed past the girls and strode into his bedroom, his arm brushing hers as he passed. Raw, sexual energy surged into Marina from his touch and she started in surprise. James wanted her. But she was lying to herself if she thought the aroused, sensual feeling came just from James.

She wanted him too.

* * * *

"James," Marina called knocking on his bedroom door. "We're phoning in our take-away order now. Have you decided what you want? Lizzie wants ham and pineapple. I'm in the mood for something spicy," Marina called. "Do you want to share with me or order something different?"

"Plain pizza with mozzarella," James called back.

"Did you get that, Lizzie?" Marina asked.

Lizzie nodded and ordered the pizzas. Just as she finished doing so the phone, which sat on a small table in the hallway, rang. Lizzie snatched it up.

"Yes. Yes." Marina heard her say. Lizzie spoke for about ten minutes before adding, "Only if you're nice to me."

Lizzie glanced up at her brother who had come out of his bedroom dressed in jeans and a white t-shirt that molded to his chest. Her blue eyes wore a wary expression. She put the phone down.

"I'm going out," she said.

"But the pizza has just arrived," Marina said. "I thought you were going to spend the evening in with us."

"No. I've changed my mind," Lizzie said. Her face wore a pinched, closed expression. She grabbed at her handbag and made for the open door but James blocked her way.

"It's that guy, isn't it? What's his name? Fabio." James stared at her.

"It's not your business who I date."

"No," he agreed. "But I don't like the way that guy treats

you."

"You're not my father," Lizzie said, raising her voice.

"No. I know," James said gently. "Don't go, Lizzie. Please."

Lizzie raised her pointy chin, her expression mutinous. "I mean it, James. Mind your own business."

"Don't go, Lizzie," Marina said.

James shot her a grateful glance.

Lizzie turned on Marina and glared at her with narrow eyes. "What! You too. You're supposed to be my friend. How dare you take James's side?"

"Lizzie," Marina said, "this isn't about taking sides. This guy isn't right for you. He's eating into your confidence. Think about it, from the moment he met you, you've wanted to change how you look. You're lovely. Beautiful. But you're not happy with who you are when you're with Fabio."

"I am too," Lizzie said defensively. "I just want bigger boobs. Lots of women have their breasts enlarged. It's all right for you, Marina. You're a C cup. You've always had great breasts. You don't even have to wear a bra and you have cleavage."

"Lizzie, that stuff doesn't matter," Marina said. "What matters is how Fabio treats you."

"And he treats you like dirt," James said to his sister. "Listen to Marina if you won't listen to me. She doesn't like this guy either."

"Fabio's nice to me, if you must know," Lizzie said, defensively. "He's always sending me flowers and little presents. I like the attention he pays me. He never thinks the

things I say are dumb.”

“How many times do I have to tell you, Lizzie? You’re not dumb!” James said.

“Lizzie, he calls you terrible names. That’s not the action of a man who cares about you,” Marina said. “He’s got weird habits and I’m scared he’ll hurt you.”

James started. “What names? What are you talking about? I’ll sort that dumb ox out if he so much as hurts a hair on your head.”

“We can’t all fit your model of perfection, Marina,” Lizzie said, tearfully ignoring her brother. “I’m not going to sit at home waiting for Mr. Wonderful to walk through the door. I know that sort of a man doesn’t exist for me. Do you think some smart executive type would want me?” Tears formed in Lizzie eyes until they looked glassy. She stormed past Marina.

James, clearly reluctant, stood to one side and let her go. “Ring me on my mobile phone if you need me,” he called to Lizzie’s retreating back. “I’ll come and get you. It doesn’t matter what time. Please, Lizzie?”

Lizzie didn’t answer him. With a sigh, he closed the door and looked at Marina.

She put her hand on his arm. “You’re a good brother to Lizzie. It’s horrible being an only child. I wish I had a brother who cared like you do.”

James shrugged his shoulders and shook his head. “Lizzie’s too old for me to be looking after her, but I don’t like this guy. I’ve only met him once and he’s never come to the apartment since.”

A small smile formed across Marina's lips. "Do you think that had something to do with you telling Fabio that you're violently opposed to the steroids body builders use, and that they can shrink a guy's testicles down to the size of a walnut?"

"Did Lizzie tell you I said that?"

"Who else?"

James twitched. "I might have said something like that. Do you think I'm too protective of her?"

Marina brushed an auburn curl behind her ear and shrugged. "Just an iota, but that's what I like about you. You care. That's nice. You're prepared to go that extra mile to look after Lizzie. I really respect that. I don't think she has the best taste in men, not that I can talk."

He held her gaze and for a moment, Marina thought he was about to lean forward and kiss her. The space between them seemed to change, to become more intimate. But James was her landlord. She'd just been telling him what a great brother he was to Lizzie. He couldn't be thinking about kissing her, could he?

"Let's go eat these pizzas before they get cold," he said, picking up the pizza boxes. He turned abruptly and walked into the living room.

"Sure." Marina followed him.

He lay on his stomach. "Picnic on the floor okay with you?"

"Sounds good." She sat opposite him helping him open the boxes. The spicy aroma of Matriciana pizza wafted toward her.

With a small shake of his head he opened his plain pizza

and stared down. "Why did I order something so boring?" He glanced over at Marina's pizza and breathed in deeply.

"You can share mine. We've got three here now Lizzie's gone. I don't mind ham and pineapple."

"How did you know I wanted some?" he asked. "Are you turning into a mind reader?"

Marina laughed. "You're transparent. Everything you think is on your face."

"Gosh, I hope not," he said, shifting uncomfortably before reaching for a slice of her pizza.

Marina took a delicate bite of her pizza. She chewed thoughtfully. "I guess it would be pretty embarrassing if we could all read each other's minds."

James stopped mid-bite. "Can you really tell what I'm thinking? Am I that transparent?"

"You have an honest face." She paused, frowning slightly. "Can I talk to you about something that's bothering me?"

"Sure."

"I have to warn you, it sounds strange, but I need to talk to someone I trust, someone grounded, like you. I usually tell Lizzie everything, but I don't want to talk to her about this. She'd think it was terrific and get all excited, but it isn't. It's horrible."

"So tell me," he encouraged. "I like the way you ask my advice."

She stared into his eyes. There was warmth there and she wished she could snuggle up close to him just to feel his protective arms around her. "I'm beginning to think I'm psychic

or something.”

She watched his lips twitching into a smile. Marina pointed at him warningly. “Don’t laugh at me.”

“I’m not. I just don’t believe in that stuff. Trust me, you don’t want to know what men think about most of the time.”

Marina laughed. “I could guess.” She had an overpowering compulsion to reach out and take his hand in hers. There was something about him. She wanted his big, hard body around hers. Being with him made her feel safe.

“So?”

She mentally told herself to snap out of it. “I’ve started getting migraines. I got the first one just before my wedding and at the time, I thought it was a fluke. I put it down to things not going right with my relationship.”

“Sounds pretty normal to me.”

She shook her head emphatically so that her curls bounced. “No. I haven’t explained this properly. Before the wedding, along with the migraine I had a vision of my fiancé, Tony, dressed in women’s clothing. Remember I told you that.” Agitated, she tangled her fingers in her curls, then wrenched her hand free. “This is hard for me to talk about, so hear me out.”

He gave her a reassuring nod. “Maybe it was a daydream.”

She shook her head. “No. This was a vision. I didn’t understand what was happening at the time, so I dismissed it. Since then, strange stuff has been happening and it’s getting worse. You remember the night Adele was murdered?”

“Yes.”

"I had a vision...a premonition that she was going to be murdered. It came with the migraine too. Remember I told you that. She was murdered, James." She threw her hands in the air. "And now I just seem to know things and it's getting weird."

"You did tell me. I don't believe in that stuff but I have to admit, you did say it before it happened." He frowned and Marina could see him trying to logically trying to work out how it had happened.

"It's like I can feel people's thoughts, their emotions, especially when I touch them. It scares me." She tilted her head to the side.

"It has to be a coincidence. You're probably intuitive. Women sense stuff more than men. You're probably just picking up body language." James reached for another piece of pizza and munched on it.

She paused and nibbled her pizza thoughtfully. "I hope you don't mind me telling you this stuff. Back home, I used to talk to my dad a lot until he passed away. It was good to get a male perspective on things. Apart from Lizzie, I don't really have anyone else I can confide in here. I guess this all sounds kinda dumb, doesn't it?"

James shrugged. "It's different." He half-smiled. "I come from a science discipline."

"Computer engineers don't believe in psychic phenomena?" she asked.

"We're trained in probability. If we can't see it, measure it, it isn't probable."

"There are plenty of things we can't see that we know are real. Take gravity."

"We can measure that," James said.

"True." She put her index finger to the tip of her nose and rubbed it. "I'd like to try something out in a safe environment. Can I try something on you?"

"Such as?" James asked, his expression wary.

"I'd like to touch you. See if I can sense anything. An emotion. Thoughts or feelings. I don't know if this will work." She stared at him. "I can trust you to tell me the truth."

He shrugged. "Go ahead. Lucky I don't believe in what you're going to do. A beautiful girl touching me in my apartment. Let me see, what could I be thinking?" He gave her a playful smile.

"Don't play where you lay," Marina said.

"You got it."

"I don't want to experiment on Lizzie because I know her too well and I already know she'd be thinking of Fabio and her sex life."

"Must be bred in the bone," he joked.

Marina bit her bottom lip and shook her head. "Lizzie's a believer and the trouble is—I don't want to be. Yet this awful stuff is happening to me and, as much as I want to deny it, it won't go away."

"So you want to test it out on me because you know I don't believe either."

She nodded. "And I know you'll take this seriously. You hold my hand and I'll try and sense what you're thinking. I'm worried. Either this stuff is real or I'm going crazy. I'm worried I'm going crazy. I have to test this out in some logical way."

He reached out and gave her a comforting squeeze on the shoulder. "Sure." He rolled on his back and closed his eyes. He shifted uncomfortably and glanced over at her. "I'll make it easy for you," he offered. "I'll think of a make of a car. You have to guess which one I'm thinking of." He closed his eyes again.

Marina slid her hand into his. His hand was firm and big. An image of them on her breasts shot into her mind. She gasped.

"What?" James's eyes snapped open.

"Nothing. Shut your eyes," she ordered, aware that her cheeks must be flame-coloured.

"Okay, this is a hot car," he said. "I'm focusing on it. Driving it."

Marina shut her eyes and concentrated. She could see herself naked with her cherry-coloured nipples erect. James was licking them, slowly, thoughtfully as if he had all the time in the world.

"You're not thinking about a car at all," she said indignantly, pulling her hand away.

His eyes snapped open. "What?"

"You were thinking of sex."

"No, I wasn't." He pushed himself to a sitting position. The skin colour around his throat and face had deepened.

"Yes, you were," she insisted, furious. "You were thinking about licking my nipples."

"How did you know that?" he said, clearly too stunned to deny it.

Disgusted, Marina rose to her feet and marched toward

her bedroom.

James raced after her. "Marina. I didn't mean to upset you. I couldn't help how I feel. You're gorgeous. But you've had a hard time. There's no way I'm coming on to you."

He was about to say more but she stopped him with a glare.

"I was trying to talk to you about something important. Do you know what it's like to live with this? To see frightening images, to hear voices?" She hugged herself. "I'm scared and I don't know what to do. I think I'm going mad. I'm too frightened to go to the doctor in case I get committed."

"Listen, Marina. You're not mad and I was paying attention. I didn't want to think about your nipples. They kept popping up. I couldn't make the thought go away."

"Go to hell." She slammed her bedroom door in his face and leaned against it to catch her breath. What was wrong with men? On the face of it, James seemed sweet and understanding, yet underneath he had his own secret sex agenda, just like her fiancé, Tony. She didn't understand men.

James knocked on the door. "Marina?"

"Get lost." She was so angry she could barely be civil. "Just leave me alone." Her head throbbed at the temple as her anger gave way to a headache.

James knocked insistently on her door.

Every nerve ending in her body jumped at the sound. She looked around uneasily. She could feel fear, a marauding, dark feeling, but couldn't sense the cause. Sure, she was angry with James, but she wasn't scared of him, yet the edgy, uneasy

feeling persisted. Something was wrong.

“Marina, can I come in and talk?”

“No!” She massaged her temple, wishing she weren’t so prone to headaches. They seemed to have become worse since she’d moved to the city. It was like her overloaded senses couldn’t cope in Sydney.

“Please, Marina?” James was standing close to the door so that only a couple of inches separated them. “I want to tell you how I feel about you. I have to get it out in the open.”

“Just go away.” She didn’t want to discuss emotions, not when she was like this. Her hands formed fists as the tension grew. The creeping blackness surrounded her. What the hell was the matter with her? Blindly, she searched her mind for the reasons for her fear. She knew this feeling. Had it before. Something was wrong.

The light in her bedroom seemed to change and the purple-coloured walls of her bedroom deepened. Oh no. Not this. Please not again. Not a migraine. Her jaw clenched in fear and her breathing quickened. But it wasn’t the debilitating migraine she feared—it was the accompanying vision that rode on its back like a specter.

She sensed evil.

She could hear James knocking insistently on her bedroom door but he seemed far away. Her anger for him forgotten, she wished she could let him in. Like a fly injected by spider’s poison, she found moving difficult. Quickly, she shut her eyes, the only part of her body that still seemed to obey her commands, hoping to block the vision that she knew would come. It was useless. The white-coloured aura of the

migraine grew inside her head, flickering at the edges like a strobe. There was no escaping it. She opened her eyes slowly as if drugged and stared into space.

Her throat constricted as a shape formed in the aura. She could see a woman, fighting, trying to find breath as a cord tightened around her neck. Suddenly, she was there in the body of the woman as if her soul had descended into the scene and entered the body of the woman.

"You filthy bitch, advertising yourself." The male voice of the murderer was low like a growl.

Marina's breath seized with the surprise of the attack and the pain of the cord tightening around her throat. Air. She needed air. She clawed at her throat trying to release the cord, but her fingers came up empty. Her legs buckled under her as blackness surrounded her vision. She couldn't breathe. Terror, and the bleak knowledge that death awaited, consumed her. She felt the woman's horror and her own dark terror as her strength went and her life force drained out of her.

Marina groaned, helpless to stop the vision. Her heart thumped in panic and she was certain that this time, she would die with the victim, but then something strange happened. The light changed in her room as the door opened behind her, but she was powerless to move out of the way.

"Marina?" James squeezed himself through the gap and bent. "What's the matter? I heard you groaning. Did you faint?" He was on his knees beside her, his warm hands on her shoulders and she had never been so happy to see him.

He lifted her and placed her gently on her bed, keeping his arms around her. "What happened?" he asked urgently. "Gosh,

you're icy."

She couldn't talk as she sucked in air, concentrated on breathing, snatching her soul back from whatever hell it had entered. With enormous effort she reached up and pulled him to her. "So cold. Hold me, James. Hold me tight." Her voice came out in a whisper as if she hadn't recovered her power of speech.

James did as he was told; his reassuring warmth surrounding her body. He drew her close as he lay beside her, wrapping his big arm around her, pulling her in close. "I think you must have fainted." His voice was full of concern. "I'm sorry I upset you."

"No," she groaned, weakly moving her head from side to side, her numb fingers massaging her throat.

"Another woman has been murdered."

Chapter 9

Marina could hear Lizzie hammering on her cubicle door at work.

“Come in,” she called.

Lizzie burst in, her face turning from side to side checking for clients.

“What is it?” Although she asked the question, in her heart, Marina already knew what Lizzie was about to tell her.

“There’s been another murder. They’ve found a woman floating in the Harbour.”

“Please don’t tell me it’s one of my clients again.” Marina wrapped her arms around herself as the chill seeped through her. She searched her memory for the event that had happened the night before. The woman had had her back to the killer when she’d been strangled so Marina hadn’t seen her face, but she couldn’t rid herself of the déjà vu feeling that she knew this person.

“I don’t know,” Lizzie said simply.

Marina let out a long sigh. She’d stopped breathing with Lizzie’s news and hadn’t been aware of it. “Was it on the radio?” she asked, knowing Lizzie, who rarely looked at a newspaper or watched the news, sometimes listened to music on the radio. Her interest in current affairs outside her own life was zero.

“Fabio sent me a text message this morning.”

“So call him back. Find out something,” Marina said. Momentarily, she closed her eyes and prayed that she didn’t

know the victim. The murder of one of her clients was a coincidence—the thought of two made her shudder.

Lizzie looked at her watch. “Fabio’s doing weight training. He doesn’t like interruptions when he’s pumping iron.”

Marina cast Lizzie an impatient glance and started pacing her small cubicle.

“Fabio only texted me she was found in the Harbour strangled. Horrible, isn’t it?” Lizzie’s blue eyes widened and she wrinkled her nose as she put her hands to her throat, stuck out her tongue and made a choking sound.

“Lizzie!” Marina’s stomach turned. She usually laughed at Lizzie’s childish behaviour but this wasn’t funny. She was just about to tell her so when a flashback of the terrible event she’d experienced the night before hit her. Again, she felt the woman’s panic and her desperate struggle. Marina staggered at the intensity of it. Sharp, unbridled fear struck her. She couldn’t breath as the cord tightened around her neck.

“Marina. What’s the matter?” Lizzie took her by the shoulders and shook her.

Marina doubled over gasping for breath as the vision faded with Lizzie’s interruption. She felt Lizzie’s thin arms go around her as she struggled to stand upright.

“Are you all right? You’re very cold. I’ll get you your sweater.”

Marina reached out and grabbed Lizzie’s wrist. Her fingers pressed tightly into her skin. “Don’t joke about the murders. They’re not funny. Don’t you realize there is a psychopath out there?” Her voice had an urgent edge to it. She couldn’t tell

Lizzie what she had just experienced, because the next minute Lizzie would be reading her magazines and telling Marina how to develop her psychic powers. Marina didn't want that. Instead, she wanted to be free of this curse that made her see and feel things she didn't want to experience.

"I'm sorry," Lizzie said. Her lower lip trembled. Marina freed her wrist realizing that she'd gripped Lizzie so hard, she'd have a bruise.

It grated on her that Lizzie had no emotional connection to Adele's murder. It wasn't that Lizzie was an unkind person, she just concentrated on her own world, her friends and didn't seem to worry what went on outside of it. Right now, despite her irritation, Marina wished she could be like Lizzie, get on with her day and forget about the murders, but she couldn't. Instead, she had a recurrent feeling she was a swimmer about to be tangled up in a large net just waiting under the surface to drag her down.

Lizzie walked over, picked up Marina's sweater and handed it to her. "I don't know why I act so dumb sometimes."

"You're not dumb," Marina said gently. "I'm oversensitive at the moment. I guess I'm still cut up about Adele. I'm sorry if I hurt your wrist, I don't know what came over me."

"Are you okay, Marina? Your eyes went all glassy. I've noticed it happening before. You didn't look well when we did Peta last week. Is it one of your headaches?"

"I'm fine. Don't worry about me." She patted Lizzie on her arm.

"You seem edgy," Lizzie said, clearly unconvinced. "Maybe you should have a checkup. See my acupuncturist. Did you

know that people who visit an acupuncturist are more relaxed than those who don't?"

"Maybe I should," Marina said to appease Lizzie. "You're a good friend, Lizzie."

Lizzie gave her a smile and walked out of Marina's cubicle, but stopped at the doorway. "I'll let you know when I've found out more from Fabio."

Marina nodded, but she was distracted. A woman had been murdered. If she were psychic, surely she'd know who it was? She'd heard a scream when she'd waxed Peta. Could the killer have mistaken him for a woman? Perhaps she was going crazy and wasn't psychic. But what about what had happened with James? She'd read his mind and he hadn't denied it. She frowned. There were too many questions and not enough answers.

"Don't worry," Lizzie said as if sensing her worried state. "I'm sure everything will be fine. It's not likely to be anyone we know this time."

But it wasn't fine. Marina knew it wasn't. She looked at her watch, picked up her schedule of appointments for the day and glanced at the printout. Mrs. Saxon was due, though she was ten minutes late. Mrs. Saxon had said she was going to start online dating. Marina bit her lip concerned. Mrs. Saxon was as punctual as she was neat about her appearance. She decided to walk down to reception and check up on Mrs. Saxon.

Marina passed Michael on the narrow stairs down to reception. He wore his tool belt and carried a long piece of wood, but he stepped back to let her pass, so that she didn't

brush against him. "Morning, Marina."

Marina wondered how she'd ever thought he'd looked rough and unapproachable, when actually he was always pleasant.

He gave her his nice, friendly smile. "Did you talk to Lizzie?"

"Hey, Michael." Propelled by her sense of urgency, she didn't want to talk, but Michael was always polite to her. "Lizzie is happy to train with me. We can stay late tonight if that is okay."

"Great. I'll give you the spare key, so you can lock up when you've finished. Natalia's got an appointment with her obstetrician on Macquarie Street and I'm going to drive her. I don't want her dealing with rush hour traffic. All those stress hormones wouldn't be good for her or the baby."

"Okay," Marina nodded, amused at how Michael fussed over his wife, who was an extremely capable woman.

Michael nodded back then looked up the stairs toward Lizzie who was standing outside Marina's cubicle.

Lizzie glared at him, turned her back, walked into her cubicle and closed the door without saying anything.

Michael's smile dropped from his face and he looked as if Lizzie had slapped him.

Marina felt her cheeks flush with embarrassment at Lizzie's rudeness. "I'll come and get the key later. One of my clients is late, so I want to ring and see if everything is all right. If one is late it throws all the appointments off for the day." She hurried down the stairs to reception to dial Mrs. Saxon.

Just as she looked up the phone number Mrs. Saxon walked in.

"You're here," she said with relief. Mrs. Saxon was safe and Marina was overreacting. Perhaps she had some sort of panic disorder, always fearing the worst? "I was just going to give you a call."

"I'm sorry, dear. I know I'm late," she announced. Mrs. Saxon was wearing low hipster jeans and a tight top, which sat just above her belly button. It was a terrific look on a younger woman, but not on Mrs. Saxon who was in her forties and normally covered her generous curves with a suit.

Marina looked closer and groaned inwardly. Mrs. Saxon had a five o'clock shadow across her abdomen where her hair was growing back from her last wax.

She limped into the salon and sat in Natalia's ornate chair. "I've bought new shoes. The trouble is I can't walk in them."

In a moment, Marina could see why her client was late. Mrs. Saxon bent forward to shuck off her platform shoes, showing Marina the blisters on the soft sides of her feet. As she did so, she pulled at the back of her hipsters in an effort not to show her white, cotton underpants, which were riding above her jeans.

Mrs. Saxon grimaced in pain. "I last wore platform shoes in the seventies when I was at school. They were uncomfortable then and they haven't improved. My feet are ripped apart."

While she massaged her feet, Marina could see the black, spiky hair on Mrs. Saxon's lower back, which the low-slung jeans failed to hide. "I'll get you some sticking plasters," she said and hurried over to the first aid box. If ever there was a

client in need of a wax, it was Mrs. Saxon. Perhaps she was trying out a younger look to win back her husband's attention. Poor Mrs. Saxon.

Five minutes later with Mrs. Saxon's feet attended to, Marina ushered her client to her cubicle.

"I see you have a new look," Marina said, laying out her cloth strips for easy access.

Mrs. Saxon brightened. "Yes, and guess what? It's working. My husband's starting to notice me again."

"Why wouldn't he? You're so pretty." Marina bit her lower lip when she realized her outburst had been emotional. It sounded to her like Mr. Saxon needed a smack around the head with a cold fish to wake him up to what he had. Still, it was not her place to sound like she was criticizing someone's husband.

Mrs. Saxon smiled. "You're very sweet, young lady. The trouble is things change when you get married, dear."

She was right on that one.

"At least he's not spending all night on the internet anymore. He actually talks to me in the evening instead of gluing himself to the television or the computer. I think he's stopped surfing the online dating sites at last."

"That's good. A definite improvement." Marina started by putting the thicker pink wax on Mrs. Saxon's eyebrows, tested it with her fingers and ripped.

"Yes, and that's not all. He wants me to put the kids in summer camp and take me on an extended trip to Paris in a fortnight. I'm thrilled. That's where we went on our honeymoon

fifteen years ago.”

“Wow! Things have changed in a week.” Marina worked over Mrs. Saxon, noticing she had lost weight. “You’re looking trim too.”

“I’ve barely eaten for a week. Just fluids and raw vegetables. I nearly fainted on the way here, but I’m determined to get my figure back. I’m so busy organizing our holiday I don’t sit at home and comfort eat anymore. I want to be a size ten by the time I get to Paris. You wouldn’t believe how much there is to organize when you’re going on vacation. I’ve had to stop my volunteer work with the aged. Let everyone know I’ll be away for some time. My elderly folk will miss me, but I want my marriage to work.”

Marina lightly smoothed over the skin on Mrs. Saxon’s stomach before she applied a thinner wax. She could feel Mrs. Saxon’s happy mood as if butterflies danced in the air, then inexplicably her fingers trembled. *Danger*. There was danger around Mrs. Saxon. She looked up at her client, but she was smiling.

“My husband says he wants to start over again,” she said happily. “A new beginning.”

“That’s nice. It must have been hard on you thinking he was looking for someone else on the net.” She applied the strips and waxed the hair on Mrs. Saxon’s lower stomach, working her way downward.

“Yes, it was. I thought our marriage was over, but he’s had a change of heart. I don’t know why.” Mrs. Saxon frowned. “I really don’t. Maybe he thinks divorce will hurt the children.” Mrs. Saxon’s lower lip trembled. “Or maybe he still cares.”

"He's trying, isn't he?" Marina felt she had to say something.

Mrs. Saxon gave her a smile. "Yes, he is. I wish I knew the future. I put so much effort into my marriage. Sometimes I long for a crystal ball. Then I'd know if all this effort was worth the trouble."

"I think we'd all like that."

"A friend of mind gave me the number of a clairvoyant. She said she's very good. I'll give it to you if you like."

Marina shook her head. "I don't know that I believe in such things. I don't think that our destinies can be plotted out so easily."

"My friend said she was right about a lot of things. I'll give you the number and you can tell me what you think when I'm back from Paris."

"Okay. I'll get it from you at the end of the appointment." Marina surveyed Mrs. Saxon's Brazilian. "Do you want the full Brazilian again? Did Mr. Saxon appreciate it?"

Mrs. Saxon's face fell. "He didn't notice. He's been doing long hours at work. Do you think you can shape a love heart for Paris? I'm sure he'll notice it there. This is the last wax I'll have here, so make sure you get all the stray hairs."

A chill passed over Marina. *Danger*. Every hair on her forearms rose like a terrified cat. "You'll be coming back, won't you?"

"Oh yes. I mean I won't be here for a while because I'll be in Paris, so I need to cancel my appointments. I'll call when I come back."

Marina nodded and continued her work. Her fingers continued to tremble. *Danger*. She heard the persistent word like a whisper on the wind. She looked up at Mrs. Saxon but her face was relaxed as if all her marital problems were in the past. In fact, Mrs. Saxon was the happiest she'd ever seen her. So why did she feel she'd never see Mrs. Saxon again?

Chapter 10

“Waxing me is really going to shock you,” Lizzie said later that evening in the salon as Marina tidied her cubicle for their training session. Lizzie leaned against the wall, looking at Marina with a challenging grin on her face.

“I doubt it,” Marina said matter-of-factly. “I’ve seen every skunk, squirrel and badger possible. And to top that off, today a client asked me if her boyfriend could watch while I waxed her.”

“One of the magazines I read said that forty-five percent of men would like to watch their girlfriend having sex with another woman. I bet that’s what he’s really thinking of. Did you let him watch?”

“As if. Anyway, you can’t shock me because nothing shocks me anymore. I’m immune to shock. Do you want get into a paper G-string?” She knew Lizzie was teasing her and normally she played along, but today was different. A woman had been murdered. Her stomach ached with tension. The first thing Lizzie had told her was that there was no more news. The waiting was torture.

“No thanks,” Lizzie said, “I’m going to strip down to my new underwear, for which I paid three hundred dollars.”

“What!” Marina dropped the spatula in the wax. “That’s half your entire weekly earnings. What are they made of? Gold?”

“Nope. I’m saving up for that set.” Lizzie giggled. “And I’m still going to shock you.”

“You just did. Three hundred dollars is a fortune. I can’t

believe you spent so much on panties.”

“Fabio won’t be able to look at anything but me, when he sees me in these,” she said joyfully as she unbuttoned her shirt.

Marina bit her tongue because she thought Fabio didn’t appreciate Lizzie. She didn’t want to get into a fight about Fabio and what he was doing to Lizzie’s self-esteem. While Lizzie was disrobing, Marina walked over to the window and pulled the drapes aside. Outside she could see the street lights glowing, and hear the busy hum of the traffic on Darlinghurst Road that signaled the approach of night. She shivered. On edge, every minute seemed like an hour. She was afraid. Waiting for news that didn’t come. “It’s a pity Fabio didn’t know more about the murder. Did he say who told him?”

“One of his body building clients is a cop, who mentioned it in passing. The police are trying to keep it quiet because they think they’ve got a serial killer on their hands. The cop said there’s something really kinky about this case.”

Marina shuddered and turned to Lizzie who was unzipping her pants. “What do you mean?”

Lizzie shrugged. “The cop wouldn’t say. The mention of kinky got Fabio interested.”

“Now why doesn’t that surprise me?” Marina asked dryly. She pulled her hair from its clip so that it fell about her face. She massaged her scalp. Her neck felt stiff with tension and she couldn’t seem to get release.

“Ta da! What do you think? Do you like this or what?” Lizzie paraded up and down in Marina’s cubicle wearing a barely-there crimson G-string and matching bra threaded with silver

diamantes, which shone when they struck the light.

"You look like you should be in Moulin Rouge."

"Check out this matching padded bra. Makes me look like a B cup. I've even got cleavage." She thrust out her breasts, strutted around the cubicle, her face proud.

Marina nodded appreciatively. "It's stunning. Theatrical. Too nice to be worn under clothes. Maybe you should get a see-through top. One of those black sheer numbers."

"So you like them?"

"Yes," Marina said.

Whore.

Marina jumped. Her gaze darted around the room. There was no one. There never was.

"Why are you frowning?"

She massaged her temple. "Sorry, I've been on edge all day." There was no way she wanted to scare Lizzie by telling her about the voice in her mind. "The murder... I can't help thinking it will be another of my clients."

Lizzie's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. She climbed onto the massage bed and spread her legs.

"Don't worry, it couldn't possibly be. That's too much of a coincidence."

Slut.

Marina gasped.

"What's the matter? You've gone all white."

"Nothing. I don't feel great."

He was back. Searching. Looking for his next victim. It

wouldn't be long before he struck again. There had to be some way of stopping him. Some way of identifying a location. Something.

Desperate, Marina replayed the vision from Saturday night in her mind like a bad movie. The murderer had taken the woman to a dark place, making it difficult to see. All she knew was that the woman felt familiar and that the killer had used some sort of a cord to strangle the victim. Her shoulders slumped. She wanted to get this training over and done with so she could go home. It was only place she felt safe, especially when James was there.

She didn't want to be in the salon. The very air around her dripped with malevolence. She felt like she was being watched. Even Lizzie's dramatic show of her underwear couldn't lighten her mood. But how could she explain something she sensed rather than understood. She forced herself to concentrate on the job at hand. "You haven't done a Brazilian on a woman before, have you?"

"No. Just my own clit and slit."

"Lizzie!" Marina smiled, despite how she was feeling, at Lizzie's rude terminology.

"And Peta's back, sack and crack if that counts."

"It doesn't. I realize she makes a beautiful woman, but she still has male bits. I know you're experienced after doing Peta, but you can't afford to make a mistake. Wax can burn a woman's sensitive areas, so you have to be extremely careful."

"And now to reveal my sensitive areas," Lizzie sang, whipping off her G-string without the slightest bit of modesty.

“What do you think?”

Marina felt her eyelids widen in shock. “I don’t believe what I’m seeing.”

“Told you I’d shock you,” Lizzie crowed.

Lizzie had dyed her pubic hair flamingo pink so that it resembled fairy floss. She lay in a movie star pose on the massage bed dressed in nothing but her crimson bra. “Did you know ten percent of women in Australia dye their pubic hair?”

Marina rolled her eyes and shook her head. “You are outrageous.”

“The way I see it, Fabio likes porn so I’m going to give him porn. If this doesn’t get his attention nothing will.”

“Just don’t let him make a video of you. I don’t want James finding it on the internet one day.”

Both girls burst out laughing.

“Could you imagine how shocked he’d be?”

“Horrificed,” Marina agreed. She shook her head wondering how such a straight brother managed to be related to Lizzie. “So I gather you don’t want the full Brazilian?”

“Nope. I always leave a narrow strip at the front. I don’t want it all off or Fabio won’t get to make love to a pink pussycat. Purr! Anyway, who needs extra pain?”

Marina stirred the wax. “My clients tell me it hurts the first time. I think it takes about three months before the hair follicles get weaker, though people are all different when it comes to tolerating pain.”

Lizzie’s eyes narrowed. “Wait a minute. What do you

mean, you're 'told' it hurts?"

"I've never had a Brazilian."

Lizzie's blue eyes opened with surprise along with her pink mouth. "You're kidding me, right?"

"I've never been bare down there," Marina repeated to Lizzie's disbelieving expression. "I don't even do my bikini line if I can avoid it. I hate pain. I was wondering how long it would take for you to find out I'm a fraud."

"You mean, you sit here day after day waxing women and you've never had one." Lizzie shook her head. "I can't believe that."

"Believe it. Because you're practicing on me next and I'm going to take longer than you do seeing as you wax regularly. You're going to have to trim me down as I have a lot of hair down there."

"A short back and sides." Lizzie giggled.

"Yup." Marina smiled.

"I can't believe you're such a fraud. A Brazilian virgin," Lizzie muttered shaking her head, her blue eyes blinking in amazement. Marina laughed, glad to feel her tension dissolve. If there was menace in the air, she didn't feel it anymore. It had gone. It was good to laugh, which she always did when she spent time with Lizzie. "Okay. Time to get started. Do you want hot wax or strip?"

"I think hot wax is better on coarse hair even though I'm soft and silky," Lizzie purred. "Strip is better for legs and arms. I always use the hot wax when I do myself."

"Best choice," said Marina setting the strips aside and

getting down to business. "Do you prep with tea-tree oil?"

Lizzie shook her head.

Marina put some tea-tree oil into some cotton wool and dabbed it over Lizzie's pubic area. "I always do my clients. It's more hygienic. Some waxers use moisturizer then oil, so you don't take the skin off with the hair, others use powder. It's up to you."

"I usually don't bother with tea-tree myself, but I'll try it your way on you."

Marina's mouth turned down. "Can't wait."

Marina finished prepping Lizzie with the tea-tree oil, reached over to her workbench and picked up a tub of baby powder. "The next thing I do is sprinkle this over the area and blot it with a towel because some women don't like me to touch them."

"The first time I waxed myself I didn't use powder." Lizzie grimaced. "I couldn't wear jeans for a week. Mind you, I didn't even hold the skin taut. I was bruised black and blue."

"Ouch," Marina said. She spread the hot wax either side of Lizzie's fairy floss and pulled. Then she worked between Lizzie's legs, smoothing the hot wax, testing it with her fingernails and pulling it off. Lizzie, who was used to the procedure, didn't flinch.

"How do you get to the back when you do yourself?" Marina asked, who couldn't imagine waxing her own asshole.

"With great difficulty. I get on my hands and knees, reach under myself and pull off the wax. Lucky I don't have much hair there."

Marina shook her head. "I don't know how you do it." Although she did the procedure day in day out, Marina couldn't bear to think about letting someone wax her butt, and even though Lizzie was her best friend, she was going to ask her to miss that part.

"The first time I put hot wax on my butt cheeks, I used too much and they stuck together before I could get the wax off. I was in agony trying to pull it off. I stayed in my bedroom for an hour screaming and rolling around the floor. James kept asking me what the matter was, but I couldn't tell him."

Marina laughed until tears formed in her eyes. "Only you would do that."

"Do you ask the clients to get up on all fours to get in between?"

"No. Just open their legs and spread their butt cheeks. Keeps the skin taut, plus it's less embarrassing that way. No one wants to get up like a dog on the massage table."

"Woof." Lizzie giggled, spreading her butt cheeks so Marina could paint a thick wax strip between.

"Behave," Marina said, wiping the tears of laughter from her eyes.

"I read in a magazine that some beauticians ask the clients to put their legs over the waxer's shoulders when they wax them."

"Gross. I guess it would make the waxing easier. I wouldn't like to do that to a client. It's important to respect their dignity."

"Why do you think so many girls want it all off?"

Marina tested the wax with her fingers and pulled, pleased

to see the clean skin she left behind. "Nearly half of my clients who want a bikini wax have it all off these days. Some say it's because they like wearing hipster jeans. The trick is to make the procedure as comfortable as possible so that they come back." Marina stepped back to survey her work. She kept applying thick strips of wax to the areas that needed them, testing the wax with her fingers and ripping it off. She picked up some tweezers to extract a few hairs, but Lizzie was an easy client. As a blond, she wasn't very hairy. It took about half an hour to finish the procedure. "There, you're done."

"Thanks Marina." Lizzie examined herself looking pleased. "You do such a good job. Fast and efficient. I bet that's why Michael and Natalia like you so much."

"They're nice people. He's so sweet about that baby."

Lizzie wrinkled her nose. "I like Natalia, but Michael..."

"Don't start on about Michael," Marina warned. "Remember he's paying us extra to do this."

Lizzie climbed off the massage bench, pulled on her G-string, shirt and hipster pants.

Marina grimaced. "Your turn to do me. Can't say as a Brazilian virgin I'm looking forward to it. You know natural redheads have the most hair."

Lizzie giggled. "Look at it this way, I'm clearing the cobwebs. It's time you had another boyfriend."

"Lizzie!" Marina was about to undress when there was an urgent hammering on the door of the salon downstairs. She looked at her watch. "I wonder who it is at this time."

"Don't answer it. We're closed," Lizzie said.

The hammering on the downstairs door continued. Lizzie's mobile phone rang. She reached into her bag and answered it. "Yes. Yes. I'll go downstairs and open up. Yes, Marina's here." Lizzie's cheerful expression changed. Her face became serious and she glanced at Marina.

"What is it?" Marina asked. The feeling of dread returned creeping up her skin, possessing her body.

"The police are downstairs. They want to question you about another murder."

Marina's hands tightened convulsively and her head swirled. "I'll open the door." Her voice came out strained and thin, so unlike her own.

"I'll go too," Lizzie said, closely following beside her down the salon stairs, her own small hand clutching the wooden banister.

"Oh God, Lizzie, pray it isn't someone we know." She fished in her pocket for the key to the salon door. Her fingers were trembling so badly she could barely fit it in the lock.

She pulled the salon door open to see the two policemen who had visited the apartment after Adele's murder.

Detective Davis flicked his badge open for her to see. Detective Herbert, who stood a head taller than Detective Davis, did likewise.

"Marina Henry," Detective Davis said.

She nodded, so tense that her throat had seized. She brought her trembling fingers to touch her throat in the same place the cord had twisted the life out of the woman in her vision. The pain and terror of her vision remained a vivid

memory.

“We’d like to ask you some questions that would assist our investigation into the murder of Dani Caponari.”

“Dani? No!” Tears sprang to her eyes as she thought of her cheerful, bubbly client who kept her entertained with her online dating stories. A desperate unreality seized her. Despite the vision, despite the bad feelings, she didn’t want to believe this was happening to her again. “No.” She wanted to scream. Her insides felt seared as if someone had burnt her. “She said she wouldn’t go.” She felt an arm around her shoulders and realized Lizzie was standing beside her, trying to comfort her.

“Marina, come and sit down,” Lizzie said, leading her to the one of the ornate salon chairs in the salon waiting room.

She wasn’t going mad. The vision had been real.

The two policemen followed her inside and even if she’d wanted to, she couldn’t have stopped them. She looked into the faces of the policemen, but there was no sympathy for her in their expression, only the wary, hard look of cops who had seen too much.

“Dani Caponari was one of your clients?” Detective Davis asked.

Marina nodded. “She was just here last week. She came in on Wednesday for waxing and impulse light treatment. Poor Dani. How could this happen to her?” Tears seeped from her eyes. She rubbed them away with her sleeve.

“That’s what we’re trying to find out,” Detective Herbert said, his voice harsh.

“She was found washed up in the Harbour,” Detective

Davis said, his eyes glittered bordering on suspicion. "Just like the last one. Strangled."

"Why do you think Marina knows anything?" Lizzie asked. She stood beside Marina, her arm still protectively around her. Marina was grateful for the warmth and support of her presence. It gave her strength and instinctively she knew she was going to need it for what lay ahead.

"Both murder victims were clients of yours," Detective Davis said. "Both had Brazilians."

Marina was about to answer when Lizzie jumped in.

Lizzie held her pointy chin high. "Maybe that's a coincidence. Lots of our clients have Brazilians. Marina does most of the girls here."

"I'm a cop. I don't believe in coincidences. Only facts that will lead me to a murderer." There was a knife-edge nastiness in Detective Davis's tone.

"But Marina didn't do it."

Marina knew Lizzie's sincere explanations wouldn't cut it with the detectives. She put her hand on Lizzie's arm to still her. "Detective Davis is right. This isn't a coincidence."

Detective Davis nodded approvingly, but the hard glint in his eyes remained. "So why don't you come clean? Tell us what you know."

He thought she was involved. The unwelcome thought whispered through her mind like a crisp wind through barren trees. "I think the murderer is finding his victims online."

"What makes you say that?"

"Dani said she was meeting a guy who liked Brazilians. I

remember Adele said something like that."

"When Dani Caponari had her appointment, did she talk about her sex life?" Detective Herbert asked. He took out his notebook waiting for Marina to reply.

Marina thought of Dani and how much pain she went through to look good. Her nostrils twitched as if she could still smell the burning hair when she gave Dani the impulse light treatment on her breasts. "Dani wasn't promiscuous if that's what you're getting at." She didn't know why she needed to defend Dani's honor, she just knew she didn't like the way the police were questioning her.

"Then why the Brazilian?"

Marina paused. "Dani waxed because looking good made her feel confident with men. It wasn't that she expected to have sex with her dates, she just wanted to feel good about herself."

"Did she say who she was meeting?" Detective Herbert asked.

Marina shook her head. "She told me she posted her picture on different dating sites and had a lot of success. Lots of replies. Dani told me the guy she emailed liked Brazil."

"The Brazilian Wax Murderer," Detective Davis said. "And you're the Brazilian waxer."

Marina switched her gaze to him. He had fatty cheeks in a rotund face and a high colour. He reminded her of a bulldog who, once it had its jaws on its prey, would never let go. "I told her not to go."

"Why was that?"

Marina dug her nails into her palms. "I don't know. I just had

a bad feeling, I guess because of Adele's murder." She couldn't tell them about the strange voice that filled her mind when she'd waxed Dani, or the horrifying visions.

"A feeling," Detective Davis mimicked. "You'll have to do better than that. We deal in facts here and the fact is that two of your clients have been murdered." His voice was rough, loaded with accusation. "We have a twisted psychopath to catch, Ms. Henry."

"I can't tell you anything else." Marina pulled at her bottom lip in agitation. The skin felt dry and flaky. Couldn't these cops see she was trying to help?

"Actually we think you can," Detective Herbert persisted. "What were your movements on Saturday night?"

"I finished here about six, went home and spent the night in with my roommate, James."

"Did you have any contact with your neighbours?" Detective Davis asked.

"No."

"Nice neat alibi," Detective Herbert said.

"Fits the flatmate's perfectly," Detective Davis added.

"You've questioned James?" Marina asked. Worry seeped into the marrow of her bones. She stiffened.

"Yeah. He told exactly the same neat story." Detective Herbert scowled at her. He reached into his back pocket, pulled out his wallet and took out a card. "Here. This is my number. You come up with some decent information, call me."

Marina's fingers clenched around the card.

Lizzie looked from one cop to the other looking distressed.

"Marina's speaking the truth," she added, backing up her friend. "I was there too, though I went out later."

"Why do I need an alibi? I'm not strong enough to strangle anyone even if I wanted to, which I don't," Marina said.

Detective Davis looked her over, his eyes narrowed. "Right at this moment we don't have much, but the information we do have lands right at your door."

Marina's stomach muscles clenched with fear, but she was determined not to show the detectives how intimidated she felt. She stood. As far as she was concerned the interview was over. "I don't have any more information to give you."

Detective Herbert looked her over. He didn't move, clearly having other ideas. "I contacted your employer and she's given me permission to take a sample of wax from your room." Marina's jaw was rigid. "It's upstairs. I'll show you the way." This nightmare was growing blacker by the moment like an insidious shadow weaving its way around her. Her lovely client Dani was dead and she was, in some way, bound to her murder.

"Why do you think they want a wax sample?" whispered Lizzie, who followed closely behind Marina like a small protective shadow.

"I don't know." Marina stopped at her cubicle door, stood to one side and let the detectives pass. "The two types of wax I use are there," she said, pointing to the molten wax in two pots.

The police took out containers and took a sample of each.

"What do you do with the waste?" Detective Davis asked. His cheeks puffed as he blew out air. He watched her through

narrow eyes.

Marina pointed to where the trash lay in the corner.

Detective Davis walked over and bent to examine the garbage bin and its contents. "Who else would have access to this?"

"The trash?" Marina asked, wondering why they were asking her such strange questions. She shrugged. "I guess the other girls in the salon, though I work full-time here. I usually take the garbage outside at the end of the day and put in a new bin liner."

"I see." Detective Davis nodded.

"Why are you interested in Marina's trash?" Lizzie asked.

The police didn't answer her.

Marina studied the detective, confused. Perhaps he was putting pieces of a puzzle together but she had no idea how each piece fitted. "I really don't understand how I'm connected to Dani and Adele's murder, other than doing their waxing."

Detective Davis walked over to her, standing so close she could see the derision in his expression. He thought she was involved. She could see it in his face. "Someone is supplying the murderer with his victims and we have reason to suspect that person could be you."

Chapter 11

Lizzie knocked on Fabio's apartment door. She was glad to visit Fabio and get away from the problems at home. She frowned. The two people she loved most in the world, Marina and James, were in trouble and she had no idea how to help them. The situation was far more serious than she had realized. She rubbed the crease between her brows, not out of vanity but sheer concern. Perhaps Fabio would have some ideas when she discussed it with him.

When Fabio opened the door he was still wearing his weight belt around his waist, which meant he hadn't finished training, yet his face lit up in a wide grin. His hair was cropped almost to a number one and she could see the dark roots. Perhaps she should offer to do his blond dye job for him now they were boyfriend and girlfriend.

"Lizzie Lu," Fabio said, picking her up and carrying her inside.

The way he could lift her like a feather, as if she were his little girl, thrilled Lizzie. She loved the secure feeling of being tucked against his warm skin. "Are you still training?"

"Just finishing up," he said, putting her on his big king-sized bed, which he'd made neatly because she liked it that way. "I was just getting in a final weights training session. The Mr. Sydney competition is coming up and I'm a hot favorite this year. Things are going good for me right now Lizzie and I don't want anything to spoil it. I signed up two more clients today. I'm seriously pumped."

Lizzie studied him for a moment. He looked larger somehow, as if he'd put on more bulky muscle. His body was slick from working out and she could smell the pungent smell of male sweat. Her nostrils twitched. She rather liked it.

"What?" Fabio asked.

"Nothing."

He was breathing heavily and Lizzie could see the veins popping on his neck and arms. He lifted his barbells and weights stacking them against the wall. While he was tidying up, she wandered over to his small kitchen. There were numerous muscle-building drinks on the bench. Lizzie twisted the containers around to read the ingredients. Although there were some things she didn't recognize, they seemed to be vitamins.

"Watcha doing, Lizzie Lu?" Fabio walked over and stood beside her.

Lizzie twisted her nose ring. "Just wondered what was in these drinks. You look bigger." She studied him. "Everywhere, but especially your chest." It was frustrating having a boyfriend with bigger breasts than her. Maybe if she took the drink and switched from aerobic to weight training, the muscles behind her breasts would get bigger too.

Fabio's eyes narrowed and he scowled at her. "What are you saying?"

"Nothing."

Fabio looked like he'd sat on a prick. "Are you calling me a cheat?" His face flushed with anger.

"What do you mean?" Lizzie shrank back so that the cold

of the kitchen sink pressed against the small of her back. A slip of fear slithered down her spine. She'd never been afraid of Fabio. In fact, what appealed to her was his gentle nature, but his normally placid face was creased with anger.

Fabio's thick hands closed into fists. "Why don't you just say it?" he shouted. "Go on. Say it."

"What?" Lizzie cried.

"Everyone at the gym is commenting on how I look. I just didn't expect you to join the crowd of hecklers."

"What do you mean?"

"Drugs. You think I'm using steroids to look this good, don't you?"

"No!" A light of understanding switched on in her mind. Tentatively, she put out her hand and touched his arm. "I wasn't thinking that at all." She wrinkled her nose not wanting to tell him what she'd been thinking, but she knew the truth would calm him down. "I was wondering whether these drinks would build the muscles in my body. I'd like to be bigger too." She looked down at her breasts, which even with her new bra, still looked too small. "Well, certain muscles."

Fabio smiled getting her meaning and his face softened. "Sorry Lizzie. I didn't mean to get mad. The drinks don't work that way. You can train and build up your pectoral muscles but the drink won't target one special area."

His words made sense, but then as a trainer Fabio knew all about that sort of thing. "I guess if they did most men would be targeting their penises." She giggled.

Fabio picked up a towel and wiped his forehead, neck and

chest. He frowned again not laughing along with her joke as he normally did. "Sorry I snapped. Someone's put a rumor around the gym that I'm using steroids. My gym manager asked me if I was using. That really upset me."

"But I read you can prove you're clean with a urine test."

Fabio nodded. "Of course I can." He flicked the towel on the floor, picked Lizzie up, walked across the room and lay down on the bed. "I offered to do one on the spot."

"That was clever of you. What did your boss say to that?"

"It shut him up." Fabio cuddled her close and smiled. "I'm more than clever, Lizzie Lu. I'm going to be a star one day. You see, all the people at the gym know me. They ask me all sorts of questions and want to find out about my fitness program. I can't let anyone tarnish my reputation." His eyes narrowed. "Especially not my competition."

Lizzie nodded in agreement.

"I've got a full list of clients. If I win Mr. Sydney, I could be doing product endorsements next."

"Fabio, I know you're going to be successful. You train so hard." Lizzie reached over and kissed him. "I can see why you're upset. I guess people say stupid things when they see how good you look. Even James said you look like you use steroids, but he doesn't know anything about drugs. He even hates incense."

Fabio's mouth tightened. "That's one of the first things he said to me. Told me it would shrink my nuts. I should show him the size of my balls." Fabio put his hand on his crotch and gave it a gentle squeeze.

Lizzie giggled and punched him gently on the arm. "I don't think so." She frowned thinking of her brother. "Poor James is in so much trouble at the moment."

"What do you mean?" He cuddled her close and Lizzie missed the amused expression on Fabio's face.

"The police questioned him over the latest murder."

"What? The one I rang you about this morning?" Fabio asked.

Lizzie nodded. "The victim was one of Marina's clients again. A girl called Dani. The police think Marina and James are involved."

Fabio shrugged, bumping Lizzie's head aside with his massive pectoral muscles. "Why?" he asked, though from the tone of his voice Lizzie thought he didn't sound that interested. His hand wandered over to Lizzie's top and he started unbuttoning her shirt, his attention clearly moving onto other things.

Although a shiver of pleasure rippled along her skin at his touch, she knew the sex could wait. "No Fabs. I want to talk about this. I'm so worried I can't think straight."

"So let me relax you." Fabio fiddled with her buttons again, undoing the top one, but Lizzie closed her hand over his. The tops of her knuckles were white.

"I need to talk about this. James emailed Dani asking for a date. The police found his email on her computer." Lizzie gave her nose ring a vigorous twist. "Poor James. All he was looking for was a date."

Fabio stroked her face. "Don't worry, Lizzie Lu. Hundreds

of people online date. The babe probably had heaps of guys hitting on her advertisement."

She grabbed his fingers and squeezed them tightly. "But it is a worry." Lizzie's voice rose urgently. "You see James was at the scene of the first murder. He admitted to being where Adele, the first girl, was murdered."

Fabio snorted. "Pier One is a busy place."

Lizzie rattled off her worries ignoring Fabio. "What's worse, witnesses saw him having an argument with a woman."

"His mum." Fabio grinned, reached down and unbuttoned the second button of Lizzie's shirt.

She couldn't wait to surprise him with her new look but she needed to discuss her problems. One of Fabio's fingers grazed her skin. Lizzie squirmed with pleasure. "It's just that the police don't seem to believe anything James tells them." It was hard to concentrate once Fabio started touching her.

"He does come out with bullshit. Look at the way he said I use steroids. I don't want it spread around that I do drugs." Fabio didn't look remotely sympathetic to James's situation.

Lizzie sighed. She knew her brother didn't like Fabio and that Fabio seemed to feel the same way about James. Still, she conceded Fabio was right about her brother. James did shoot his mouth off sometimes, but in this case she was certain her brother hadn't done anything wrong. "James said Dani didn't reply to his email. He didn't go out on a date with her. I know he spent Saturday night in with Marina."

"So that's his alibi." Fabio's fingers moved lower undoing another button exposing Lizzie's crimson bra. Some of its sequins caught the light. "Wow Lizzie Lu, what are you hiding

under there?" His hand reached inside her shirt, his thick fingers resting over the bra cup as his thumb stroked the edge of the bra where the fabric met flesh.

Lizzie smiled but she held his hand firm. Let him wait for when she was ready. Her mind was a scramble of possibilities and she needed Fabio to listen to her. "The trouble is Marina and James have the same alibi, but the police think it's too convenient. Dani was one of Marina's clients. They've got this weird idea that Marina's supplying James with girls to murder. I'm so worried I don't know what to do." Lizzie walked out of the kitchen and stood near Fabio's bed.

Fabio followed her. "But that's a bit of a jump to make."

"I know, but the police think this nut case is someone who can pass himself off as normal to get the date in the first place. I don't quite understand it myself. Nor do James and Marina. There's something strange going on. Something kinky."

Fabio leaned forward and ceased trying to undo Lizzie's shirt. "Kinky? Like what? The cop I train told me that too."

For the first time Lizzie saw he looked interested in what she was saying. "That's just it. I'm not sure. The detectives on the case wanted to know what happened to the pubic hair after Marina's finished the Brazilians. Why would they want to know that?"

"Beats me. That's real weird." Fabio shook his head. "There's some sicko out there. You make sure you stay close to me because I'm gonna look after you and treat you like a star." He pulled her down on the bed lying close beside her. "Now I wanna see that sexy number you're hiding under your shirt."

Lizzie giggled, enjoying the expression on his face when she unbuttoned the rest of her shirt. She slipped out of it and leaned on her left elbow facing him because she knew if she leaned on her side, the bra would make her breasts look bigger. "Do you like what you see?"

Fabio drooled. "Hot, hot, hot." His hand moved to unzip her pants.

"Not so fast." She pushed his hand away and stood in front of him. "Lie back down. I've got a special surprise for you." Maybe she'd never find a way to cure Fabio of his pornography addiction, but this time she was going to make sure he had no one on his mind but her. If she had to compete with celluloid-looking women, she was going to win.

Fabio laid back on his bed with his hands tucked behind his head. An appreciative smile creased his face.

Lizzie stripped off her pants and flicked them onto the ground. Already she could see the bulge straining against the tight Lycra of Fabio's training shorts.

"I've never met a girl like you," he said. "You are a babe. Sensational."

"I haven't finished yet," she purred. "You're about to see how sensational I am."

She walked up the bed so that she stood one foot either side of his face, hooked her fingers under the sides of the G-string and slid it off.

Looking down she saw that his mouth had dropped open, which was a good thing because that was exactly the reaction she wanted.

“You’re pink. Pink!” he muttered again as if he couldn’t believe his eyes. He reached up and pulled her down onto his face.

* * * *

Twenty minutes later Lizzie glowed with satisfaction. Fabio had shagged her for the first time without the assistance of pornography—no downloads off internet dating sites, no porn photos of girls with implants and no whorish name-calling. Lizzie let her mind float with pleasure. This time she felt Fabio had made love to her. Life was perfect.

Fabio cuddled her close. “I love you, Lizzie. You did that for me, didn’t you?” He stroked her downy, pink hair below.

“Who else did you think I’d do it for?” Lizzie grinned. “No one would appreciate it but you.”

Fabio smiled and nodded. “I think a lot of guys would appreciate just how sexy you are, but I don’t ever want them to find out. You’re my girl.”

It dawned on Lizzie, as she laid there cuddling Fabio, that she was crazy about him. In the past when he’d annoyed her, she could walk away. The pornography addiction hurt her, but she could cope. She’d never thought of him as a long-term relationship. But somehow she didn’t feel that way now. She and Fabio were on the same wavelength. He wasn’t an intellectual either but he had plans for his life and he worked hard for what he wanted. She liked that. Overall her life was happier having him in it even though he upset her sometimes.

“Lizzie. I want to show you something.” Fabio leaned on his elbow and looked into her eyes.

“What?”

"You have to promise not to get mad."

"Of course I won't get mad." How could she feel mad now? She was too happy.

"No. I mean it, Lizzie. You have to promise me." The expression in his eyes was serious. "It involves pornography."

Lizzie's muscles tensed and her heart beat faster in disappointed anticipation. She untangled herself from his arms and sat.

"Never mind," he said quickly. His face wore a closed, disappointed look.

Lizzie wondered what he could want to show her. Some pictures of women with enormous breasts that she would never measure up to? Why did he have to spoil a perfect moment?

"What did you want to show me?" she asked. "Not more magazines?" She didn't want to lie there naked looking at pictures of porn with him. The comparisons would be inevitable.

"No. I haven't bought any magazines since you helped clean up my apartment. I swear." He put his hand over his heart. "I'm trying to stop that habit. I want to make you happy, Lizzie. I'm trying real hard."

He looked so sincere her heart warmed to him. "Then what?"

"Put this on so you don't get cold." Fabio handed her one of his t-shirts. Lizzie pulled it on over her head. It swam over her shoulders and hung below her knees like an oversized dress. He walked over, picked up his workout towel and

tucked it around his waist.

"I found a site on the internet you should see." Fabio walked over to his computer, pulled out the chair and sat.

With trepidation in her heart, Lizzie joined him. Fabio pulled her onto his knee and turned on his computer. She noticed that once he clicked on Internet Explorer he opened his Favorites file. The last thing she wanted to see was some favorite porn site. Perhaps dying her pubic hair pink and getting a part-Brazilian hadn't been such a good idea, after all? Now he wanted her to look at porno with him.

"Fabio, things are good right now. I don't want to see pornography because we always seem to fight about it. I don't like it." Lizzie squirmed on his lap thinking about leaving but Fabio had his arms on either side of her.

"No. Wait a minute. I think you should see this. This is something weird I found last night. I can't explain it." His arms stiffened when she tried to move. She looked up at his face, but Fabio was staring intensely at the computer screen.

"I've had enough of weird, thanks." Her heart sank when she saw that since he now had her, he wanted her to look at what he found no matter how she felt about it. Lizzie shook her head. Fabio was in a strange mood today. Aggressive even.

"Look at this, Lizzie. Look, I tell you."

"Oh my God." Lizzie pulled her nose ring right out of her nose. She was looking at a photo of Marina on the internet naked. She leaned closer trying to get a sense of what she was seeing. "What's going on, Fabio?" she asked, her voice sounding small. "Marina would never take a nude photo."

"I thought you'd be interested in this. It's not Marina but her

twin. Isn't she beautiful?" Fabio was enthused. He gave Lizzie a squeeze.

She froze. Anger bubbled in her chest and she fought to contain it. Fabs was her boyfriend. He should be interested in her and only her.

"When was this taken?" Lizzie studied the downloaded photo. It looked dated with its bouffant hairstyle.

"In the eighties. She's so like Marina I couldn't believe it when I found her."

Lizzie studied the photo of the naked woman. The first thing she noticed was that the woman didn't have implants. Her breasts were rounded like Marina's own. There was one main difference. This woman had a Brazilian. Marina didn't.

She looked at Fabio. "She doesn't have huge breasts."

Fabio shrugged. "She looks like a real woman. Sexy."

"I can't believe she's so like Marina. I mean her hair is fuller, bigger. It looks so funny, but it's an amazing likeness. I wonder who she was."

"She's in a few of the photos on this porn site but none of them have a name on them. You see? Pornography's not all bad," he added, looking pleased. "It shows how women's bodies have changed. Women are too skinny now. Look how rounded she is."

His voice was low and she could feel him hardening beneath her. "I've seen so much porno with silicone-enhanced women I'm bored with looking at them. I need something new to get a buzz from."

Lizzie raised her eyebrows at him. Somehow she doubted

Fabio's obsession with pornography had anything to do with research. Her lips tightened and her eyes narrowed. Fabs was getting a buzz from looking at porno pictures of a woman who looked like Marina. A lump formed in her throat. Why wasn't he content with looking at her?

"Can you print this out for me?" she asked.

"Why?"

It was Lizzie's turn to shrug. "I don't know. I guess it's strange seeing such a close likeness of Marina. She might want to see it. They say everyone has a double. Maybe this girl is hers. I wonder why she did porn? She has such a nice face."

Fabio put his hands between her legs but she pushed him away. Seeing as he was turned on by a Marina-look-alike, he could satisfy himself. She wanted to go home.

Chapter 12

Marina was aching with tiredness. She rubbed her eyes and stifled a yawn as she walked downstairs to greet her client at reception. All night she'd tossed and turned trying to make sense of what was going on. The police had dragged her and James into this mess and yet, in some way, the police were right about their suspicions. She and James were connected to the murders. She felt it with a certainty in her bones, except the police had the wrong handle on things because she and James were innocent. But innocent moths that flew into a spider's web were still devoured. The spider was close by. She just knew it.

Whether she liked it or not, she had to listen to her instinct because there had to be a reason for these frightening psychic premonitions. If only she understood what was happening. If only there was someone she could talk to about her psychic abilities. The problem was that if she admitted to having visions, people would think she was crazy. Even James, who knew she wasn't crazy, had trouble accepting she could be psychic until the last vision had occurred almost in front of him. She herself had trouble accepting it.

When she reached the bottom step, she checked the client printout in her hand. She was so rattled, her short-term memory had decided to take a hike and she couldn't remember the name of her new client. There were two clients sitting in reception: an older woman with a perm wearing a dowdy checked skirt; and a young woman with a bare midriff and a pierced belly button.

"Cynthia Nelson," she said, looking from woman to woman.

The older woman stood and Marina smiled to welcome her. One thing she'd learned from waxing in Sydney was never to be fooled by the clothes or age of a client. The more conservative-looking clients often wanted Brazilians.

"I'm Marina," she introduced herself. "Come this way."

She led her client upstairs and into her cubicle. "I haven't done you before, have I?"

"No, lovey. I used to go to Natalia." Cynthia Nelson took off her glasses and put them in her handbag.

"Good. Then you know to change into the gown and paper G-string."

While her client changed clothes, Marina stepped out of her cubicle. There were no flowers outside of Lizzie's door, which meant she hadn't fought with Fabio. Marina had gone to bed early and Lizzie was still asleep when she woke in the morning. She hadn't come into her room wailing so Lizzie's attempt at being Fabio's porn queen must have worked. That was fine by Marina, provided Lizzie didn't get hurt.

She knocked after a few minutes had passed.

"Come in, dear."

Her client was already lying down with her knees up waiting. She noticed that Cynthia had taken off all her clothes, even her bra so that her breasts flopped to either side under the gown.

She put a cotton blanket over Cynthia. Although she knew she should be used to nudity, when it was blatant like this it disturbed her. "How would you like your Brazilian today?"

"I'd like you to shape a love heart today, dear. I want my love-muffin pretty because I'm going to a party tonight."

Marina didn't laugh at Cynthia's quaint term for her vulva, though she knew Lizzie would. She guessed that Cynthia was in her late fifties and thought it was great that she took good care of herself.

"A party. That sounds fun." Marina lifted the client's gown noticing that Cynthia had sparse, graying pubic hair. She surveyed the top of her client's vulva with an experienced eye working out if there was enough pubic hair there to form the heart shape.

Marina took a deep breath to clear her foggy mind.

Her breath stopped in her throat and she quickly turned to reach for the tea-tree oil before she gagged. Gross. Cynthia Nelson hadn't showered for some time. Marina slipped on her protective gloves and wished it were permissible to wear a nosepeg. Marina was very fussy about her personal hygiene and found it disturbing when a client turned up for a Brazilian without showering.

After wiping her client with tea-tree oil, she patted some powder onto the area with a towel. Taking a wooden spatula she smoothed the hot wax onto Cynthia's inner thigh and her upper bikini line. Working on two places at once was quicker and she used the technique when she wanted the job done quickly. She wasn't sure whether Cynthia was a bathe-once-a-week person but she certainly smelled like it.

"So do you have something nice to wear to this special party?" Marina asked, knowing it made the client feel comfortable if she made conversation while she worked. She

started pulling off the hot wax and reapplying it to the area until all the hair came off cleanly.

“Oh no, dear. This is a naked party.”

“Right.” She paused for thought. Marina had boasted to Lizzie that nothing shocked her but she was coming close to shock here. “Are you a nudist?” Cynthia Nelson didn’t have the rugged tan that older people kept from years of walking naked in the sunshine. In fact, she looked more suited to working in a library. Marina smoothed more hot wax onto her client, careful to leave enough hair to shape the love heart though it would be a bit sparse.

“No, dear. This is a swingers’ party.”

She wasn’t going to touch that one. Marina fervently searched her mind for a change of conversation except her brain was in slow gear. Still, at least she wasn’t having any weird psychic feelings other than wanting to finish this appointment ASAP—and there was nothing psychic about that!

“My husband and I run the Swinging Sixties club.”

Wrinklies playing sex games. Marina bit her lower lip, trying not to smile. Lizzie would think that was gross.

“We’re always looking for new members,” continued Cynthia matter-of-factly.

Marina groaned inside. Please, no.

Cynthia raised her head and peered at Marina as if she were a bit short-sighted.

Marina knew she was checking her out as a prospective swinger. “I’m too young,” she blurted, feeling like an insect on a

pin board.

"A bit of fresh, young blood always makes things interesting. The boys would love you."

How old were the 'boys'? As old as Cynthia? It was time for Marina to move to doing facials. There was something about waxing that made clients talk about their private lives, and while she was usually quite happy with comments about boyfriends and husbands being appreciative of her skills, Cynthia had crossed the invisible line of what she could cope with. She could adjust to the idea of online dating even though she hadn't actually done it herself. But swinging? No way! Marina widened the wax strips and kept ripping. "I don't think so."

"You can always access our website if you change your mind. Search swinging sixties on the Net. My husband's posted some lovely photos on the site."

Like no way! Marina looked down at Cynthia's unwashed love-muffin and her stomach contracted. Too much information. That was one site she wouldn't be looking up.

Marina kept applying the hot wax and pulling it off. It was early, but she could tell that it was going to be one hell of a day.

* * * *

Later that morning one of Marina's first-time clients called and cancelled, unable to face her appointment. Every month she lost one or two appointments due to fear, but this time she didn't mind. Marina was happy to have an extended lunch hour so she could go outside to breathe some fresh air. The air conditioning didn't seem to be working. Once back inside, she pushed aside her drapes. Her cubicle window, which looked

onto busy Darlington Road, was stuck and she couldn't open it.

Perhaps she could find Michael and see if he could adjust it for her. She walked along the corridor, past Lizzie's cubicle to the end of the corridor where there was a set of stairs leading up to the attic, where Michael was putting in two extra cubicles. When she stood at the foot of the stairs, she sniffed with appreciation at the new odors. The steps smelled like wood shavings and paint as Michael had just put in a banister. The walls of the corridor leading up to the attic weren't painted yet, but she could hear a sloshing noise coming from one of the attic rooms. Natalia adored the colour yellow, so the whole salon was done in a yellow wash.

"Michael," she called. "Are you up there?"

"Is that you, Marina?" he answered.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Wait a minute. I'll come down."

She could hear a ladder creak as well as the slippery, crunching sounds his work boots made as he came down the narrow stairs toward her. "Hi, Marina. What's up?"

She smiled. He had yellow paint splotches on his bald head and speckles on his face.

He grinned back and wiped his head with his hand, which only served to smear the paint. "Natalia wants these rooms painted ASAP. She doesn't like to keep clients waiting too long to get appointments. Says we'll lose business." Michael raised one arm and massaged his neck. He even had tattoos along the insides of his arms, which she hadn't noticed before. Pictures of skulls and serpents intertwined with roses.

Her throat tightened with distaste. She gave herself a mental kick, determined to shift from her conservative small-town thinking and stop being so narrow minded.

"She's probably right," she said. "I've noticed clients don't like to wait more than a few days for appointments." Especially when they had to sit on a prickly Brazilian.

"Heard you had the cops visit last night," he said. "What did they want to talk to you about?"

Marina nodded. "They're investigating the latest murder. The client was one of mine. I couldn't help them much." She didn't want to talk about it. If Michael knew she was a suspect she might as well quit work now.

Michael screwed up his face. "Nasty business." He shook his head. "Saw the ultrasound of the baby last night," he said excitedly, changing the subject. "It's a boy." His eyes sparkled with joy until he slapped his hand over his mouth leaving a yellow thumbprint. "I'm not s'posed to say the sex. Damn! Don't mention it to Natalia. She'll have me for this."

He looked so contrite, Marina laughed. "Don't worry. I won't mention I spoke to you. I just wanted to know if you can do something about the air conditioning. My room seems stuffy."

"Sorry Marina. My fault. I turned it down because I'm painting and I didn't want the smell to go through the salon. Do you wanna open your window?"

"I think it's painted shut."

"I'll get my jimmy and open it."

Marina watched him march up the stairs. She liked the way he always referred to Natalia and cared about what she

wanted. Underneath he seemed sweet despite his rough appearance.

When she went back to her cubicle she noticed Lizzie had finished with a client and was tidying her cubicle.

"Hi, Marina," she called happily. "It worked. I had a terrific night last night." She put her hands on her hips and wiggled them.

Marina rolled her eyes. "As Peta would say, at least one of us isn't a 'loser.'"

Lizzie giggled but her laughter died in her throat and her eyes narrowed as she stared past Marina. Marina turned and saw Michael. He had his tool belt strapped around his waist.

"Hello, Lizzie." He nodded pleasantly to Lizzie who grunted back.

Marina felt her cheeks warm with embarrassment at Lizzie's attitude. If she didn't watch out, Michael might say something to Natalia and she'd lose her job.

"How did the training go last night?" Michael asked with a grin.

"Fine," Marina said.

"Suppose you want to know the details?" Lizzie said.

Lizzie's nasty tone worked like insect repellent on a fly and Michael looked as if she'd sprayed him. His grin dropped. He vigorously pulled the knuckles of his left hand. Several of them cracked.

"Lizzie! Don't be so rude." Lizzie was out of order this time and Marina scowled at her.

"I don't wanna know what you girls did," Michael protested.

"I just wanna pay you for the extra time."

"Oh," Lizzie said, but she didn't apologize. Instead she twisted her nose ring around and looked away.

"We did an hour," Marina said, glaring at her. She'd never seen Lizzie so surly and she didn't like it.

Michael reached into his pocket and pulled out his wallet. He flipped it open and Marina noticed he had a picture of Natalia inside. She'd bet, in six months' time, he'd have a picture of his baby as well. The trouble with Lizzie was that when she made up her mind about someone, rightly or wrongly, she refused to budge on her opinion. She thought Fabio was terrific despite what he did to her. Come to think of it, James was like that about Fabio. He couldn't stand the sight of him and wouldn't budge from that position. Maybe stubbornness was a family trait.

Michael pulled out two fifty-dollar notes and handed one to each girl.

"That's too much!" Marina exclaimed.

Even Lizzie looked pleased. "Thanks Michael," she said, quickly pocketing the money.

Michael shrugged and looked embarrassed at their enthusiasm. He shoved his wallet back into his pocket. "You girls turn up to work, you never take sick days like some of the staff here. We've never had one complaint about you."

"We like our job," Lizzie said smiling.

Marina noticed somewhat sourly that Lizzie's attitude to Michael seemed to have changed with the money.

"Natalia says we need to look after our best staff because

when the baby comes, we're going to depend on you girls. She'll need time off, see?"

Lizzie nodded. "I'm happy to help out Natalia," she said somewhat pointedly.

"Thanks Michael," Marina said. Extra money was always appreciated, but what excited Marina was Michael's praise of her work. She prided herself on her professionalism. When she could afford it, she wanted to open her own salon again. Knowing she could do it in the city meant she'd never have to return home to the mess she'd left behind.

The city was good for her. She was learning to be more broad-minded. Perhaps if she'd been that way in the first place, she would have been kinder to Tony about his cross-dressing and worked with him to prevent the domino wedding disaster. The guilt Marina felt pricked at her conscience. Lizzie nudged her with her elbow.

She was hopping from stiletto to stiletto like an impatient imp. "Fifty dollars. Cool."

Michael gave her a cautious smile. "No problem. I'll go unstick your window," he said to Marina. He waved their enthusiasm away with a flick of his hand as if he didn't like girly fuss and went into Marina's cubicle.

Lizzie squeezed Marina's hand. "Littles has a sale on. Let's go look. I'll grab my handbag."

"Sure." Marina reckoned that Lizzie's fifty dollars would last ten minutes once she hit the shops, but then everything looked good on Lizzie's size six frame.

The girls walked along Darlington Road, toward Oxford Street which was lined with shops selling the latest fashions,

alternative clothing and gourmet food. Lizzie loved Littles, a boutique stuffed with funky clothes. Lycra minis weren't Marina's look so she knew she wouldn't be tempted, though she had noticed a cute A-line skirt with a suede cat on it when she'd looked in there last week. She preferred Porters, a more conservative brand, which suited her budget better.

"I also need to stock up on my magazines. I haven't bought this month's Street Cred Magazine or Fashion. I also want to see what's on sale in the other boutiques."

"Don't think your fifty dollars is going to go very far," Marina said.

"Don't care. I have to have them."

While Lizzie rushed into the local news stand to buy her magazines, Marina stopped to say hello to the cat lady who sat in her wheel chair with her kittens on her lap. Mostly she sat opposite the salon but this time she was in front of the newsstand on Oxford Street. "Hello," Marina said, taking her wallet out of her purse so she could donate her tip money. "You've placed your little gray kitten."

"Yes. I found him a good home."

Marina put some coins in the lady's cup while waiting for Lizzie. The cat lady had two marmalade kittens sitting on her lap. "Can I cuddle one?"

The cat lady nodded and Marina picked one up, holding it close. "Aren't you sweet?" She tickled the kitten.

"Did you have a burglary last night?"

Marina looked at the cat lady surprised. "Did you see the police visit?"

The cat lady nodded. She reached over and put her hand on Marina's arm. Her skin felt dry and papery. "I saw a man climb the salon fire escape stairs last night before the police came."

"But the fire escape stairs aren't visible from the street."

The lady tilted her head upwards. "I live above the store opposite the salon, so I can see the upstairs of the salon from my lounge, though my night eyes aren't good. The lights were on in the front room and they aren't usually."

"Lizzie and I worked late last night. No one came in except the police." An icy shiver passed up Marina's spine. "This man. What was he like? What did he do?" The malevolent feeling that had haunted her last night lodged in her spine, a haunting recurrent sensation.

The cat lady shook her head. "I don't know. He was dressed in black. Even his head was covered. My precious girls wanted their dinner and I don't like to keep them waiting. When I looked again, he was gone." The cat lady put her hand on Marina's arm. Marina could feel her concern spread like a gentle warmth up her arm. She was used now to feeling people's emotions through their touch and she no longer questioned it.

"Watch your back, won't you, dear. My cats would miss you if anything happened."

Marina swallowed and nodded. "Y...yes," she said, though her words came out in a stutter because her throat had gone dry.

"Come on, Marina." Lizzie swept past her, her magazines tucked under her arms. She stopped and nodded briefly to the

cat lady before turning back to Marina. "Look at this," she said, flashing a magazine in front of Marina's face. "It says, 'Undress for Success.' They should have interviewed me."

Marina shook her head and followed Lizzie into Littles. She flicked through racks searching for the cat skirt hoping she'd find it in a twelve. Popular sizes went first which meant she was never successful like Lizzie in finding a bargain.

Lizzie whirled shirts, tops and skirts aside Marina had never seen her look so focused. "I saw some striped high-waisted jeans with a bootleg here last week. Ah, here they are and twenty percent off. Bargain!" She flicked the pants over the crook of her elbow and kept searching.

Unable to find the skirt she was searching for, she stood back and watched Lizzie.

"Can't you find anything?"

Marina shook her head.

"Never mind. You might get something in the other shops. Hold my handbag, will you?" Lizzie said, passing it to her. "It's getting in my way. I won't be long." She paused from her task and a small smile creased her lips. "Have a look in my bag. Fabs found a photo on the internet you have to see. It's real weird."

Marina wasn't sure that she wanted to see anything Fabio found on the internet. Still, she opened the clasp of Lizzie's pink beaded bag, pulled out a piece of folded paper and unfolded it.

"What!" At first glance the printout was a naked picture of her. She strode over to Lizzie and hissed in her ear. "Where did you get this?"

Lizzie stopped searching for bargains. Her blue eyes twinkled and her mouth curved further into a cheeky smile. "The likeness is amazing, isn't it? Look again."

"What do you mean likeness?" insisted Marina. "Did that sick boyfriend of yours do this? Did you give him a photo of me to play with?"

"Look closer. This is a photo from the eighties. You were little then."

Marina stared at the photocopy of the naked woman. She noted the website address on the bottom of the page. Fog swirled in her mind so that she wobbled on her feet. The same malevolent feeling that had been stalking her closed in. Her heart started thumping. Her hand holding the paper began to tremble and she stared at it as if the hand barely belonged to her. Something was wrong. Her psychic instinct raised like hackles on a dog. "But how? Where? How can she be so like me?"

Lizzie ran a hand through her gelled blond spikes. "Seems like something interesting came out of Fabs's you-know-what addiction. I reckon he spends hours on the porn sites when he's not training or with me." She moved closer so she could study the photo. "Look how the woman has bigger hair."

"It's like my twin from another time." Marina's voice came out croaky. An unseeing madness swirled in the air shifting through the normalcy of the shop. Her psychic senses strained, sensing the evil vibrations. *So close*, whispered her mind.

Marina's first instinct was to clamp her mind closed in fear, but denial hadn't helped before and two women had lost their

lives. She owed them her help. Tentatively, she allowed herself to focus on the vibrations, no longer fighting her gift. Her hand trembled violently and then she realized what was happening. The sensations were coming from the photocopy of the woman.

"They say everyone has a twin. Your twin is a porn star. Fancy that." Lizzie giggled, unaware of the twilight mood that had descended on Marina.

Marina's concentration snapped. She frowned. "Shush, Lizzie. I have the strangest feeling." She didn't want to explain. There wasn't time. She had to act while the feeling was on her and try not to get caught up in the fear.

Cautiously, she reached out and touched the woman's face with her other hand. A vision flashed in front of her mind so compelling that she couldn't move. There were hands around the woman's throat crushing the life out of her. The woman, her eyes popping, her mouth gasping for breath clawed at her attacker but she didn't have the strength to fight back. She wasn't prepared for the violence and had no way of protecting herself. She loved the man who was strangling the life out of her. Marina could feel her love and confusion. The woman hadn't expected the attack.

"No," Marina groaned. Caught in the vice grip of her vision, her strength left her and her knees buckled. She was in the body of the woman feeling her terror, experiencing her death as if her very spirit had traveled through time.

"Marina!" She could hear Lizzie calling her name. She wanted to drop the printout but she had clawed it into a bundle.

Blackness surrounded the edges of her vision. She was

dying. The air crushed from her lungs by her unseen attacker.

"Marina. Wake up."

Marina's eyes opened but it took her some time to focus on Lizzie's face, which was streaked with sooty mascara tears. Several people gathered behind Lizzie staring at her.

"She's had a fit," she heard someone say.

"Can you hear me?" wailed Lizzie, who kneeled beside her clutching at her shoulders.

She nodded. "What happened?" She was weak and disoriented.

"You went all strange and fainted. You turned blue. I think you stopped breathing." Marina felt several tears drop onto her face and she was grateful for them. To be in Lizzie's concerned warmth, her life force, was so much better than the hell she'd been sucked into.

Lizzie wiped her tears away smearing the mascara across her cheeks. "Can you sit? Do you want me to call an ambulance?"

"No." This time she knew she was all right. She wasn't going crazy or dying. She realized she'd had another vision just like the last one at the apartment. Only this time she'd traveled to the past. Marina struggled to sit and concentrated on her breathing until the world settled down. On the floor laid the crumpled ball of paper. She didn't dare touch it. Instead she stared at Lizzie not caring that she blocked the aisle of the busy shop.

"Something terrible happened to the woman in the photo. I'm certain she was murdered."

Chapter 13

“The next time the police question us we have to insist on having a lawyer present.” James paced the apartment living room. He stopped, pulled out his wallet and took out a business card. “I had an appointment with a criminal lawyer today named Anthony Ford. His advice was not to speak to the police unless he’s with us.”

“Okay,” Marina said, sitting on the arm of the sofa.

Their fingertips touched when he handed her the card. A sense of protectiveness swirled up her arm from his touch—a powerful energy greater than James’s years.

She savored the sensation. It took a moment for her to realize that there was more than just protectiveness in his feelings for her. The hollow area in her chest began to glow. He cared about her. She knew he was attracted to her, but this feeling was more than sexual attraction.

Drained of energy like a battery that needed charging, Marina searched for strength. This murderer had the power to enter her soul, ravage her, destroy her sense of self. She thanked God that James was with her. His quiet strength and protectiveness settled her anxiety. Having him close restored her. If only she could find some way to harness her psychic ability. Her eyes narrowed with anger. She’d use it to hit back at the murderer.

James stalked the room, a worried frown creasing his face. “Marina?”

“Yes?” She started, lost in her own thoughts.

“This lawyer’s got a good name and we’re going to need him. The police are trying to build a case against us. I’m not going to meekly sit back and let them do it.”

“Why didn’t you just tell the police that you were with your mum?”

“I was embarrassed. I’ve tried contacting her online but she hasn’t returned my messages. I have no idea where she is at the moment. Unless I can find her the police won’t buy my alibi. They’re convinced I’m the killer.”

Marina looked at the card and nodded. “You’re right about that. They think I’m finding you victims.” She flopped onto the sofa, her shoulders aching with tension.

James nodded and started pacing again. His mouth tightened. He stopped and turned to her. “It’s insane. Just totally off the air.”

Her gaze locked with his. She propped herself up on one elbow. “I feel like that’s what I’m dealing with. Someone insane. These women who are strangled, they know this man. And worse. They care for him. I can feel their confusion as he kills them. They have no idea he’s a killer.”

James ran his hand through his hair. He was dark under his eyes from sleepless nights. “How’s that information going to help us?” His voice had a frustrated edge to it. He started pacing again.

Marina pushed herself to a sitting position, scowling at him.

James caught the look on her face, walked over and squatted in front of her. “I’m sorry, Marina. I shouldn’t have said that. I’m better dealing in concrete evidence. I’m trying to

understand your visions. It's too out there for me." He took her hand and gave it a squeeze. "I believe what you're telling me. I just can't make sense of it."

"I'm only just coming to terms with it myself." She squeezed his hand back, not wanting to let go because she could feel the warmth of his feelings for her. The sensation rushed up her arm. Sensuous. A beckoning distraction. She longed to bask in the pleasant feeling but the brooding menace of the killer dominated her life. She had to focus on that. "It means we're dealing with a man who can pass himself off in the community as a normal guy."

"Who is really a psychopath. Think Ted Bundy. Decent family background. Reasonable presentation. Deadly killer."

Marina shivered. Reluctantly, she let James's hand go.

James stood, thrust his hands in the pocket of his jeans. "I'm so frustrated. I hate this. I can do the practical things." He listed them on his fingers. "Get a lawyer, look after you girls when I'm here, keep a log of my movements so I have an alibi, but I can't damn well make sense of what's going on with these murders."

"What's going on is carefully planned," said Marina slowly. The feeling that she was being watched wasn't just in her mind. The cat lady had seen someone climb up the fire escape. "This person must know how we live our lives. Our day-to-day movements."

James studied her seriously and nodded. "It has to be someone we know."

"Definitely."

"That's what's driving me nuts." A vein on James's temple

stood out. Marina could see it throbbing. "The police have me at the scene of the first murder. They don't believe our alibi for the second."

"What did the lawyer say about that? Surely that's not enough to build a case against you."

James sighed so that his large chest rose and fell. She could see his hard pectoral muscles pressing against his t-shirt. A thread of desire wove its way to her core. When he was troubled, he looked vulnerable and sexy at the same time and she knew the attraction was not one-sided. How much time left would she have with James before their lives were ripped apart? Her heart pattered with panic at the thought. It occurred to her that she didn't want to waste what time there was.

"Things are worse for me than they initially seemed." He paused, his expression grim. "I emailed the second victim asking her for a date a week before she was murdered."

Marina sat rigid. "Oh hell. You emailed Dani? I forgot about that. She mentioned it."

James nodded. "The police found my email on her computer. Thank goodness she didn't answer me."

"Hundreds of guys replied to her bio. She had her photo up on several sites. You weren't the only one."

"It's still evidence, damn it." James started pacing again. He stopped, slapped his hand against the wall and leaned against it. "The police are building a case against me piece by piece. I don't know what's coming next."

Marina stared at James, her heart heavy. "They know more than we do, that's for sure. They took wax samples from my

cubicle."

All she had to go on was feelings, her senses and visions. Instinctively, she knew she had to listen to them before more innocent women lost their lives. But who was this deadly individual who was determined to destroy both her and James?

The skin on her bottom lip was dry. She fiddled with it, peeling back a rough patch until it bled. Nervously, she licked the blood off her bottom lip with the tip of her tongue. Except for James and Lizzie, she didn't know who to trust.

"Does anyone hate you, James?"

"Like enough to set me up?"

She nodded.

He shook his head though his expression was thoughtful. "I don't like Fabio. I think he's bad for Lizzie and he knows that." James's eyes widened. "That's it."

"What?"

"I think Fabio's the killer. He's a sicko. He knows what we're doing because Lizzie's such a chatterbox."

Marina paled. "But Lizzie says he's so sweet with her."

James pulled a face at her description of Fabio. "I don't want him near Lizzie," he said decisively. "If he harms one hair on her head I'll tear him to pieces." James's face had suffused with blood. He started pacing again.

Marina stared at him with a mix of admiration and concern. It wasn't that she approved of violence. She didn't. But she liked the way James was prepared to go out on a limb for his sister. She realized he'd do it for her too. She felt safe when

he was around. Still, going out with a fire in his belly and no proof of Fabio's guilt would only land him in trouble.

"You don't know it's Fabio."

"I don't like that guy."

"You didn't like Lizzie dating Fabio before these murders started," she said, determined to inject some reason into the conversation.

"I'm going to go over there and warn him to stay away from Lizzie. He's not good for her."

"You can't interfere in Lizzie's love life for no reason. She's twenty-three."

"I can if I think the guy's weird. I've done it before."

"Yes. Lizzie told me you went down and had a word with Michael just because Lizzie said he was looking at her. She was furious. Natalia nearly fired her. Anyway, Michael's a family man."

"Rough as guts, that guy."

"He's a builder." What was it with this family? Why did they base so much on looks? Still, she had been guilty of that herself, she realized, thinking of Michael's yucky tattoos.

"Yeah, so I was wrong," James conceded.

"And you're wrong about Fabio. His weird habits don't make him a murderer," Marina said firmly.

James crossed his arms in front of his chest, his look defiant. "If he harms a hair on her head, he's had it."

Marina picked at her lower lip. She tasted more blood. "You'll get arrested by the police if you do something stupid. Is that what you want?"

"Lizzie's worth it."

She had to keep James from doing something dumb. "You'll lose Lizzie's love."

She knew she'd hit home when James's hands dropped to his side. The sides of his mouth turned down.

"She hates it when you interfere in her love life. It's not your business, you know. I mean, I want to interfere too, but I have to shut my mouth and it's tough. I really care about Lizzie too."

"But what if Fabio's the psycho?"

Marina shivered. "I don't know. I think it's creepy that he found that pornographic photo of the woman who looks like me. Lizzie said he was totally buzzed when he did it."

"Yeah. Lizzie told me about it. He's a sicko."

She shuddered. "I couldn't bear it if anything happened to Lizzie. I'd never be able to live with myself. But I doubt you going down to Fabio's demanding he never see Lizzie again will achieve anything except alienating her."

James's green eyes glinted dangerously. "I'd like to take that puffed-up steroid user on."

"Which will leave the real murderer free to stalk his victims."

James's jaw tightened with anger. "The trouble is I've got nothing on him to force him to stay away from Lizzie. It's not like he's married or something."

"And you don't know he's using drugs. Lizzie said he trains for hours."

James shot her a black look. "Stop defending him," he said angrily.

"I'm not," she fought back. "I'm using common sense and trying to keep you out of prison."

They glared at each other, though Marina knew it was the tension that was getting to them. She didn't want to fight with James. What she wanted to do was hold him close, feel his warmth and sensuousness.

"I don't understand how your last vision is connected with these latest murders? Fabio digs up some porno from the eighties and your visions start all over again."

"I'm sure she was murdered the same way as the others." Marina gnawed on her knuckle as she recalled the vision of the woman.

"But that was years ago."

"I know."

She forced herself to concentrate on the hideous memory of seeing the woman die. Her face looked bloated. She was fighting for her life. Dying. Turning blue. Eyes bulging. Her fingers clawing for release. Marina's hands started to tremble again so she clasped them tight. "Only she wasn't strangled with a cord like the others. The man used his hands. The murder was intimate. It's so strange. I feel like I'm in the murderer's head when he's about to strike." She took a deep breath to go on. "But when the women are dying, I feel everything they do."

"How do you know it's the same man?"

Instead of holding her like she needed, James started pacing.

"It is! It feels like him." Marina's voice was laced with

agitation. He was too damn logical. She glared at him. Her fingers were icy as if the blood had drained from them.

James stopped and shook his head. He brought one hand up to his face rubbing his cheek and eyes as if somehow the movement would clear away his confusion. "I don't get it. Why start murdering women again? Why now? Why connect the murders to us? It's just not logical. I don't understand who or what I'm dealing with. How can I fight against visions? I can't even talk about it to my lawyer. He'd put me away."

Marina stood. Every muscle in her body stiffened with agitation as she struggled to understand what was going on. James's comments weren't helping. "I don't understand it either. I wish I did." She forced herself to loosen up as she focused on the shadowy sensations that haunted her. "I think these visions are some sort of message. That vision today was a warning—a message from the dead."

"I wish this dead person would just damn well say who is doing this rather than sending an obtuse message I can't unravel." He strode over to the other sofa, picked up a cushion, and punched it harder than was necessary before he sat.

Marina walked over to the window and looked out into the darkness. She thought about her situation. It had been so easy to dismiss the first vision and even the next, but that was no longer an option. She turned. "I can't afford to ignore the visions or think I'm going mad. If I know people are going to die, I have to do something about it. I can't just let them go to their fate because I can't live with myself." Her eyes grew hot with tears. James wasn't the only one who was frustrated.

"It's not your fault." The tension left James's voice and his expression softened. "You're not killing these women. You're not responsible." He leaned forward in his seat as if he needed to be closer to her.

Marina shook her head and the threatening tears sprang to her eyes. She hugged her arms around herself. "No. That's where you're wrong. I could have stopped Dani's murder. I insisted she not go but I should have been stronger. I should have listened to myself."

"What were you supposed to say?"

"I should have told her the full story about my visions."

She didn't want to tell him what was really getting to her—a nagging, ice-cold fear that woke her in the night. Her throat became thick.

"So what now? You going to take all the blame?"

Her eyes narrowed. "I have to stop this man before it's too late."

James frowned and shook his head as if trying to understand her meaning. "Before what's too late?"

She had to tell him because she couldn't bear to struggle on alone. "I felt I was being watched the night I trained Lizzie at the salon. The lady who sits on opposite the salon in her wheelchair with her cats saw someone climb the fire stairs outside the building. A man dressed in black."

James's face went deathly white. "You never told me this before." His voice sounded husky with shock.

"Why should I? You don't seem to get anything I'm telling you," she said angrily. "These murders. He's warming up to

something bigger and it involves Lizzie and me. I've got no proof. Nothing. I can just feel it."

James strode over and stood beside her, so close that his muscular thigh touched hers. He put his arms around her and she hugged him back.

"Hell. I had no idea how bad this was."

Marina closed her eyes and dug her fingers into his back, as if her life depended on him.

He pressed her close. "I believe what you're telling me, Marina. I do. It's just so damned difficult to use what you're saying so I can protect you and Lizzie. I don't know who or what I'm fighting."

She could feel his heart beating. His stomach was taut and hard against hers and a rush of desire hit her so hard she didn't know if it belonged to him or her.

"I don't want anything bad to happen to you." He looked into her eyes, then looked away. "I'm really attracted to you." He glanced at her as if afraid how she'd take his news.

Marina smiled. His admission brought a welcome relief from the stark tension that consumed her. "I know." She could feel it. When he held her, his feelings for her surrounded her in a heady mixture of love, desire and protection.

"Is that because you're psychic?"

"You keep looking at my breasts."

James's face fell. "Man, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be sleazy."

Marina laughed. "I can feel your thoughts too."

Instead of being disturbed he looked relieved. "How do you

feel about me?"

"I'm holding you, aren't I?" She really liked him and yet, due to her last disastrous relationship, she was scared to take it any further.

He smiled into her upturned face. "Yeah. And I like it."

"I thought you didn't play where you lay," she said.

"I'm not playing. I'm serious about you."

James's body against hers felt so right. He was honed and lean from his constant training. His jeans were slung low over his hips yet somehow, although the change was small, he no longer looked like the sexy guy next door. This leaner, hungrier look suited him.

He stroked her face. "We're not going to stay here waiting for the cops to pin something on us because they're too lazy to investigate this properly. I'm going to fight this all the way. I'm going to look after you."

"Shush." She stood on her tiptoes to kiss him.

She didn't know what was going to happen tomorrow. The ordinariness of life had disappeared to be replaced by a craziness she couldn't bear. All she wanted was for the knife-edged fear to go.

Hard and hungry, he kissed her back. His arms tightened around her so that she could feel his heart hammering.

All that mattered was her and him. The taste of him was tantalizing. Arousing. A hint of what would come. She breathed in deeply so that her breasts squashed against his hard chest, the movement making her nipples peak. James smelled out-of-the-shower fresh and his scent made her hunger to savour

more of him.

All her fear melted away as he kissed her, his tongue teasing hers. Sheer, hot excitement made her tremble with desire. She wanted him.

James had a black belt in Tae Kwon Do and was not scared to take on anyone. But admitting her worst fear—that the murderer had her in his sights—had clearly shaken him. He moaned and took a fist full of her hair, tilting her head back so that she was exposed to the full force of his kiss.

She responded by pressing herself against him so that her hips locked against his powerful thighs. Against her belly, she could feel his rock hard erection, and a thrill of pleasure ignited along her spine.

In one sure movement, he picked her up. He didn't need to say anything. They both knew what was going to happen.

Chapter 14

James clearly couldn't think of anything else except getting her naked. He lowered her on to the bed and his fingers rapidly undid the buttons of her lacy top. The buttons were tiny and his fingernails were trimmed so short he fought to get an edge. The intense look in his eyes made Marina offer assistance.

"Here, let me," she said, her beautiful mouth curving into a smile.

James groaned as she slowly unbuttoned one, then another and another. "That's so sexy, the way you do that."

Marina revealed a creamy bra embroidered with flowers. She dropped her top on the ground. "Aren't you going to take anything off?"

"Yeah, sure," he muttered, not taking his eyes from her for a moment. He kicked off his shoes and undid his belt.

Before she could get to her bra, he reached around her bending to kiss her along her collar bone and expertly unclipped her bra. He cupped both of her breasts in his hands and kissed each nipple like he was worshipping them. He breathed in deeply, nuzzling her throat, giving her little kisses and nips as if he couldn't get enough of her. "You smell of roses." He ran his thumbs over her nipples in a circular motion so that they puckered under his touch.

She sighed, her eyelids fluttering. "I like it when you do that," she said, putting her hands on his shoulders and pulling him down to kiss him again.

He shuddered in pleasure.

When his tongue touched hers and danced she sucked on it very gently.

He gasped, breaking the kiss. "Wait!" In one sure movement he ripped off his t-shirt and flung it to the ground.

Marina laughed at his agitation. She reached down and unzipped his pants. He rose and stepped out of them, along with his boxers. She stroked him, savoured the length and feel of him.

He groaned with excitement. Yet, despite the erotic pleasure he pulled away from her touch. "You're not naked."

"I'm shy," she answered.

"I'm beyond caring. Get naked with me."

She was wearing a long skirt, which had more buttons. James cursed under his breath.

"Do you want to see me that badly?" she asked, tilting her head.

"I wanted to see you naked from the moment you walked into this apartment. I've wanted to rip that blue wrap you wear from your body every time you're in it. Do you have any idea what it has been doing to me, knowing that you're naked under it every time you come out of the shower?"

She undid three buttons and slid the skirt over her hips.

"I love your body," he said.

She pulled off her matching underwear. It was sheer, silky and embroidered with flowers like the bra.

"No Brazilian?"

She shook her head. The corners of her mouth turned

down. "I knew you were going to be disappointed."

He exhaled loudly and she realized he'd been holding his breath waiting for her to unveil. "Oh no, I'm not. You're sensational." He sighed. "So sexy."

Marina pulled him down onto the bed and rolled on top of him. She looked him straight in the eye. "When I touch you I can tell what you're thinking. I can feel your thoughts, so I know you're telling me the truth."

James moaned as she rocked gently so that the pressure of her pelvis pressed against his. He ran his hands over her skin. "You're so smooth, so perfect. You remind me of one of those Botticelli paintings." Slowly, he moved his hands down her back over her bottom before resting them there and cupping her cheeks pressing her into him.

She sighed and arched her hips. "That feels so nice when you do that." Her stomach muscles contracted. "Every time I've been scared, I've wanted you to touch me."

"Just when you're scared?" he said, his voice husky.

"No. When you come into my bedroom with my cup of coffee, I've wanted to pull you into bed," she said.

"Yes, well, this is what I've wanted to do to you." He rolled onto his side so that she toppled off him onto the mattress. He moved down the bed and between her legs, pulling her knees over his shoulders.

He ran his tongue lightly over her lips before finding her clitoris. He pressed his tongue over it and licked gently.

Marina groaned and spread her legs wider.

Her whole body trembled as he stroked her rhythmically

with his tongue. He parted her with his fingers and continued to play with her. He teased her at first, lightly lapping at her until she strained for him.

"Please," she cried, arching her back. "Please." She reached down and scrunched his hair between her fingers.

Her whole body trembled and a deep moan left her lips as he licked her from the base of her sex to her clitoris in one sure motion before oscillating over her bud.

Her fingers tightened in his hair and he stayed circling his tongue, matching the pace of her rolling hips.

A groan started deep inside her body and ended in high-pitched cries, but he didn't let up until she ceased trembling and slumped to the bed.

She saw that her sighs of pleasure made him smile. When he looked at her, his green eyes intense with desire, she realized just what a generous lover he was.

He muttered something under his breath, reached down to the floor and pulled out his wallet.

"What are you doing?" complained Marina.

"Getting a condom," he said, digging it out of his wallet and throwing the wallet to the ground. He sheathed himself and moved between her legs.

Marina looked down and a shiver of anticipation coursed through her body. He guided himself into her, slowly first because he was big and the head of his penis was a tight fit. She opened her legs further to let him in.

He entered her, filling her and she wrapped her legs around his hips. His body was so hard and strong she closed

her eyes and gave into sensation. She had to enjoy what she had now, every single minute, because she suspected she may not have much time left.

* * * *

That night Lizzie sat on Fabio's bed watching him as he did his round of weight training. His biceps bulged with the repetitive action and the veins on his neck and temple stood out so that they looked like ink-drawn lines.

"Marina had a strange sort of fit today," she said.

"Uh?" Fabio grunted.

Lizzie knew he didn't mind her talking to him as he practiced, so long as she didn't ring him at the gym when he was with a client. Often she didn't get much of a reply beyond a grunt when he trained at home, but that was okay with her because she liked to chat.

"It happened after I showed her the printout of the photo you gave me."

Fabio glanced at her. "Uh?"

"I called her at home and she seems fine now. Quite relaxed. I'm not worried because I told James to look after her."

"Ugh!" Fabio snorted, not looking particularly impressed at the sound of her brother's name.

Lizzie wasn't happy that her lover and brother didn't get on, but it was James's fault. Men didn't like being told their testicles could shrink. Her brother could be embarrassing at times.

A rivulet of sweat worked its way down Fabio's temple.

She noticed he hadn't done his hair and his roots were obvious. How like a man not to care. She wondered if she brought some hair dye if he'd let her do him tomorrow. She liked the way they had matching hair colours. It was one of the things about him that had first attracted her.

The weights clunked to the floor signaling that Fabio had finished weight training. "What do you think, Lizzie Lu?" He flexed his biceps. "Do you think I'm getting bigger?"

It was only last night since she'd last seen Fabio and she certainly didn't think he could have changed in size overnight, but she knew the right answer would please him. "You're looking great."

"Like the next Mr. Sydney?"

"Yup," nodded Lizzie.

He came and laid beside her on the bed, smelling of sweat. Lizzie wrinkled her nose appreciatively. She wasn't fussy about body odor the way Marina was. She liked the way Fabio smelled. Young. Horny.

Just the way she was feeling.

He pulled Lizzie close. Although his skin felt tacky from his training she didn't complain because she liked the heat of him.

"Guess what I did this afternoon?"

"Let me see." Lizzie giggled. "Trained?" She rolled her eyes. It was hardly a guess. She traced her fingers along the line of his chest feeling the ridges of his muscles.

"No. I've been on the internet trying to find out more about that porn star. You know, the one who looks like your roommate."

Lizzie felt the smile freeze on her face. She stared at him and her eyes narrowed. Not porn again.

Fabio climbed off the bed, strode across the room, picked up a pile of paper from his printer tray and carried it over to her. "Check this out. She was famous in her time and her name was Pixie."

She watched as he spread lots of photocopied pages out, all of them black and white photos of the woman who wore Marina's face from another time. Her stomach twisted with distaste. Seeing Marina's likeness had interested her the first time, but this had a weird voyeur feel.

"How long did you spend doing this?" She noticed the different website addresses on the bottom of each page.

"All afternoon." He shrugged. "I didn't have appointments at the gym."

"Shouldn't you have been training?" She tried to keep the accusatory tone out of her voice.

"Look at this woman. What a body. Bet your roommate looks like this naked."

Lizzie's insides turned to water. "I don't want to see anymore and I don't like you looking at this woman either." Nor did she want her boyfriend to be thinking about her roommate.

Fabio looked sheepish. "I have to have breaks from training otherwise I get muscle fatigue. I thought you wanted me to find out more."

"No, I don't." Not if it meant Fabio was going to spend hours obsessively searching the internet for pornographic photos that looked like Marina. Not if that likeness had such a

strange effect on her flatmate that she collapsed in the middle of shopping.

“This could be Marina on the internet.” Fabio stared at her expectantly.

Lizzie felt her anger build. “I don’t want to hear about this anymore. It’s sleazy and disgusting.”

“I thought you’d be interested in seeing more pictures since Pixie is so like Marina. I spent a lot of time doing this for you. I had to search a lot of sites.”

She felt the muscles clench in her jaw. “No, you didn’t,” she said through gritted teeth. “You did it for yourself. I’m not interested in pornography.”

Fabio’s face flushed. He looked as if her words were a slap to his face. “Since you’re not interested you won’t want to know how she was murdered.”

“She was murdered?” Lizzie’s voice was small. Fear rippled up her spine as Marina’s words echoed in her mind.

“Strangled.” He gave a short, sharp nod. “And they never caught the guy who did it.”

Chapter 15

Marina smiled at the client sitting in the salon chair. There was only one, a blonde in her thirties with a beehive hairdo reminiscent of Ivana Trump post-Donald.

“Serena Porter?” she asked.

The woman nodded.

“Hi, Serena. I’m Marina. I’m doing your treatment today. Come this way.” She ushered Serena up the stairs before her, noticing the cut of Serena’s suit and black stilettos encrusted with diamantes. She looked more Double Bay, a classy suburb in Sydney’s east, than Darlinghurst Road, where the dress was either Grunge, New Age or remnant Hippie.

She couldn’t resist glancing down at her client’s shoes. “Great heels.”

Serena stopped, turned and smiled so that the rim of her plump top lip curled over toward her nose.

Her dermatologist had been heavy handed with the collagen. A beautician could always tell.

“I bought them at a shoe sale in Chapel Street last week,” Serena boasted. “I live in Melbourne, but I fly here for business every month.”

Chapel Street had the best shops and although Marina wasn’t a shopper like Lizzie, she did like shoes. “They’re really something.”

Serena had petite feet and the high heels not only gave her legs a slender line, but they looked easy to walk in.

"They sure are. Even at over six hundred dollars, I had to fight through a crowd of women to get these. There's nothing like a designer shoe sale. Women were guarding piles of shoes, then throwing them on the floor if they didn't fit. The place was littered with shoes. The salesmen were begging them to put them back on the racks but no one was listening to them."

Marina took a sharp intake of breath. "Did you really say six hundred for a pair of shoes?"

"Nearly seven hundred actually."

She reached out to steady herself on the wall unable to comprehend spending that much on shoes.

Serena shrugged her slender shoulders. "I don't care. I had to have them. They change how I feel about myself. I'm sexy when I wear them." She sashayed up the stairs to the landing.

"I get it," Marina said, watching the sway of Serena's hips.

It was funny how different indulgences made a woman feel sexy. Marina loved having her curls blow dried straight after a trim, so that her hair had a swing when she moved and not a girly bounce. She was glad she didn't have to pay a fortune for the experience though.

"This way." Marina showed her client into her cubicle. "Could you please put these on and change into the gown?" she said, handing her client the disposable underwear and terry-cloth gown. "I'll be back when you're changed."

Marina stepped outside and waited. Glancing to her right, she saw that Lizzie's door was closed. There was already a bunch of roses at the door. She shook her head. Lizzie should dump Fabio and forget about him. She didn't like the way he

was screwing with Lizzie's head.

"Are you ready, Serena?" She tapped on the door.

"Come in."

Marina opened the door and walked in. "Are you having the Full Brazilian, a Heli-pad or a Runway today?"

"What's a Heli-pad?" asked Serena.

"That's a little square."

"And a Runway is when you leave a strip of hair, I take it?" said Serena.

"That's right. Or I can do a 'Clitler.'"

Serena laughed. "I can imagine what that is. Actually, I want the Full Brazilian wax today. I'm celebrating something special."

Warning bells rang in Marina's mind.

Oh no! She was not going there. She was not going to ask what Serena was celebrating by having a Brazilian. The last time she'd asked, her client had issued her an invitation to join the Swinging Sixties. It was never something simple like a birthday or an engagement.

"If you'd like to lie on the massage table, I'll get started," she said in her most business-like manner. When Serena was settled, she flipped Serena's gown to one side, prepped the area and loaded a spatula with hot wax.

"I'm celebrating because I've had my drapes done."

Marina tested the wax with her index finger. "You're redecorating?" she asked, glad the conversation had steered to safe waters.

"I suppose you could say that. I spent eight thousand

dollars having my drapes raised.”

Now why was she getting that sinking feeling that Serena was not talking about doing up her home?

Serena raised herself on her elbows and looked downward. “I paid for a designer vagina.”

Marina understood what she had heard, but it still didn't resonate. But maybe, just maybe, it was because she didn't want to go there. She looked her client in the eyes because it was either look at her there or stare at something else. “You've had surgery?”

“Yes. I hated the way my inner labia looked so I had them trimmed with a laser.”

Marina gagged. She put her hand in front of her mouth and hoped the noise sounded like a cough. “Excuse me,” she muttered.

“Now they're neat like the nude girls you see in magazines.”

”

“You paid to look like a nude model?”

Slut.

The word was whispered in the air.

Marina jumped. Involuntarily, she looked around the cubicle, yet all the time she knew the voice was in her head. Just like before her last client was murdered. Get lost, she said in her mind, summoning her will power to make it go away.

“What's the matter?” asked Serena.

“Nothing.”

She hadn't said the word 'slut'. It was not a word she used

and she certainly did not think about her client in that way.

"I know it probably sounds strange having surgery down there, but women pay big money to get breast implants. Why is it any different paying to improve the look of my vagina?" Serena explained, seeming to sense her unease.

"I guess it isn't." Marina clenched her thighs at the thought of a laser anywhere near her privates. "It's a lot of money to do a procedure that no one sees."

"Speak for yourself. I'm not going to let myself grow cobwebs."

Marina put a strip of hot wax between Serena's thighs and ripped. "So I see."

Serena laughed.

Marina smiled at her client's forthright response. The evil voice inside her head was silent. She prayed she had willed it away. Hoped that, in some way, she had the power to do so.

She continued with her work, waxing her client's inner thigh and bikini line. Serena didn't flinch with the pain as did clients. Maybe she was one of those people who could cope. "Did it hurt? You know...um...the drape raising?"

"I bled into my underwear for days."

"Ugh!" Why did she ask, thought Marina as her stomach rolled. She'd eaten a sausage for breakfast and it sat hard in her stomach. Why didn't she just stick to waxing and not ask questions?

Stupid whore.

An icy shiver shot up Marina's spine. The voice was back. Present somehow. Waiting to strike again. Damn him!

"It hurt like hell, but I'm glad I did it."

Fingers jerking with the movement of her work, Marina increased her pace. Her temples throbbed and she wondered whether she was going to get another migraine. How could she stop this murderer who seemed to be invading her life? Was Serena the next victim?

"I'm thinking of going back to the doctor. I'm sure one of my drapes is longer than the other."

Vain bitch.

Marina jumped. She bit her bottom lip tasting blood. "Don't!" Her throat was tight.

Serena looked at her questioningly.

"I see a lot of women in this job." She grasped for words. "I see all sorts of drapes from Austrian blinds to Venetians. You're perfectly normal. Spend your money on shoes. You'll get a lot of enjoyment out of those."

Serena laughed. "You're really nice, you know that?"

"Thanks." She frowned with concentration, working rapidly, trying to think of how to keep her client safe. Dani and Adele had died after meeting a stranger online. She glanced at Serena, determined to find out more about her so she could keep her safe. "How long are you in Sydney for?" she asked, searching for a way to find out more about Serena's personal life.

"Just another couple of days, then I'm flying back to Melbourne at the weekend."

"What do you do?"

"I work in computers. I've just been in our boring capital,

Canberra, for a trade fair, staying at the Hillion. Gosh the place is dull."

"That's where my boyfriend was staying. He says the same thing about Canberra." Marina felt her cheeks redden at the thought of James. That's what he was though, her boyfriend. "Do you know James Worth?"

Serena shook her head. "The trade fair's big."

"Do you have someone special back home?" She hoped she didn't sound too nosey, but instinct told her that Serena's safety depended on her not dating in Sydney. She had to trust her gut feeling. The murderer was not going to get this one. She was going to stop him.

"I felt like a freak before with my drapes so long. I couldn't even wear jeans. But I feel better about myself now. I'm keen to get out there and start dating more."

"Don't do it in Sydney. Where are you staying here?"

"At the Marian near the museum. Across from Hyde Park. I like it there. I'm right in the city and yet my room looks over trees. Why are you asking?" Serena seemed puzzled.

Marina wasn't going to mess around, so she got right to the point. "I don't want to scare you but I've had two clients murdered recently. There's a psychopath on the loose. Don't open your hotel door to anyone you don't know. Don't date here."

"I read about that in the paper." Serena nodded.

"The police think the girls met him online dating, so I'm warning my clients to be careful. I think that's the link. He meets them that way."

“Don’t worry about me. I’m not into online dating.” Serena closed her eyes looking as if she had not the slightest worry in the world.

“Good,” said Marina, determined to drive her point home. “This man poses as someone normal but he isn’t. He’s insane.”

“I hear what you’re saying,” said Serena calmly. “Don’t worry about me. The men I meet in Sydney are gay or computer geeks. I like a man to look tough and sexy. I get so bored with all the suits I work with. I’ve given up looking in Sydney.”

Marina stared at her client holding her breath. Serena didn’t think anything would happen to her. None of them did. That was the problem. “Promise me you won’t date here.”

Serena opened her eyes. “I promise. Don’t worry about me.”

“Great.” She started to breathe again.

There had to be some way to stop this psychopath killing her clients, invading her life and James’s. Her gut was tight with anxiety. To calm herself, she took a deep breath and let her mind wander, sent her thoughts out looking for the presence.

She felt like a small octopus at the bottom of a dark ocean; its little legs touching, probing, searching for morsels. But there was nothing. No sense of evil. Just her and Serena. The voice was silent. Gone.

She took another deep breath and straightened her shoulders. There had to be a way to fight back. People called psychic abilities a gift. Although it didn’t feel like a gift to her,

she was going to use everything she had to stop this man—even if that meant developing the gift that terrified her and finding the killer herself.

Chapter 16

"I need you to teach me some moves," Marina said to James when he came home later that night from Tae Kwon Do training. She sat in the living room fingering the green silk Talisman that Lizzie had made her, the darkness surrounding her like a thunderstorm. Lizzie had said it would bring her protection. Marina was so freaked out by the murderer's words when she'd waxed Selena Porter today, she'd opened the jar she kept it in and tied it around her neck.

James flicked on the living room light. "Are you talking the Kama Sutra? I'm hoping that's why you're sitting here in the dark." James grinned. "You gonna seduce me?"

Marina laughed at his hopeful expression. She recognized the special smile that was reserved for her. He had perfectly straight white teeth and firm, sensual lips and he knew how to use them. "No such luck."

He strode over, bent and kissed her.

When his lips touched hers, her anxiety lessened. His mouth was hot, his lips possessive. It brought back memories of their passion together. Sweaty, sexy memories. She wanted to slide into the kiss, forget everything else, but instead she pulled away. "I'm not talking sex."

"I am. I couldn't stop thinking about you while I was at the trade fair." He sat next to her, his knee pressing against her leg.

"I missed you too," she said, savoring the heat of the close contact.

“What’s that thing around your neck?” He reached out and picked up the Talisman. The back of his knuckles made contact with her throat. Her nipples contracted with the grazing motion of skin on skin.

“It’s a Talisman.” Taking it from him, she fingered the green silk pouch feeling the rose quartz that Lizzie had put inside it to help her find love.

“A what?”

“A Talisman. Lizzie made it. It’s to help me find love and ward off evil.” It was too spiritual for James. He wouldn’t get it.

“Right. You found me, though I doubt Lizzie made it for that purpose.” He grinned hopefully and put his hand on her knee.

She frowned at him.

The hopeful expression on his face became serious. “Has something happened?” He sat beside her and put his arms around her. “What’s the matter? Have the police called?”

“No. Why? Did they call you?” Marina asked.

“No, but I feel like they’re on my back just waiting for me to make some mistake. It’s really getting to me.”

So James had bad feelings too. This was driving them all nuts. She gripped his hand. “He was back this morning. The murderer.” Her voice trembled. “I heard his voice in my head. He was saying terrible things about my client. He’s getting ready to strike again. I can feel it.”

His arms tightened around her. “Sick bastard. I worried about leaving you and Lizzie unprotected.”

James stood then pulled Marina to her feet. “You’re right. I do need to teach you how to protect yourself. At least

something basic.”

She looked at him expectantly.

Taking a step back, he looked her up and down. “This guy gets up close in order to strangle his victim.”

Marina shivered.

James put his hands around her throat. He didn’t squeeze. Just stood there with a thoughtful look on his face. “This is the position you need to get out of.”

“I could knee you.”

Marina raised her knee in practice.

“Sure you could, but that’s exactly what I’m expecting you to do. Because I’m expecting it, I can either throw you to the ground because you’re standing on one leg or simply move my leg and block your blow.” He moved his leg to protect himself so that Marina’s knee made contact with his thigh.

Marina let out a sigh of exasperation. “I have to do something.”

“Yep, you do. Lift your leg and strike at my knee with your heel. It doesn’t take much to disable a kneecap. It’s about twenty pounds of pressure. Your attacker won’t be expecting that. Then you can run and he’s stuck on one leg.”

Placing her hand on his shoulder so she could balance, James lifted Marina’s foot and showed her where to strike. “Try this.”

She directed her heel at his kneecap and was surprised to feel it move so easily under the pressure.

“Good. You got it.”

She nodded.

"I'm going to teach you a few things that don't require strength. Close contact stuff." He kissed her full on the mouth.

Just for a moment she sank into his kiss, allowing herself the pleasure. James knew how to kiss.

This time, however, he broke the kiss. "That was for good luck," he said. "Let's start training."

An hour later Marina flopped on the lounge. "Enough for now," she panted. She now knew several deadly tricks including how to poke out an eye; grab, twist and pull a man's tackle if she were attacked from behind and where to punch a man in the diaphragm so that his breath fled from his lungs. It wasn't much but she felt better.

James laid down beside her and put his arms around her. "One more thing. If you can break glass, do it."

"How will that help?"

"People ignore car sirens, burglar alarms, even screams but they always investigate the sound of breaking glass in case their property is being damaged."

She thought about it. James was right.

He put his forefinger to his temple rubbing it with the knuckle. "How do you reckon the murderer knows what's going on in the salon? I just don't get it."

She nuzzled into his neck, his very warmth a comfort. James's black hair was still damp at the temples from his rigorous training. He smelled of perspiration and his own male scent.

"Can he see in the window or something?"

"No, there's a drape. Stop searching for a concrete

explanation.” Her voice was full of frustration. “Does it make sense that I can hear his thoughts?”

He shook his head. “Damn weird if you ask me. Did you have a premonition? You know, like the others.”

“No. Not this time.”

“Good.” James kissed the top of her head. It was a small gesture but it brought comfort so she snuggled in to him. “I don’t get it when it comes to psychic stuff. If I hadn’t seen you have that turn, I’d never believe in it.”

Not believing hadn’t helped her in the past. She had to accept herself and follow her instinct. “I’ve been trying to learn how to use my power. Send my thoughts out to the universe but I don’t get anything back. It’s frustrating. The trouble is I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“Do you reckon you’d know if the psycho committed another murder?”

“I did the last time. It was like I was there. I’m certain nothing has happened yet. The trouble is the waiting is destroying me. I want to know how to stop him.” She pushed herself out of his arms and paced the living room. “I get shards of warnings. Like I know he’s looking to strike again. I need more than that to stop him.”

James nodded and narrowed his eyes. “It sucks that he has the upper hand. If I find out who the son-of-a-bitch is, I’ll throttle him myself. Give him a taste of what he’s dishing out.”

Marina bit down on her lower lip. The pain sharpened her mind, helped her think. “We have to be smarter than that.”

“He deserves it.”

Marina rolled her eyes. Trust a male to think a good thumping would do the trick. "Do you have any enemies?" she asked.

"Fabio."

Not this again. She met his gaze. "I'm telling you, it's not him! Look, I know I've only met Fabio twice." Briefly. Not enough to get a real fix on him. "He dropped into the salon with a gift for Lizzie. When I took it from him because Lizzie was busy, I didn't get bad feelings off him. Psychic feelings. His heart is in the right place. I just don't think he's right for Lizzie and I know she told him I said that. She's so down when she fights with him, but I have to stay out of her love life. He's her choice."

"I still think it's Fabio." James's mouth narrowed into a thin line. His mood darkened visibly. "You think the killer's psyching up to his next murder? I think it's him."

She noticed he ignored her psychic feelings. "James, you're not listening to me."

He looked at his watch. "Where's Lizzie now?"

Marina gave a resigned sigh. "With Fabio. They're having a drink at Planet Juice near the salon. Fabio's not drinking on account of his training."

James strode over to the telephone table where he had dumped his keys and mobile phone. "I'm going to call her and go deal with Fabio."

"No." Marina sprang up after him. "You can't do that."

James turned on her, his face dark with anger. "For Christ's sake, Lizzie's with a creep, a potential murderer. You

wouldn't let me deal with him last time we talked about this."

"That's a big assumption to make just because you don't like Fabio. You don't know he's the murderer. You have no proof."

"Who else could it be? The guy hates me enough to set me up, plus he's a sicko. He was at the pier the same night I was. He knew we were in having pizza when the second murder happened. Come on. You're the psychic. Work it out."

Blood drained from her face. "You are being an ass," she said through gritted teeth.

James ignored her, turned, punched in Lizzie's mobile phone number and waited for her to pick up. "It's me. Where are you? Good. Tell Fabio to come up. I want to talk to him." He rang off.

"Damn you. You're making a big mistake."

"I'm not. Have you seen how he's treating her? He's playing with her mind. Tormenting her. What else is he capable of?"

She didn't want to add fuel to James's fire, but she had to admit to herself that she had wondered the same thing about Fabio.

James opened the front door of the apartment. "Lizzie's downstairs. The creep walked her home."

"You are going to destroy your relationship with your sister. You don't have the right to tell her who she should date."

"I'm not going to sit around waiting for feelings..."

"Hi, guys," chirped Lizzie as she came up the stairs to the landing. She looked behind her. "Come in Fabs. What do you

want to talk to Fabio about?"

Fabio stood in the doorway or rather blocked the doorway. He was bronzed all over, the colour of a gingernut cookie and his over-bleached hair was greasy. "Hey." He seemed uneasy as if he knew his presence was unwelcome.

James's eyes narrowed. He looked Fabio up and down as if he were a sparring partner. "I want to talk to you about the murders."

When Fabio stepped inside, James closed the door behind him with a bang.

Lizzie jumped. "James!"

Marina's stomach turned. This was going to get ugly. "Calm down, James."

"Quiet, Marina. I'm dealing with this." James stood inches from Fabio. "I want to know what's going on."

Fabio shrugged his massive shoulders. "What's with you, man?"

"I've had the cops all over me about these murders. I don't take kindly to being set up. I'm as close to a suspect as they've got."

Fabio raised his enormous arm, scratched his head and inspected what was under his fingernails. "What's that got to do with me?" The muscles in his arm bunched with the simple movement of his fingers.

Lizzie's mouth tightened. Her brow creased with concern. "Fabio's got nothing to do with that."

"Quiet, Lizzie," James shot out.

"James!" How dare he be so rude to Lizzie? Marina glared

at him, but he ignored her.

Lizzie shot him a surprised glance. Her eyes glistened as tears started to form.

"Don't talk to my girl like that." Fabio frowned.

"The first murder happened when I was at Pier One." James jabbed a finger into Fabio's chest. "You were there too."

"So what?"

Marina's mouth went dry. James was doing his best to pick a fight, which was dangerous considering Fabio was double his width.

"The next murder happened when Marina and I were here. The cops think it's a convenient alibi. It would suit you to get me out of the way, wouldn't it? Locked up. Then you could do what you liked with Lizzie."

Fabio looked affronted. "What are you talking about? I love Lizzie. I wouldn't hurt her. She's the best thing that ever happened to me."

"What were you doing when the second murder happened?"

Clearly confused, Fabio's gaze met Lizzie's. She put her arms around him, hugging him as tears rushed down her face.

"I was with Lizzie." He gave her arm a reassuring rub. "Don't cry, Lizzie."

James shook his head. "No, you weren't. Lizzie was traveling to your place when it happened."

"You trying to say I'm the murderer?" Frowning again, Fabio tilted his head to one side.

"You're a bit slow. Glad you finally caught up."

"James," Lizzie wailed. "Stop being so nasty."

"Like hell I will," James shouted. "I don't want this guy near you. I don't like him."

Lizzie flinched.

"That's enough, James," said Marina. She couldn't bear it. There didn't seem enough room in the narrow hall. The air was hot, static.

"I know about your porn habit." James jabbed a finger into Fabio's chest again.

Fabio took a step back. "Stay cool. Quit with the finger action."

"I think you're a sicko."

Marina was certain that the only thing that stopped James moving on Fabio was Lizzie. She had attached herself to Fabio like lichen.

"James! Fabio isn't a murderer."

"Stop it, James." Marina's gaze darted from man to man, but she realized with amazement that although Fabio looked upset, he was more confounded by James than anything else. Didn't James care that he was hurting Lizzie by being so aggressive?

"I know you don't like me," said Fabio. "But I love Lizzie. I think she can make up her own mind whether she wants to be with me or not."

James smacked his hand into his fist. Every muscle on his body was tense. "No," he growled. "She's finished with you."

Marina dug her fingernails into her palms. How dare

James treat Lizzie like this?

Lizzie detached herself from Fabio and stood in front of him. "No, I'm not. I choose my boyfriend, not you." Lizzie was pale but determined. Her tears had slowed. "I hate the way you treat me like Dad did. Like I don't have a mind of my own. I'm not stupid."

"Lizzie! The man's a sicko. You know he is."

She shook her head. "No. I know you don't like Fabio but you've got it all wrong. Fabio and I came up to tell you. There's been another murder."

"Not again," Marina gasped.

"It happened when you were away with your boss in Canberra, so I guess that means you're in the clear," Lizzie continued.

James was silent. He stared at Fabio. "But—"

"Fabio had a complete training schedule that day," Lizzie interrupted. She wiped a tear from her face with a slash of her hand. "He's innocent too. Maybe if you'd taken time to get to know him better, you'd know what a gentle guy he is."

James's shoulders slumped.

"But who was murdered? How did you find out?" Marina couldn't bear not knowing. She'd felt nothing. Had no warning except that the murderer was seeking his prey. Surely after last time she would have felt something?

"One of my clients is a cop. Works with another of the cops on the case," said Fabio to Marina. "He said they found her in the Harbour like the others. Another 'Brazilian Wax' murder."

"But they don't know who it is yet," Lizzie added.

Fabio stared at James. There was quiet dignity in his tanned face. "Guess you'll have to find another reason to hate me. At least you know your sister's safe with me."

Mouth open, James started to say something but Fabio didn't wait for his reply.

"Come on, Lizzie." He put his hand on her shoulder. "Come stay at my place." He reached over, opened the door and ushered Lizzie before him.

"Wait," said James.

Fabio turned.

"I'm sorry." James offered his hand for Fabio to shake. "I was wrong about you."

"You sure got that right," muttered Marina. Fabio's handling of James's naked aggression impressed her. Lizzie was right, her boyfriend was gentle in nature.

Fabio looked at James's proffered hand. "I'll shake your hand when you treat your sister with more respect." He walked away, his stance proud.

Lizzie didn't look back.

Chapter 17

When Marina pushed the wood-framed door of the salon open, she noticed Salon City had become Salon Clity again. Michael had diligently scrubbed out the 'I' last time but the sign had only lasted two days before the street artists struck again. Looking around Darlinghurst Road before she entered her work place, Marina realized why some shop owners used psychedelic murals to decorate their shop fronts. It saved the vandals trouble. The thought brought a smile to her lips. She embraced the eccentricity of the place and the way the gay crowd had brought a quirky and exciting style to the place. Its diversity no longer threatened her.

"Morning Marina," Natalia said. "One of your clients cancelled, but I've scheduled in Cynthia Nelson first thing this morning."

Marina's nostrils flared. How could she forget Cynthia, the client who was allergic to washing? "Great. Cynthia." She tried to sound enthusiastic.

"Yes," Natalia said.

Marina noticed that Natalia's high cheekbones had filled out. Her porcelain skin glowed with the pregnancy and her hand absent-mindedly patted her now-showing bump.

"The Swinging Sixties lady," Marina said. She raised her eyebrows at her boss. "I don't seem to remember you warning me about her before I did the job."

"Did she ask you to join her svingers' club?" Natalia arched one of her thinly plucked eyebrows in return.

“She did and I didn’t.”

“I vaxed Cynthia for five years. She ask me on a regular basis to join her club.” Natalia looked in the mirror behind reception and smoothed her translucent skin with light fluttery motions from her perfectly manicured hands. “Naturally I refused. I’m novere near sixty.”

Both women laughed.

Natalia’s well-made up eyes narrowed. “Vot’s that thing you’re wearing?” She gestured to Marina’s throat.

“It’s a Talisman. Lizzie made it for me. It’s supposed to protect me from evil. Help me find love. That sort of stuff. I kept it in my pocket before, but Lizzie said I’m supposed to wear it near my skin or it won’t work.”

Natalia laughed. “Trust Lizzie.”

Her face became serious and her wing-eyebrows formed a slight frown. “I heard on the radio, there’s been another murder.” Her voice had slipped to a whisper though there was no one else in the salon. “Vot you think? It’s one of our clients again?” While she was waiting for an answer, she took a spoonful of frozen yogurt.

Marina’s stomach twisted, barely able to watch as Natalia took another dainty mouthful of her yogurt. She’d eaten nothing. Couldn’t touch food. The thought of her clients being picked off made her permanently queasy.

“I hope not. I can’t bear it. Nothing like this ever happened back home.” Cross-dressing aside, things were simple.

If only she could get away from the feeling of unease. Waxing Cynthia’s unwashed love-muffin was preferable to the

sheer horror of wondering who the murderer had killed next. "Lizzie's boyfriend told me last night. He heard from a cop."

Natalia took another spoonful of yogurt, her lips leaving a red lipstick mark on the white plastic spoon. "The radio said homicidal violence. Vot you think? That means he strangled her like the rest?" She examined the half moons on her fingernails.

"Natalia please." She grimaced. Did she have to make murder seem like a tea party?

"Sorry." Natalia looked shame-faced. "I know you like your clients. I hope they catch the guy. If it gets out all the victims come from here, it will be bad for business."

Was that all Natalia cared about? The business?

The women weren't just victims to her. Adele's hopeful face and Dani's vibrant one swam before her eyes. Natalia was right about her. She did get attached to her clients. They weren't faceless people. Adele had dreams. Dani too. They didn't deserve to have their lives cut short by a monster. She glanced at Natalia who was scraping the bottom of her yogurt tub. Christ, Natalia, innocent women are being murdered! she wanted to yell.

Natalia noticed her staring. "Yogurt breakfast. It's good for the baby." She patted her stomach. "Look." She motioned Marina over. "I have a picture of the baby on ultrasound. I know the sex. Of course I'm not telling."

"Of course not," agreed Marina seeing as, thanks to Michael, she already knew. She looked at the gray swirl on the piece of paper unable to make out a thing. "Everything fine so far?" It looked like a black blob.

Natalia nodded.

“Good.”

She glanced at her watch realizing that she had better get ready for her client. “I’ll go upstairs and turn on the wax.”

When she climbed the stairs, she marveled at Natalia’s ability to switch from murder to baby without drawing breath. But then Natalia had her baby to think of and the management of the salon. Marina’s heart twinged. How lucky she was.

She walked into her cubicle, switched on her hot wax and hung her jacket behind the door. Everything was normal for other people. That was what she wanted.

Fifteen minutes later Cynthia Nelson lay semi-naked on Marina’s massage table, trying to convince her to try a night with the Swinging Sixties.

“Are you sure you don’t want to wear the paper G-string?” Marina dangled it in the air determined to distract her client from her favorite subject.

“No, dear, my back passage is far too sensitive. I can’t bear anything touching it.”

Nope. She wasn’t going to go there. She was not going to ask why. It was quite simple. She did not want to know. “Are you sure you want me to wax your back passage?”

“Definitely. It will be rosy in a few days. You see I’ve had my asshole bleached. It’s gotten darker with age.”

Blah! Disgusting! “Ouch!” Marina clenched her butt muscles.

“It wasn’t that bad. The doctor painted on some solution. Feels a bit raw now, but it’ll be pink and pretty for the next

party.”

Marina blinked. Gross deluxe! That was way too much information. She busied herself by prepping the area and started on her client’s bikini line. The good news was that Cynthia had showered before her appointment. Bonus. The day was looking up.

“Do you still want to maintain the love heart?”

“No, dear. I want something different this time. I’ve got something special planned.”

Special. Marina shook her head. She didn’t want Cynthia to tell her anymore.

Cynthia raised her head and gave Marina a wicked smile. “I want the letter T shaped on my love-muffin.”

“No problem. I have a new bikini trimming kit. Do you want me to crop the hair or do you want a shaggy style? One knee up.” She got straight into the job. This was going to be quick seeing as there wasn’t much re-growth. She’d only just done Cynthia. Most clients came monthly to maintain their Brazilian.

“Mmm...” Cynthia paused to consider her question. “It needs to be a distinct T shape so it can be found in the dark.”

Not waiting for the gross explanation, Marina fervently searched for a change of topic. What are you doing this weekend? Nope. Not a good question. Catching up with some oldies? Nope. Probably not a good question either.

“I’ve come up with an exciting game to play for my next swingers’ party. It’s called Perfect Match.”

Perfect snatch more likely!

“What do you do? Ask questions? Other leg up.” She

spread the wax along Cynthia's inner thigh.

Cynthia's face lit up, obviously mistaking Marina's dry tone for interest.

"No, dear. That's so passé. Don't be surprised if more of your clients want letters on their love-muffins over the next few days. I've recommended you to all my girlfriends."

"I've waxed a lot of shapes: lightning bolts, arrows, x marks the spot. You're my first client who wants a letter." Not that she wanted to know why. Oh no, no, no. She kept working, stripping all the re-growth between Cynthia's legs.

"Yes, you see all the women in the swingers' club have been sent a letter, which they can shape by shaving or waxing. At the party, the men have to find the letter that their name starts with in the dark. But I want your opinion, dear. You young ones are so hip."

No, we're not. "I'm not sure I'm qualified to help. I can do a close shave though. With my new bikini trimming kit. It's really neat. It came with a few attachments, too, and little sharp scissors." Marina rattled on hoping to divert the conversation. She put the hot wax on top of the heart to shape the top of the T.

"I'm wondering whether to tie the men's hands behind their backs. That way they'd have to find the letter with their tongues. Imagine how exciting it would be for the women. Come to think of it leave the hair long, it will take them longer to work out the letter shape."

Gross! Vomit! Ugh! Marina took a deep breath. So much for conversation diversion. Couldn't Cynthia take up ballroom and change partners in progressive dancing like her

grandparents back home did? Was she being narrow-minded again? Cynthia was waiting for her answer.

"I...I..." She was feeling distinctly tongue-tied.

There was a knock. "Marina." Natalia called but didn't open the door. "I know you're in the middle of an appointment, but I just thought I'd let you know the police are here to see you."

Marina drew a sharp intake of breath. "I'll be finished in a few minutes."

"Thanks. I'll let them know." She heard the click of Natalia's heels as she walked away.

"Not again." The blood drained from Marina's face.

"Are you in trouble, dear?"

"No. Not me." Her voice was flat. "Have you read about the murders in the paper?"

Cynthia nodded. "Yes, it's been the talk of the swingers' club."

"Adele and Dani were my clients. And I think there's been another murder. I was praying it wasn't one of my clients, but the police are here again." Her fingers trembled as she worked. "They only come when something bad has happened."

"That's very strange. Why would both girls be your clients?" Cynthia put her hand to her chest, her eyes wide with concern.

Marina continued shaping the T but she couldn't concentrate, couldn't get the wax to go in a straight line. "I keep asking myself that question."

"And now possibly another client murdered. That's an odd pattern. A disturbing one."

Marina met her gaze.

Cynthia gave her an astute look. "Could the murders have something to do with you?"

The muscles in her stomach tightened. Little flutters of fear made her swallow. If the clients thought she was involved... Where would she run to this time? She shuddered. She liked living in Paddington. She'd miss James, Lizzie, the crazy shops. She stamped her foot. She would not run again like she did from Blackheath after her wedding disaster. Running made her look guilty.

"I just do the waxing. That's it." Was Cynthia looking at her like she was a murderer? How long before they all looked at her like that?

Cynthia pushed herself to a sitting position.

"I haven't finished yet." Marina looked up and caught her speculative gaze. She was checking her out big time. "Did I hurt you?"

"Your fingers have turned to ice. Anyway, the police need to see you. I'll get Natalia to finish me later." She dressed and quickly walked out of the cubicle without saying goodbye.

Marina rushed down the narrow wooden stairs to meet the police, her heels clattering on the wooden stairs.

Detectives Davis and Herbert stood waiting for her like a bad repetitive video.

"Ms. Henry," Detective Davis said. His cop gaze flicked over her. Assessing. Calculating. "We're investigating the murder of Ms. Angela Saxon. We want to talk to you in private."

Later that evening Marina stood under the shower letting the hot water gush over her. She massaged her scalp then directed the showerhead onto the back of her neck. Her muscles were bunched with tension. There was no way to expunge the horror she felt at losing Mrs. Saxon.

Her client had looked forward to her second honeymoon and the rekindling of her dying marriage. Her husband. Her children. They must be devastated. Tears trickled down Marina's cheeks and were lost in the stream of water.

Although she knew it was useless, she squeezed her eyes tight, but the tears kept flowing. If only she could have saved Mrs. Saxon. But there had been no evil voice. No premonition. Just an uneasy feeling that something was wrong. How could she stop this murderer when her gift wasn't consistent? She couldn't warn every client she had an uneasy feeling about. She'd done her best with Adele and Dani. It wasn't enough.

She turned off the shower, shoved aside the shower screen and reached for her towel. The problem was she had no idea how to develop her gift. She rubbed at her arms and legs with the towel. It wasn't like she could go to a school for psychics.

Wrapping the towel around herself, she walked into her bedroom and pulled on a silky blue nightgown. The other extravagant buy she'd purchased for her honeymoon. She frowned. There had to be some way to stop these murders. Mrs. Saxon had wanted to know the future. If she had known she was in danger, could she have changed her destiny? Marina had no idea.

Perhaps. The thought fluttered across her mind like a moth. She looked around her for her handbag. Striding across the room she pulled it out of her closet and emptied the complete contents onto the bed. "Where is it?" Her last link with Mrs. Saxon. "Ah, there." She unfolded a small piece of paper which had a telephone number written on it in Mrs. Saxon's loopy handwriting. "Evelyn," she read out. "Maybe you can help me."

She pushed her wet hair from her face, then walked into the hallway to the telephone. She punched in the number from the paper.

"Hello?" A woman's voice answered. In the background she could hear the voices of children.

"Hello, Evelyn, I'm Marina. I was given your number by a client, a friend." Although she didn't know her well, that was how she'd felt about Mrs. Saxon. "She suggested I contact you."

"It's about time. I've been waiting for your call. Your father's with me at the moment. He's very concerned about you."

"But my father's dead..." She sank onto the telephone table seat.

"Of course he is. Why do you think he's with me? Been following me around for the past few days pestering me. It's bath time for the kids, but he won't leave me alone. I told him I don't call strangers and bother them with dead relative things. They have to call me."

Marina shivered. No. It couldn't be. The rational side of her mind didn't want to believe. "Are you sure it's him? What does he look like?"

"He's bald. About sixty. Wait a minute. He's telling me he's

sixty-three and he's got a pot-belly. It is a pot-belly. Listen here, William, don't preach at me. Can you believe it? He's telling me to respect my elders."

"Oh." Shaking, Marina gripped the handle of the telephone so that the knuckles of her hand showed white. "I can't believe it. It is Dad." A surge of emotion filled her heart for the man who had adored her. "Tell him I love him."

"You can tell him yourself. Look, I have to get these kids in the bath. My address is 17 Round Street, Strathfield. I'm free Thursday after eight. Your father has got something urgent he wants to tell you." Evelyn paused.

Marina picked up a pencil and scribbled down the address. In the background, she could hear the sound of children fighting.

"Will you kids keep it down? I've got a dead person here trying to tell me something and a lady on the phone. I can't hear myself think."

Marina's mind was spinning. She had so many questions, but Evelyn was busy so she said goodbye.

A key turned in the lock just as she was putting the telephone down. James came inside dressed as usual in his Tae Kwon Do outfit.

"Hi." He didn't smile as he normally did when he greeted her. She could sense the tension between them.

"Hi." She'd barely talked to him after his fight. He'd hurt her and he'd hurt Lizzie too.

"Lizzie home?"

"No. She phoned in sick to work. I felt bad because Natalia

was asking how she was and I didn't know what to say."

"Has she spoken to you?"

"No. I tried to call her today. Her mobile is off."

James nodded. "I tried too."

She took a deep breath. Her mind was drained from the emotional wrangling of the day. She didn't want to fight with James, but there were some things that had to be said. Her blood surged. "You owe your sister an apology and you owe one to me."

James's green eyes flashed. "So Fabio's not a murderer. I still don't like him."

Marina stood and crossed her arms in front of herself determined to put her point forward. "You were appalling to her last night and you were a pig to me."

He looked bewildered. "I wasn't mean to you or Lizzie."

"Fabio was right about you."

James's mouth tightened.

"You don't treat Lizzie with respect. The same way you don't respect my gift or listen to what I have to say."

James moved close, but she fought the urge to close the distance and hug him. She'd never tackled the things that worried her in a relationship before. That was her problem. She was like a calm ocean with a dangerous current underneath. Churning.

"Damn it, Marina. Do you think I want something to happen to you? To Lizzie? I don't know how to protect you. The bastard's invisible." His voice was full of emotion. He walked into his bedroom leaving her standing in the hall. She strode

after him, but stopped at the doorway.

James undid his black belt and peeled off his top. He flexed his muscles, groaned and rubbed his ribs. Just above his six pack was a large blue bruise where someone had made contact. Her fingers itched to stroke it, to rub some Arnica on the bruise, to soothe him. She couldn't. Wouldn't let herself.

"You going to stand there and watch me get changed?"

She put her hands on her hips. "If that's what I have to do to stop you avoiding this conversation."

So he didn't want to talk. Tough. Sure she could back away and not talk, but if she did that she'd be leaving her relationship behind. Running away. Again.

James flicked open his wardrobe-door and pulled out a t-shirt and jeans. His body was so tense she could see the individual contours of his muscles. She knew his skin was like velvet. Heat flared in her groin but she fought against the sensation.

"Look, I know you're mad at me. Lizzie is too. The thing is Lizzie always chooses boyfriends who put her down. Just like Dad did. She never talked about plastic surgery until she started dating Fabio. That gets me mad."

"You put her down too."

"Huh?"

"I said you put her down too. You tell her to be quiet when's she's trying to speak. You did the same to me last night. I'm not going to put up with it."

He looked stunned at her accusation. Just stood there

staring at her, holding onto his jeans and t-shirt, so she pressed on.

"I told you last night Fabio is not the murderer."

"But that's because of some airy fairy feeling. I don't operate like that."

Her blood boiled. "I am psychic. That's who I am. I was right about Fabio." It took strength to admit it out loud. Strength she didn't know she possessed. Somehow the admission brought relief too, like finding out the answer to an illness.

"Damn it, Marina. You had a feeling." He pulled on his t-shirt, sliding his arms in first before pulling it over his head.

She glared at him. "A feeling that was correct. I don't like being dismissed. It hurts. You hurt me."

"I'm sorry." He held out his arms to her, but she didn't go to him. "I was so sure it was Fabio I had to nail him." He balled one hand into a fist and smacked it into the other.

The cracking sound sent a ripple of irritation down Marina's spine. She narrowed her eyes determined to make her point. "Did you see how passive he was when you attacked him? He's gentle. I felt that through his touch. There isn't a mean bone in that man's body." She paused. "There's confusion. Hurt."

"You get that from one touch?" James looked like he wasn't buying it.

Emotion welled up inside her. "Listen James, if we have any chance of staying together, then I need you to accept who I am."

His arms dropped to his side. He scratched his head. "It's

not that I don't believe you. You were right about the murder. It's just something I'm not used to dealing with." Confusion played on his features. "Damn it. This would be hard for any guy to cope with."

Pain squeezed her heart. "Then we have no future together." She turned on her heel and started to walk away.

"Marina! Marina, wait. You were right about Lizzie, too. I treat her like a child and she isn't one. Marina!" He grabbed her arm and turned her around so that she had to face him. "I don't want to lose you."

She pressed her hands against his chest so he couldn't pull her close. His hard chest was warm. She could feel the heat of it through his t-shirt. He was tempting. "I need you to accept that I'm different."

"I do." He put his arms around her waist. "Look, if it makes you happy, I'll call Lizzie and apologize. Damn it. I'll apologize to Fabio again."

"I need you to accept what I tell you in future." She could tell from the look in his eyes that he wanted her. But she wasn't going to let him lure her into his bedroom by pretending he accepted her.

"I'll try harder. I will."

She sighed. "I couldn't accept Tony, my ex-fiancé, but I'm working on trying to be more open-minded." She shrugged off his grip. "I'm different, too. Maybe I don't deserve to be accepted. I didn't cope with Tony. I was so mean to him. Cruel."

"Most women wouldn't cope. Okay?" He pulled her in tight so she couldn't shrug him off. "I'm sorry about last night. I'm so

scared I might lose you. Lose Lizzie.” He stroked her hair and kissed her. His kiss was urgent, hot with emotion. He broke the kiss. “You’re handling this far better than I am, Marina. You’re listening to your feelings, acting on them. I get so damned frustrated, I just want to find the murderer and beat the crap out of him.”

He looked into her face, his eyes pleading forgiveness. He’d cropped his hair shorter than usual and the cut made his features seem more angular. Sexy.

“I wish it was that simple.” Marina stood on her tiptoes and nuzzled his neck. She liked the way the skin was so soft there. His essence lingered on his throat. She licked him with the tip of her tongue.

He sighed and his nipples became erect under his t-shirt. “It’s good to come home to you. I’ve had a hell of a day. The cops were in again interviewing my boss. Thankfully, the alibi’s going to stick this time.”

“So you’re free.”

“No.” His fingers searched along the nodules of her spine, up and down, up and down. Stroking. Exploring. The silk rubbed against her flesh.

The heat of his groin seared through her.

“I’m free when you’re safe. That psycho is still out there. I heard about your client.” He hugged her tight.

“Poor Mrs. Saxon. I knew something was wrong but I didn’t get a premonition.”

“You had premonitions with the other ones, didn’t you?”

She nodded. “If only I’d had the premonition, I would have

told her about it. Warned her. All she wanted was to be loved and be happy."

"That's what I want." He feathered light kisses along her forehead.

"I can tell you're happy now."

"Is that a psychic feeling?"

"No. There's something hard pressing into me."

"It's that sensational silk thing you're wearing." He put her at arm's length. "Do you know I can see the outline of your nipples when you wear that?"

"Yes."

"You've been walking around the apartment half naked for weeks. That's torture for a guy like me."

"Really? I had no idea." She bit the insides of her cheeks so she didn't laugh. "Is this better?" She slipped the blue nightgown over her head and dropped it on the floor.

James groaned. "Man, you're a tease."

"So what are you going to do about it?"

He scooped her into his arms. "You're about to find out."

Chapter 18

“Guess what?” James strode into Lizzie’s bedroom waving the Sydney Morning Herald. “The ‘Brazilian Wax’ murders have made the front page.”

Lizzie finished setting up the massage bed for Peta’s evening wax appointment and stared at him. After James’s profuse apology both to her and Fabio, she’d decided she liked living with James and Marina more than Fabio, so she’d moved back home. “Doesn’t surprise me.” Mostly she didn’t care about the murders, but Fabs was interested, so she paid attention.

Marina, who was sorting out the CDs, stared at him also. “It was only a matter of time before that happened.” Her hand rose to her throat.

Lizzie saw her clutch the Talisman. She noted in approval that Marina wore it constantly. She’d have to remember to wear her own. “What does it say?” Lizzie asked.

“Do they have a lead on the killer?” Marina asked her eyes wide. She picked at her lower lip.

Lizzie rolled her eyes. “About time those dumb cops did.”

“No, worse luck.” He scanned the article. “Hell!” Colour bled from his face.

“What?” cried Lizzie.

“It says here that Mrs. Saxon’s was a copycat murder. It’s not the same as the others after all.” He jabbed his index finger at a photo of Mrs. Saxon. “Look here.” He walked in and placed the newspaper on the massage table so they could

see it. "The police have arrested her husband."

"Mr. Saxon?" Marina asked. "Oh my God." Her voice rose with a wail. "How could he do that to such a sweet woman?"

James stared at her, his brow knotted with concern. "Look. Read it yourself."

"I knew things weren't right," Marina said vehemently. "He didn't seem to care what she went through to get him to notice her." Marina walked over and stood beside James.

Lizzie noticed that Marina stood so close beside James that their bodies were touching. How cute they were.

"Come on. What does it say?" she asked. She knew she couldn't read as fast as James and Marina. There were too many big words. She was getting bored with the murders, but Fabs wanted to know every minute detail. He was totally fascinated that all the women had Brazilians. Fabs wanted to watch next time Marina waxed her. She'd told him no way and hit him hard. Next, he'd be asking for a threesome. Like no way was she going there.

"Oh my God. Poor Mrs. Saxon," Marina cried as she read the article.

Lizzie watched her friend's face. Marina was as pale as milk. "Spill the beans." She tapped her foot. "I hate reading newspapers."

"The article says she was strangled like the others but in a different way."

"Wonder what they mean by that?" Lizzie said. "How many ways could he strangle someone?"

"It doesn't say," Marina said.

Lizzie narrowed her eyes. "Remember Fabs said that there was something kinky about the way the others were strangled."

"Yuck." Marina shuddered. She turned back to the article. "It says here Mrs. Saxon's neighbor became suspicious when he saw Mr. Saxon at the airport with a girl half his age. He'd been having an affair for six months."

"What a bastard," Lizzie said, picking up the pot of strip wax and slamming it down on the massage bench. How like a man to get sick of a woman and move on. Nothing ever satisfied them for long. The thought worried her. She wasn't sure what she was going to do next to satisfy Fabs. The dye and wax job had been terrific, but she was running out of ideas. How could she keep his attention on her and not pornography?

Marina pushed the newspaper away. "I can't bear to read about it. It's just too horrible."

James picked the paper up, his knuckles white as he re-read the article.

Lizzie frowned. Marina looked like she was going to cry.

"Poor Mrs. Saxon. Do you remember her?" Marina asked Lizzie.

Lizzie nodded as she thought of the overweight blonde with the nice face. She had looked better in the hipster jeans Lizzie had seen her wearing at her last appointment, since she'd lost a little bit of weight.

"She so wanted to save her marriage," Marina said. Her hands twisted in dismay. She brought them to her chest. There were tears welling in her eyes.

Lizzie picked up a rabbit, one of the soft toys that sat in a jumble on the end of her unmade bed, and threw it at her.

Bonk! It bounced off Marina's head.

Marina jumped. Her eyes widened with surprise. "Lizzie!"

"You get too involved with your clients. I mean, I'm sorry another one's been knocked off, but you can't let it get to you." She walked up and pulled up the pink bed duvet and stuffed her short pajamas under her pillow. She didn't want Peta to see she was a slob.

"But this is number three." Marina's lips were pinched together. With jerky movements, she picked up the stuffed rabbit and put it back on the end of Lizzie's bed.

"It's not number three. It's a copycat murder."

"It's my third client," Marina protested. "I can't believe your attitude. How would you feel if it was your clients being killed?"

Lizzie thought about it and decided she'd better not admit that she'd feel quite good if it was some of the bats she had to deal with. "Look Marina, I know Natalia says we have to make conversation with the clients, but you get so involved with them and their problems, you act like they're your own. By the end of the day you're dead on your feet. You're getting migraines. Give it up."

Marina blanched at her criticism.

"Lizzie!" James put his arm around Marina's shoulder. "You okay?"

Marina ran her hand through her hair. She nodded.

Lizzie noticed Marina was looking dark under her eyes. The skin around her nose looked a little red and flaky. Sure

signs of stress.

“Lizzie’s right.” Marina sighed. “I don’t keep my distance. Even Natalia said that about me. It’s probably because I knew my clients so well back in Blackheath. I knew who was pregnant with whose baby, who had an abortion, who was getting engaged. I knew more than the local doctor and minister combined.”

“You didn’t have to deal with a serial killer there,” James said soothingly, rubbing her arm.

Lizzie was sorry that Marina’s clients were being popped off. But she was more concerned about Marina. She needed to get a life. It was lucky James seemed to get on with her. She’d never seen him behave so compassionately with one of her friends.

Marina pulled at her bottom lip. She walked around the massage bed, gathering up dirty clothes that Lizzie had thrown on the floor.

“Here, give me those.” Lizzie hurried over to her and chucked them in the cane washing basket that stood in the corner of her bedroom next to the stereo.

“No wonder the police wanted to know the details of Mrs. Saxon’s last conversation with me. Detective Herbert said her death didn’t follow the pattern,” Marina said.

“Detective Herbert said that? Did he explain?” James asked.

“No.”

“Now I get why they didn’t try and interview me,” James added, “seeing as the husband’s the killer.”

“Oh my God. You know what this means?” Marina said to James.

Lizzie noticed that, like James's, Marina's face looked like she'd used the wrong colour foundation her skin was so pallid. She let out a large sigh. The whole thing was bloody boring, she thought, but decided to keep her view to herself.

“You'll be a suspect again.”

Lizzie's chin jerked up and she stared at James. Shit, James was in trouble again. “That's not good,” she said.

Her brother's eyes narrowed. He swept the stuffed toys against the wall and sat on her bed. He looked like a pin had popped his balloon. “I knew that the moment I saw the paper. This murderer is smart. He won't be caught easily.”

“I told you before, we have to be smart too,” Marina said.

Lizzie saw hope in her brother's eyes. She liked the way they bounced thoughts off each other. James had never got on so well with one of her friends before.

Her brother pushed himself off her bed. He walked over to Marina and put his hands on her shoulders, his face was inches from hers. “We have to catch this murderer before he strikes again. You're the only one who can sense him. You have to use your powers.”

Powers? What was James talking about? “Marina!” Lizzie stared at her, feeling left out. “Did you look in the scrying bowl again without me?” She watched as Marina squeezed James's hand. These two were closer than she thought.

Marina took a clean sheet from Lizzie's wardrobe, unfolded it and smoothed it over the massage table. “There's

more to it than that, Lizzie.” She hesitated. “I had premonitions of the murders too.”

“Huh?” A rush of surprise hit Lizzie. “What do you mean? What premonitions?” Marina always carried on that she wasn’t psychic.

“Remember the strange thing that happened in the shop when I held the printout? The way I saw things. The way I knew that woman had been murdered?”

Lizzie nodded.

“I had that before Adele was murdered when I was waxing her. Then later that night I had another terrifying vision. I saw Adele dying. It was the same with Dani.”

Hurt filled Lizzie’s chest. “You’re my best friend. You never told me. Does James know?” One look at her brother and she saw he did. “You told him before me.” She knew it was silly, but she couldn’t keep the accusation out of her voice. She wanted her brother to like her best friend. She did. But Marina had been so distant lately. She’d thought it was because she didn’t approve of Fabio.

“I’m sorry.” Marina gave her an apologetic hug. “I didn’t believe what I was seeing when I had the vision with Adele. I was terrified. I thought I was going crazy.”

“You crazy? Ha! Unlikely. I can’t believe you didn’t tell me. I tell you everything.” It bugged her that Marina kept things to herself. She would stew on things until she was wrinkled like a prune sometimes.

“That’s your strength, Lizzie.” Marina patted her arm. “You’re open-minded. You accept things so much faster than I do. It’s harder for me. It takes me longer to believe in things

when they're different. Like I'm different."

Lizzie's heart warmed to her best pal. Her father had called her a gossip, a busybody. Marina called her open-minded. Despite their differences, Marina always made things seem right.

"You're just fine as you are," James said.

"James was with me the night I had the vision of Dani. That's why he knows." Marina moistened her lower lip. "I was scared. I guess I couldn't keep it to myself any longer."

Lizzie noticed her roommate had lost weight. The skin on her lips was dry and cracked but she didn't seem to have realized. Normally she was the lip gloss queen. She didn't wear makeup when she was at home, but she always wore something on her lips.

"The thing is, I think there's a pattern." Marina's eyes widened as she looked from Lizzie to James. "With Dani and Adele I had a warning of what was to come when I waxed them."

Lizzie twiddled her nose ring. "That's awesome. Weird too." She got why Marina was so freaked out.

Marina stared into space as if trying to figure it out. "When the murder actually is happening it feels like I'm looking out of the murderer's eyes, then when he's killing them I'm in the victim. I feel it. Everything!" She shuddered. James put his arm around her.

Lizzie sucked in a deep breath. "Ugh! Poor you." She reached for her best lip balm, twisted the lid and offered it to Marina. She wasn't sure what to do.

James's eyes narrowed.

Lizzie could almost see him thinking as his mind ticked over.

"You didn't get a vision with Mrs. Saxon, did you?" he asked.

"No. Just a vague feeling."

"Yet she was one of your clients, too," Lizzie said. She scratched her head. There was a simple answer, but she just couldn't think what it was.

Marina raised her hand to her mouth and chewed on her fingernail.

Lizzie frowned at her and shook her head. Marina normally kept her fingernails short and neat for waxing. She continued to chew, not noticing Lizzie's disapproval.

"The murderer gets into my head when I'm working. Not with every client. I feel it's like... When he's searching for a victim. He says horrible things about the clients. I can actually hear his words." She looked at Lizzie. "Remember the night we were training?"

Lizzie nodded.

"I don't want to scare you, but he was doing it when I was waxing you. That's why I was so distracted."

A slither of fear stabbed between her breastbone and down into her heart. Lizzie was glad Marina had kept that one to herself. But her nosey side got the better of her. "What kind of things does he say?"

"Whore. Slut," Marina said.

Lizzie took a step back.

Marina's face twisted with dismay. She walked over and held out her hand to Lizzie.

With some reluctance Lizzie reached out and touched her flatmate's hand. Her heart was pattering like a canary in a birdcage. Marina had freaked her out.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have told you."

Whore. Slut. Fabio had used those words on her. Lizzie pushed the thought away. "No wonder you thought you were going crazy. It must be horrible for you." A yucky thought crossed her mind but she pushed it away. It couldn't be him. Her doubts persisted, however. Fabs knew the salon well. They'd shagged there once when she'd stayed late. He dropped in to the salon on a weekly basis with his little gifts. What if Marina could read his thoughts when he was close? She'd always been telepathic. She'd just refused to recognize it. Anything too different freaked her out.

"You must have some connection to the murderer," James said. "You must know him."

Lizzie jumped. Her insides went weak with fear. What if... Hell! This was freaky. She reached over, grabbed her stuffed bunny and hugged it.

"I know," Marina said with a frown on her face. "I've thought about it again and again." She walked over to Lizzie's dressing table and took out some tweezers, tea-tree oil and powder they kept in her drawer for clients.

James's gaze followed her every movement. "Think, Marina. This man gets inside your head somehow. It's someone you've met. It has to be. You never had a vision with Mrs. Saxon. It's someone who has a connection with you."

Lizzie looked at her brother with admiration. He was smart, good at working things out. Whenever she had a problem, he always fixed it for her, providing it wasn't a problem with a boyfriend. "You know," she said to Marina, "I read in a magazine that most people are psychic but they don't develop their talents. Maybe you need to stretch yourself." James would probably pooh pooh her idea but it was all she could think of. She did want to help.

"Lizzie's right," James said.

"Huh?" Lizzie started. Though she knew that James believed Marina, she still stared at him in surprise. He'd always thought anything esoterical was complete rubbish.

"I need help to develop my psychic ability," Marina said.

"Fast," he added. "Before the next murder."

Marina took out some cotton strips the girls used for waxing, pushed some of Lizzie's beauty products aside and placed them on her dressing table beside the massage bed. Marina looked at her watch. "Do you want to turn the wax on, Lizzie?"

Lizzie nodded. She noticed when she pressed the wax switch her hand was shaking. She felt like she'd downed ten cups of black coffee in a row, her hands were trembling so badly.

"Before Mrs. Saxon died she gave me the number of a clairvoyant. I've made an appointment to see her tonight after we've waxed Peta. Maybe she can help me." She hunched her shoulders. "It's a long shot but I don't know what else to do."

"Wow! A clairvoyant." Now Marina was talking. But she could help too. "I'll search through my magazines for you,"

Lizzie added. "There's bound to be something in them."

"I'll drive you to see the clairvoyant," James said.

"Sheesh!" Lizzie stared at James in surprise. "Haven't you changed in a short time?" She saw him glance at Marina with such warmth, she realized her best pal had made an impact on her brother. More than an impact.

"Marina's something else," James said, looking at her with admiration. "She told me Fabio's innocent. I'm willing to go with that."

There was conviction in her brother's voice. Normally that would have made her happy. Pleased her that he had a crush on Marina. After all, they were the two people she loved most, but she didn't feel happy. Instead her stomach pinched.

What if... It couldn't be Fabs. It just couldn't. Yesterday she'd been insulted by the very suggestion. But the words 'whore' and 'slut' haunted her. She pushed the thought away again. "Told you you'd like Marina living with us."

Marina blushed. She looked at her watch again. "Peta will be here in a few minutes. We're still not ready. I have to finish sorting out the Elvis CDs."

James crossed his arms watching them prepare. "How much do you girls talk to Peta?"

"Heaps. Why?" Lizzie asked.

"This murderer's a man and it's someone who knows what we're doing. At least enough to commit a murder when we don't have an alibi."

"Or not one that will hold up," Marina added.

Lizzie looked from Marina to James. "We always tell Peta

what we're doing. I mean, it's not that I'm a blabbermouth," she added quickly. "She asks." Just like Fabs did.

"Don't," James said. "Don't tell her anything. What do you think, Marina?"

"I think you're right. Someone knows too much about us."

Lizzie felt herself blush. Guilty. She told Fabs everything too. Every little detail. Every mean thing James said about him. James's disapproval of his porno addiction. The way Marina thought she should break up with him because he put her down. A shudder of disquiet passed through her. She remembered Fabio's fury over the protein shakes. He could be scary if he wanted to.

Marina laid out some small spatulas next to the container of hot wax. "When I touch Peta, there's anger there. She hates her mother. I know she always seems in a good mood, but I can feel her emotions through my fingers. It feels...hot...seething. And yet she's gentle, vulnerable. There's violence there too. Remember I heard a scream, Lizzie?"

"Yes, the last time we waxed her. I didn't hear anything though."

"The trouble is I don't know if it's something in the future or something in the past. I'll try touching her when we do this wax."

Lizzie was impressed. "You get a lot from touching her, don't you?"

Marina raised her eyebrows and sighed. "To think I thought I was suffering just from migraines."

"Would you touch Fabs? Sometimes I don't know what

he's thinking. You know with his you-know-what problem." She gave a quick glance at her brother. Would Marina sense if Fabs was the murderer?

"I don't want her touching him," James interjected.

Lizzie stared at her brother.

He reddened under her scrutiny. "She doesn't need to. Sort your own stuff out."

Lizzie ran her fingers through her hair. It was thick with hairspray and needed washing. She had intended to visit Fabs late tonight, but now she decided not to. She looked around her little pink bedroom. It was too full with the massage bed in it as well. She'd never bothered to change the colour from her childhood. It felt safe.

"I'm not going to Tae Kwon Do tonight. I'm going to stick around. Just in case you girls need me."

Lizzie shrugged. "Suit yourself." She was glad her brother was there.

There was a knock on the door.

"That's Peta. Remember," Marina cautioned Lizzie, "not a word about our personal lives."

"Fine with me," Lizzie agreed. How she wished she hadn't told Fabio so much about their personal lives. She shot a guilty glance at her brother. James would be furious if he knew.

Once she'd even checked James's sent email list and shown them to Fabio when they were in the apartment and James wasn't home. She'd thought it was harmless. She'd laughed with Fabio about James's online dating name. Sex Cowboy. But it wasn't funny now. Not at all. It was frightening.

Fabio knew everything about them.

* * * *

Marina walked down the hallway and opened the door for Peta, determined not to give anything away about her private life. She stopped. Peta was wearing a red wig this week, styled in a way that matched her own hair. "Hey, Peta, I like the hairstyle. Should I take it as a compliment?"

Peta held out her hand. "Put it here, honey. I thought of you when I saw this wig. This is a high-five moment."

She slapped Peta's hand. A sensation like a punch exploded in her brain. She gasped and staggered back.

"You okay, honey?" Peta looked at her concerned. "Did you lose your balance?" Peta held out her hand with long manicured red fingernails to steady Marina.

She blinked and stared at Peta. Little stars flickered in front of her eyes. She steadied herself declining her client's help.

James strode down the hallway. "Marina." He put his hand on her arm. "What happened?"

"Nothing." She shook his hand off her arm, trying to ignore his hurt expression. There were too many feelings coming at her all at once now she'd opened herself up. "I just felt dizzy for a moment. I'm fine."

"Honey. You look a bit woozy. A little out of sorts. Are you feeling better now?" Peta asked.

"Yes." Her head cleared now she wasn't touching Peta.

Peta's gaze flicked over James. "What about you, honey? You feeling anyone lately?"

James instantly flushed.

Marina laughed despite what had just happened to her. Peta was dreadful. Funny too.

Peta's gaze flicked from James to Marina. "You looking after this pretty chicken?"

"Course I am," James said.

"You make a nice couple," Peta added perceptively. "Of course if you ever want to cross over to the dark side, give me a call."

James grunted noncommittally. "Excuse me, I've got things to do." He walked into his bedroom and shut the door.

Peta gave a shiver and pursed her lips. "I love it when he grunts. He's such a he-man. I'd just love it if he dragged me to that cave of his."

The thought was so unlikely Marina put her hand over her mouth trying to hide her smile.

"That's better. Now you're smiling, your pretty cheeks have gone all rosy."

"I'm fine now. Come in to Lizzie's bedroom. Everything's set up for you." She let Peta walk in front of her. She was wearing a sparkly blue mini and tight leather jacket. She had sensational legs when she wore stilettos. Long with a tight small ass that would make any girl envious. Although she was sexy, Peta was gentle too. So why did she sense violence when Peta seemed so gentle-hearted? What was going on?

"Lizzie," Peta cried. "You getting any?"

Lizzie's blue eyes widened like a startled rabbit. "Um...um."

Marina suppressed a smile. She knew how hard it was for

Lizzie not to give anything away, especially when confronted with Peta's intimate style of questioning.

"Honey. What kind of answer is that?" Peta stripped off her leather jacket, to reveal a black lace see-through top.

Despite Peta's slender torso, Marina noticed her back was strong and wide like a man's. She suspected she could run fast too with those long legs of hers.

Peta reached behind her back and unclipped her bra, flinging it on the bed, then wriggled out of her skirt to reveal a black leather G-string. "You ready for me, ladies?" Peta climbed on the massage table.

Marina walked over to the stereo and turned it on. The first Elvis CD started playing. "What do you want done today?"

"It's only been a couple of weeks since I last saw you girls so I just need maintenance. I'm prick...ly."

Lizzie giggled.

"My eyebrows seem fine." Peta rubbed her jaw. "I think my face feels a little nasty though."

Marina ran her forefinger expertly along Peta's jaw line. "I can feel a few hairs." Momentarily, she closed her eyes seeing if she could sense anything from Peta. Not a thing. When she opened them Peta was watching her, her gray eyes gleaming as if she could tell what Marina was doing. Marina quickly smoothed some wax on Peta's jaw line and started working. If she could hear the murderer's thoughts, what if the murderer could hear hers?

"So how's work?" Peta asked.

Lizzie shrugged. "The usual."

"More clients being killed?" Peta asked.

Marina glanced at Peta. Talk about getting to the point.

"It's a pity the killer hasn't knocked off that bitch of a boss of yours?"

"What do you mean?" Marina asked. Peta's tone had a spiteful quality about it. She hadn't heard Peta speak that way before.

"Don't start on Natalia. We like her," Lizzie said.

"That's because she didn't accuse you of stealing the nail polish."

Marina remembered that Lizzie had mentioned Peta used to do the massages at the salon. "What happened. Did she fire you?"

"Let's just say we parted ways. Still don't like the bitch. She was never the same to me once I had the implants. Some people are so narrow-minded."

Peta was angry. She could feel it running up her fingers like a current, yet at the same time the feelings were muted. She couldn't get much off her.

"Get every last hair, honey. I need to be smooth. I'm certain the man of my dreams is going to ask me out tonight."

"Is that the same one as last time?" Lizzie asked. She started on Peta's legs with the strip wax.

"Yes. I know he likes me. He's there every time I dance. He even tucks money down my front." Peta giggled. "I'm playing hard to get. Hard being the operative word."

"I bet," Lizzie grinned.

"So what about you?" Peta asked. "Your boyfriend treating

you right?"

"It's off," Lizzie replied. She kept her head down and worked, clearly hoping Peta wouldn't ask her anymore questions.

Marina looked at her surprised. At last count she thought it was still on.

"So you're not getting any."

"No." Lizzie didn't meet his gaze.

A small frown crossed Peta's face. "What about you, Marina? That caveman hunk giving you the bone?"

"Peta!" Lizzie squealed. "James wouldn't shag his flatmate."

Marina flushed. Was she that obvious? How did Peta know what was going on? Even Lizzie hadn't worked it out. She put her hand on Peta's cheek avoiding her penetrating gaze, pretending to feel for stray hairs. She tried to get a feeling off her, something that would give away the underlying feeling of violence. Nothing.

"Look. You've embarrassed her. She's gone all pink." Lizzie laughed.

"She's very quiet. Hello, Marina. Are you still talking to me?" Peta teased.

"Quieten down a bit, you bad girl, while I do your jaw," Marina said firmly. It was hard to stop Peta's inquisitive questions once she got going.

"So what are you girls up to this weekend?" Peta asked, ignoring Marina's command.

"Nothing," Lizzie said.

"Who you seeing now, Lizzie?" he persisted.

"No one," she answered.

"What about you, Marina?"

"Nothing happening in my life," she answered.

Both girls continued waxing as fast as they could to get the job done. Marina finished with Peta's face and moved on to her chest.

Peta rolled her eyes and was silent.

Perhaps she got the hint that they weren't in a talkative mood, Marina thought. Lizzie was doing well. Normally she talked as much as Peta. She'd never seen her so quiet.

"I'm having my penis chopped off next week."

"What?" Both girls stopped work.

"Ha! That got your interest." Peta looked from girl to girl. "Yes. I am becoming a woman. Maybe that cave hunk will take me seriously once I'm a woman. What do you think, Lizzie?"

"[...]..."

Lizzie was speechless. Rare for her.

Peta's eyes narrowed as she stared at Marina. "Unless he's involved with someone else. Do you think he'd fancy me? I'm a redhead like you now."

Marina put her hand on Peta's chest. The intensity of Peta's gaze unnerved her but she left her hand there. *Jealousy*. The word floated in the air. She could feel it coming off Peta.

"Are you jealous, Peta?" Marina asked her.

"Of course I am." Peta raised her eyebrows. "He used to

look at me before you moved in. I liked it. Now he only has eyes for you.”

Marina’s cheeks felt hot. Lizzie was staring from her to Peta.

“No offense, Peta, but James is straight,” Lizzie said gently.

Peta just smiled. “Pity. I had my eye on him first. I won’t give up without a fight to the death. You remember that, Marina!”

Chapter 19

“Evelyn the clairvoyant doesn’t want to see me until her kids are in bed.”

Marina sat next to James who drove his Lexus along Parramatta Road. She wasn’t sure whether it was the drive or what she might be about to find out that left her nauseated, her stomach pinched. She eyed row after row of nondescript red brick houses that lined the busy road as they traveled out to Sydney’s west.

“Check this screen out.” James nodded toward the satellite navigation system on his dashboard. “I’ve put a flag on where we’re going. I programmed the system to show me the fastest way to get there without traffic lights.”

What was it with boys and their toys? Marina glanced at the small screen. An arrow that represented the car moved slowly toward Strathfield, a dignified suburb with a mix of beautiful Victorian houses and apartments. Dark lines marked with names of streets she didn’t recognize surrounded the orange and black flag, which marked their destination. “I suppose that’s useful.”

Seeing as her sense of direction had disappeared with the onset of puberty she was mildly impressed, but she had difficulty garnering enthusiasm in her present mood.

“Yeah. The system even tells you where the petrol stations are, plus the restaurants.” He pressed the screen whilst driving one handed. “Is this seriously cool or what?”

Irritation prickled up her spine. Just drive, she wanted to

say.

"There's the greatest DVD player in the back."

James looked like he was about to launch into a further explanation, but she jumped in first. Marina found the thought of a DVD in a car as interesting as James's Xbox. One glance was enough. She changed the subject. "I have to warn you, this woman I'm going to see sounds a bit different. Weird even. She said she saw my father."

"What? Like a vision or something?" James gave her a quick glance, one eyebrow raised.

She noticed a wary expression cross his features. "No. In spirit form. Dad's dead."

James screwed up his face in disbelief. "Huh? Dead people. Man." He tapped the steering wheel with one hand. His mouth dropped open and his eyebrows rose at the same time painting a mixture of disbelief and confusion.

"Evelyn named my father and described him right. She said he has an urgent message for me."

"Do you really believe in this? I mean, I know Lizzie does, but she believes in whatever she reads in those magazines of hers. Meditation, visualization, vibrations, crystals. Blah, blah, blah."

She sighed. Did she believe? She was desperate. A sharp pain jabbed at her stomach. She rubbed her tummy to no avail. She'd always wanted to lose a few pounds but had found it hard. Now her clothes were loose. "It's a big leap of faith. I just hope Evelyn can help me."

Six weeks ago she had been the one who couldn't cope

with anything different. Her cross-dressing groom had started the change. Now searching for answers to things she didn't understand consumed her life. "So much has happened since I moved here. I guess there's a lot going on in the world that I don't know about."

"Yeah. Fine," James said, off-hand. "I don't believe in clairvoyants though. I'm just doing this to support you. How can someone possibly know my future? It's ridiculous. I make my own decisions."

But was the world that simple? She used to think it was when she lived in her small town. She'd had her whole life mapped out. First she had established her business, then planned her marriage and hoped to have two children. The planning seemed farcical now.

Marina rubbed her lips together. They were dry and chapped. "You believe in me, don't you? I see what's going to happen in the future. I mean with the murders. How do you explain me?"

James reached over and gave her hand a quick squeeze. The heat of his fingers and sturdy grip warmed her ice-cold hand. "Yeah, well, I know you. You're the real thing. I saw the evidence myself. You gave me a real shock when you saw I was thinking about having sex with you."

"That I didn't need to be psychic for."

James laughed.

She reached over and massaged his shoulder. The muscles under her fingers were tense, bunched with knots.

Their light banter kept them going, she realized. Buried the fear like crust over a volcano.

"Let's meet Evelyn and see what she has to say. I know there are lots of charlatans out there but she might be for real," she said.

"Guess we have to. I mean she's probably a total waste of space, but we've run out of options. Somehow you have to get a fix on this guy before he strikes again. We know he can get into your head. Maybe Evelyn can show you a way to get into his."

"Even though you don't want to believe in this stuff."

"That's right." James grinned. "Guess I'm feeling desperate too. I mean, I know I can protect you girls when I'm there, but what if I'm not?"

Marina put her head back on the headrest. If James weren't with her, she'd have to rely on her own resources. She shivered. She took a deep breath to steady herself. Would her strength match that of a murderer? Fear pressed inside her like a fist to the heart. She gazed out of the window. It was dark but she could see Wentworth Road where they had to turn off.

James turned into Wentworth Road and then into a street lined with bungalows. He pulled over and parked. Winding down the window, he leaned out squinting. "Evelyn's house should be the house across the road." He pointed out a run-down, red-brick home with loose gutters.

Marina wasn't sure what she expected. Certainly not a wreck of a house in a suburb where people took care of their houses. She got out of the car, waited for James, and crossed the road with him. The garden was wild and dense with trees that needed clipping. It looked like no one had mowed the

lawn for months. The gate was swinging partly off its hinges. There was a yellow toy truck on the path turned on its side. She bent and scooped it up.

"What a mess," James said, looking around him. "You sure you got the address right?"

Tucking the truck under her arm, Marina pulled out the piece of paper where she'd written the address. "Yes. This is it, all right."

The porch light was on.

Marina glanced at James. She could see the concern in his eyes as if he expected attackers to jump out and mug them at any moment. "We're only visiting a clairvoyant," she whispered. "Calm down."

"I'm calm," he said. His eyes darted from side to side.

She knocked on the door. Footsteps and a sharp cry of a child signaled Evelyn's approach.

A woman about thirty opened the door. She had dark hair roughly tied back in a ponytail. Her skin was sallow and she looked like she could do with a moisturizing facial. There were shadows under her eyes as if she hadn't slept well. In fact, a whole makeover would do.

"Hi. I'm Marina." She handed Evelyn the toy truck. She motioned to James. "This is James."

"I'm Evelyn." She placed the truck on the wooden floor boards near some other scattered toys. "Please come in quietly. I've just put the kids to bed so try not to make too much noise."

Marina looked around. Children's clothes were scattered

on the floor. It looked as if Evelyn was allergic to housework. The house smelled of cabbage.

"I haven't had time to tidy." Evelyn clearly noticed her gaze. Marina hoped she didn't appear rude.

Evelyn turned to James. "You can sit on the lounge and wait. There are some car magazines that might interest you."

James's green eyes opened wide with surprise. "Cool. Did you read my mind?"

Marina noticed his hopeful expression. She guessed he needed an answer as much as she did.

Evelyn scratched her hand. "Actually, they're my husband's. He likes fast cars. Can't afford to buy one so he settles for the magazines."

"Right." James, deflated, sat on the lounge.

"Come this way." Evelyn motioned Marina to follow her into a converted garage, which she had set up as her study. She closed the door behind her.

Marina looked around her. The room was Spartan with unclad brick walls and concrete on the floor. A desk with a computer sitting on it sat in the corner. Three spindle-back chairs were placed in a triangle facing each other.

Evelyn signaled Marina to sit. "Have a seat opposite."

Marina sat.

Evelyn sat too, her hands on her lap. Suddenly she turned looking at the closed door. "Will you just go away? How many times have I told you not to bother me when I'm working? Of course they didn't eat their vegetables. I told you the kids don't like cabbage."

Marina tensed. "Who? What?" There was no one in the room except for her and Evelyn.

"Sorry. My mother-in-law died some time ago and now she's driving me nuts. She can't stand the house in such a mess, but I'm a working mother. What does she expect?"

Evelyn glared at the doorway. She turned back to Marina. "Good. She's gone. She'll be back though. Worse luck. I haven't learned to block her out. Couldn't manage to do it when she was alive either."

If Evelyn couldn't block out the unwanted, what hope did she have? The pin-prick of hope that stayed in her heart flickered like a candle in a draft.

Evelyn settled back in her chair. She seemed to be staring at a space over Marina's right shoulder. "Your father, William Henry, is here. There are others here, too, but William won't let them speak." She screwed up her face. "I really hate it when one of the spirits gets bossy."

"Dad?" Marina looked around her. She hadn't given Evelyn her surname, had she? She couldn't remember. Had Evelyn plucked it out of the air? A surge of emotion set her heart beating. "Why does he need to contact me?" Did she believe in this? It was too wacky and yet, she was the one who had contacted Evelyn.

Evelyn frowned. "All right, old man. I'll get on with it." She sighed dramatically. "Your father says you're in danger. So is the man sitting outside who loves you."

Marina reeled. Acid filled her stomach. She clenched it. Talk about a hard start. "Are you sure?" She stared down at her fingernails, noticing they were looking ragged. She fought

an urge to bite her thumbnail, a habit she'd given up years ago.

Evelyn looked her up and down, her expression concerned. "Sorry. Thought I'd throw in that love bit. Don't like to be the bearer of bad tidings." She shook her head, her expression grim. "This isn't going to be an easy reading."

"Go on," Marina urged. "I know I'm in danger. I guess I didn't expect you to pick up on it so clearly."

Evelyn nodded. The expression in her eyes sympathetic. She swayed slightly as she concentrated on a spot just above Marina's head. "There's an evil man in your life. A man who is not what he seems. He's dark but he wears a mask." She gestured in front of her face with a flurry of her hands.

"What do you mean a mask?"

"A mask of civility. Of humanity." Evelyn squinted and leaned forward so that she was closer to Marina but she continued to look past her. "Your father is holding up a photograph of a woman." She shook her head. "This is very strange. I haven't come across this before." She beckoned to the air with her hand.

"Huh?" Marina urged.

"Wait." She held up one hand to Marina. "Bring it closer, old man. I can't see that far away."

Something, like the barest wisp of air brushed past Marina's arm. Every hair stood on end. Yet she wasn't frightened. She watched as Evelyn looked from the unseen to her.

"You have a double." Her eyes narrowed as she looked

from Marina to something in front of her. "Why did you throw the picture away? That was a gift delivered to you by your father. Your father says he worked very hard to get it to you."

Marina gasped. She put her hand to her mouth. This reading was real. Too real. "Dad's talking about the photo of the nude model?" Her throat was hoarse as she remembered the terror the photo held for her.

"The one who looks like you," Evelyn continued, "has brought you great trouble that is not of your making." She shook her head as if to clear a trance. "Jeez, your father speaks like someone from the Bible."

Despite her fear, Marina smiled and nodded. "Dad was very religious. I loved him. Still do, but the preaching got my goat." She'd become sick of being told how to live her own life. Had even thought about moving away until she'd become engaged.

"I can understand that." Evelyn flicked her fingers in the air as if shooing someone away. "Back off a bit. I'll get on with it." She turned to Marina. "This man's worse than my kids. He's so pushy. He said it's good that you're wearing your Talisman that Lizzie made you. It took him a long time to get through to her." Evelyn frowned. "What do you expect, old man? Lizzie can't hear or see spirits. Gosh he's very pompous your old man. Opinionated. Looks down on people and he's worse now he's up there. Like my mother-in-law."

"Dad always meant well. He just always thought he knew better than everyone else. I guess he thought he was saving souls for Jesus when he preached." It was absurd that she was sticking up for her dead father, but then, this whole situation

was absurd.

"No wonder you moved away. I can't stand it when people tell me how to live my life."

"But I didn't move away because of Dad." But she'd thought about it sometimes, even though moving away had conflicted with the safe plans she'd made for herself in Blackheath. Her plans seemed so limited now.

"Honey, you weren't meant to stay in a small town. It's not your destiny. Why do you think your guides sent you that cross-dresser? They put a bomb under you to make you move."

"Huh? You mean things are planned?"

"Of course they are. It was a life lesson. You have amazing powers, but you could never have developed them there. You couldn't grow in that small town. Not with your old man standing over you preaching all day. You would have broken out from that staid old life sometime."

"I loved my dad." But boy he could go on about right and wrong. Although she was protective of her father, she knew Evelyn was right. She'd learned heaps since coming to live in the city. She enjoyed the freedom and the diversity of people. She liked doing Brazilians, a job she was sure her father would have disapproved of. She could never settle for country life now. Maybe she wasn't as conventional as she thought.

Marina watched the expression on Evelyn's face darken. "I'm getting to it, old man."

The shadows around Evelyn intensified. Her thick black eyebrows raised in surprise. They made Marina itch to get out her tweezers.

"This woman in the photo is the reason you're having this trouble. The deaths are linked to her. There's a young blond woman in terrible danger. She's next." Evelyn dropped her head in her hands and groaned. "I don't want to deal with this. Now I know why you wouldn't give me any details before she came. You knew I wouldn't want to do this. This is horrid. Horrid!"

"Please, Evelyn," Marina urged.

Evelyn raised her head and stared hard at Marina. She let out a dramatic sigh. "Murder. You have murder all around you."

Marina's heart palpitated with fear. Her hands became fists. She leaned forward determined to face this though her stomach was churning. "What's going to happen? Who's going to be murdered? I have to help them."

Evelyn looked away as if she couldn't meet Marina's gaze. "No!" She crossed her arms in front of herself. "I don't want to do this. It's not ethical to terrify clients. No, I'm not preparing her. You do some work for a change. Appear in her dreams and tell her yourself. It's easy for you, fluffing around in the after-life with your pot belly. It is a pot belly."

"Evelyn. I have to know this." Marina interrupted what seemed to be a fight. She didn't want to go there either. She wanted to run. But buried underneath her fear she found something that surprised her. Strength. She would not let this man beat her.

Evelyn fixed her dark gaze on Marina. "You know what's going to happen. You've seen it with your own eyes. You're psychic yourself. You always have been but you ignore it. You shimmer with psychic energy."

"I didn't know I was psychic."

Evelyn narrowed her eyes and leaned forward. "That's because you tend to ignore things you don't want to know. You can't now, though. Not now your own life is in danger. Your inner power is bursting to save you. You can't shut the things you don't like in a box. Mind you, I stuck my mother-in-law in a box. Pity she didn't stay there." Evelyn raised her eyes heavenward.

Marina thought about what Evelyn had told her. "I...I guess I always knew things about people. I would think things and they'd happen. I always knew what my flatmate Lizzie was thinking when we were at summer camp together. I didn't think I was psychic though. I just thought it was coincidence. Intuition."

"There you go, shutting stuff out again. It's more than coincidence. Your strength lies through your sense of touch. Perhaps it has developed that way because of your job. You're hands-on all day. Your power has developed over time." She pointed her finger at Marina. "Now you need it."

Marina shivered. Her throat was dry with fear. "I'm not prepared. I don't know enough. I need you to help me. Please, Evelyn."

Evelyn looked at her for a long while as if considering whether to tell her or not. She bit her fingernail and picked off a bit of loose nail, flicking it to the floor. "I don't like to be the giver of bad news. I never tell people that they've got cancer or that they don't have long to live. I just tell them to go to their doctor and check for the cancer. Do you see what I'm trying to tell you?"

"You're not trying to tell me I've got cancer, are you?"

Evelyn shook her head. "You're in excellent health."

"You mean, the murderer plans to kill me too." Marina spoke in a whisper.

Evelyn nodded. Her lips were pinched shut.

"Who is it?" Marina leaned so far forward she nearly fell off her chair.

"I can't see." Evelyn's voice rose with frustration. "I told you before. His face is masked. There's a swirling cloud where his face is. He has the ability to change his character because he is two people. One that is caring and kind. Gentle. Sweet." Her voice dropped with disgust. "The other a monster."

Evelyn rubbed the area between her eyebrows, massaging the crease formed by her frown. Her shoulders slumped. "It's the murders and suicides. I hate getting them," she said wearily. "I never know how to handle it." There was a mixture of fear and sorrow in her eyes as she stared at Marina. "Your father is taking me into a future I don't want to see. I don't want to follow him there." Evelyn gasped. "You poor thing."

The breath froze in Marina's throat. Instinctively, she knew if she absorbed Evelyn's sorrow for her, it would make her weak. There would be nothing but fear and death waiting for her. She couldn't afford to feel sorry for herself. She needed every ounce of strength she could summon.

"This is hard," Marina said, "for both of us. But I need to know everything you can tell me. I have to arm myself with weapons I don't know how to use. You're my only hope."

"I'll teach you how to use your gift. Just a few things. You

don't have much time." Evelyn held out her hand. "Come. Learn to use your gift."

With determination, Marina walked over, sat on the chair next to Evelyn and took her hand. She could feel Evelyn's exhaustion through her touch. A seeping, draining, bone-weary tiredness.

The clairvoyant squeezed her fingers. Keeping hold of Marina's hand she closed her eyes. "You're brave. Special." Evelyn's voice dropped to a hoarse whisper. "When he takes you, you'll fight. You won't let the terror consume you like the others."

Perspiration broke out on Marina's brow. Terror! She had to fight the terror. Deep down inside her, she already knew what Evelyn was saying was true. At some point in her future she would meet the murderer face to face. It would be her turn to feel the rope tighten. She took a deep steadying breath but it didn't work. Her heart was hammering with fear. Marina placed her other hand over Evelyn's. The clairvoyant's fingers were thin and cold.

"Keep going, Evelyn. I have to hear this."

Evelyn swayed from side to side. She gasped. Her whole body jolted but she didn't look up. Instead her head slumped forward so that her black hair draped her face. Marina sensed this was taking more out of her than she could afford to give.

"You know this man, Poppet." Evelyn's voice had deepened so that it no longer sounded like her own.

"Huh?" Marina's eyes widened in surprise at the use of the name Poppet. She leaned forward and nearly fell out of her chair. Only her tight grip on Evelyn's hand stopped her. This

was the pet name her father always used!

Evelyn's hand started to tremble. "You're trying to like him. Don't be fooled. You're too trusting. My fault, Poppet. I taught you only to look for the good in people. Use your sense of touch to find the truth."

"Dad! Help me. Who is it?" She could feel his strength and love flowing past Evelyn into her. Tears rolled down her cheeks for him.

Evelyn's eyes flickered open. She pulled away from Marina.

"Jeez, I hate that," she said, and trembled. "Your father jumped into my skin. He didn't have the right to do that." Indignation crossed her features.

"Don't stop," Marina begged.

"I never gave him permission to get inside my skin." Evelyn glared at her. "They're supposed to ask permission, not just jump right in there. The universe does have rules." She rubbed her arms and legs. "Do you have any idea what it's like to try and clean yourself from inside out?"

Evelyn looked more sallow than she had when she'd started. Marina made a promise to herself if she ever got through this she'd come over and give Evelyn a free beauty makeover.

"I'm sorry Dad did that. But this is important. Please, Evelyn. You told me to use my sense of touch. What exactly do you mean?"

Evelyn gave her a querying look. "But you already know that."

"I feel things when I touch people. Like what's going on in their head."

"Stop being so timid with your gift. This could save your life. Look." She took Marina's hand. "What do you feel? Concentrate! It's not going to jump out at you. You have to open your third eye to receive my messages."

Marina closed her eyes. At first she couldn't feel anything except Evelyn's bony fingers. Her skin needed some hand cream too.

"Take off that Talisman you're wearing for a moment. It's filtering the messages I'm sending. I can't get enough through to you."

Marina untied the pink ribbon Lizzie had used for the Talisman and put it on the floor. She reached over and took Evelyn's hand again.

"Come on, Marina, I'm letting it all hang out for you."

"Impatience," she said.

"You got it. Now what else?"

"You're worried."

"Well, duh. What mother isn't?"

She ignored Evelyn's caustic comments. As she held Evelyn's hand she could feel her concerns flowing into her hand and up her arm. There was deep sorrow in Evelyn. Love too. A vision came to her. "I can see someone." She glanced at Evelyn.

"Don't break your concentration," she ordered. "You want to get that man who's terrorizing you, you have to learn how to do this."

Marina closed her eyes again. "He's lying on his hospital bed. He's young. Not well. Argh! I feel pain throughout my body. Terrible pain." The word came to her. Jarring her with its unwelcome content.

Her eyes flicked open and she stared at Evelyn.

Evelyn released her hand. "Now you see why I'm so drained," she said. "Why everything is such a mess."

Marina nodded. "Your husband's in the hospital."

Evelyn's mouth became pinched again. "People think it's great being a clairvoyant. Personally, I think it sucks. How do you feel?"

Marina shook herself, mentally assessed her body parts as if checking for a broken bone. "Wrung out. It's quite strange. I feel like I'm carrying your burden. I didn't like it."

Evelyn gave a small hollow laugh. "It's not yours to carry. Goodness knows you got loaded up with more than your own share."

With a deeper understanding she nodded at Evelyn. "Now I know why you didn't like doing my reading. Why you didn't want to go where my father is taking you. When I sensed your troubles, it felt like it was happening to me."

Evelyn only stared at her. "You can ask to release others' pain. It's not your pain. You don't have to carry it. Remember that. You tend to take on others' problems as if they're your own. Concentrate on your own business. You need to."

Marina looked at her watch. She saw she had been with Evelyn for an hour. James would be wondering what was happening.

She was about to get to her feet when Evelyn reached out and caught her arm. "There's one other thing you should know. It isn't always convenient to touch someone in order to read them."

Marina nodded. "Fair enough. It's not like I want to hold the murderer's hand to read his vibrations."

Evelyn nodded and pushed her dark hair behind her ear. "But if you have something special like a piece of their jewelry, you can get the vibrations off that. They need to have worn it for some time."

"I've seen clairvoyants do that. I went to a psychic fair once.
"

Evelyn leaned close, her voice a tense whisper. "Don't try and get vibrations straight from the murderer. If he's that close, you'll be fighting for your life."

Chapter 20

Lizzie sat in the living room, examining her book on magic. Her fingers twitched with each turn of the page. There had to be some way of turning off Fabio's devotion to her. There just had to be. The telephone rang, closely followed by her mobile phone. Her head shot up as the combined noise stabbed at her nerves. She turned in frustration and glared at the telephone in the hallway. This was the fifteenth time Fabio had called. She glanced at her watch. It was late. James and Marina had been gone for hours.

When the phones stopped she continued to flick through the pages of her book. There were plenty of spells for falling in love, she thought, as she studied one she'd used. She'd secretly been trying them out on Fabio—grinding up rose petals, along with her and Fabio's hair clippings. Fabio had been drinking them in his energy drinks for the past month. Once he'd even complained one of his drinks was gritty. They'd worked. Too well!

Lizzie sighed. She hadn't found a spell to stop Fabio's you-know-what addiction. It was worse than ever. Only this week she'd found a stack of porn and downloads of big-breasted women from online dating sites hidden under a corner of the carpet in his studio. Laid flat, she would barely have noticed the difference in the rise of the carpet, if it hadn't been for the slight edge of a page sticking out. Worse still, she'd found more pornographic printouts of the model who looked like Marina from another time that he hadn't even told her about.

Gnawing on her knuckle, she turned the pages of her book. She thought about the offensive words Fabio had used when they were shagging. What if she were responsible for what was happening to Marina and James? Fabio knew they were out tonight. He always knew what they were doing and it was all her fault. The phone started ringing again. Lizzie flinched and attacked the pages of her book searching for an answer. How could she make him go away? There had to be a love reversal spell.

Since James's attack on him, Fabio wanted her to move out and go live with him. He had so many plans, all of them involving her. She swallowed and rubbed at her throat. Fabio was suffocating her. A chill worked its way up her spine. She twisted her nose ring back and forth, her mind darting like a small bird in a cage.

The phone rang and rang. Lizzie crept over and stared at it. "Why don't you get lost?" she said, through gritted teeth. She pulled it out from the wall socket, then rushed into her bedroom and turned off her mobile. Slapping the pink mobile phone down next to the telephone, she walked back to the living room and picked up her book. There. She'd silenced him. This time she really did want to break up with Fabio and no amount of him pestering her was going to change her mind.

She picked up her book again. There had to be something that would do the trick. She turned the pages finally stopping on a spell that seemed like it might work. "Vanquishing mortals," she read. Sounded good to her though she wasn't sure what vanquishing meant. Her nose wrinkled in disgust as she read the ingredients. The spell required human blood.

"Yuck." Still, it was only a drop. She could manage that. She kept reading, ticking off the ingredients in her mind. Luckily she had some of Fabio's hair shavings left in a little heart-shaped envelope she kept under her pillow.

Walking into her bedroom, she located the sewing kit her mother had bought her when she was eight years old. At the time she had been thrilled with the pink padded basket and its contents. That was, until she'd overheard her father tell her mother it was a good thing she'd bought it, because Lizzie might as well learn to sew, since she was too stupid to do anything else.

She opened the basket and pulled out a needle. Grabbing the envelope with Fabio's hair and a small bowl, she set up to do her spell on the kitchen table.

Closing her eyes she jabbed the needle into her finger. It embedded more deeply than she intended. "Shit! That hurt." The iron-tasting blood made her grimace as she sucked on her finger. "Yuck." Holding her finger over the bowl, she shook in a drop of blood. "Damn it. Stop bleeding," she muttered. More blood welled like a pearl on her fingertip and dribbled down her finger.

Picking up the envelope, she ripped the seal and poured in the remaining hair, leaving a blob of blood on the paper. Blond and dark hairy bits floated into the bowl.

She hurried back to the sitting room to locate her book because she couldn't remember the incantation. Several drops of blood dripped from her finger onto the cream carpet. "Shit," she said, sucking her finger. "Stop bleeding, damn you." She rubbed at them with her toe making a smear on the

carpet.

She was just about to pick up her book when she heard a heavy footfall on the landing. Good, sounded like James was home seeing as he walked like an elephant. She couldn't hear Marina but then she was light on her feet. About time they arrived home. She was dying to find out what the clairvoyant had told them.

She skipped over and opened the door. Her face froze with disappointment. This was the last person she wanted to see right now. "What are you doing here?" she said.

* * * *

James pushed his keys into the lock and opened the door to the apartment. He stepped back to let Marina in before him. "You home, Lizzie?" he called. Pushing the door closed, his hand touched something sticky on the doorknob. Absentmindedly, he wiped it on the side of his t-shirt.

"I thought Lizzie would stay in for us. She loves this clairvoyant stuff," Marina said.

"I told her not to go out unless she told me first," James said.

Marina pushed Lizzie's bedroom door open. "She's not here. She must have gone to stay the night with Fabio, though something doesn't feel right. I thought she said she wasn't going out tonight. Fabio probably bugged her until she changed her mind."

"I think she likes the attention," James said. "Personally, I hope she will dump the dumb-ass." He stopped when Marina scowled at him. "I was just going to add that Lizzie's choice is Lizzie's choice and I have to put up with it."

Marina picked at the skin on her bottom lip until it started to bleed. She licked at it with the pink tip of her tongue. "I'm worried."

"You getting something? A message?"

She frowned, rubbing at the crease between her eyebrows with her forefinger smoothing it away. "It's late to call Lizzie, but I'd like her to ask Fabio the URL for that eighties porn photo. I should have written down the URL before I threw the photo out."

"Why do you want to do that?"

She shuddered. "I never wanted to see it again after I had that strange reaction. The trouble is Evelyn said that the photo was the link to the murderer. That's the reason all this is happening. So we might as well start there. Maybe I could get some feelings off it. A vision. Something I could recognize."

He glanced at his watch. "It's late. Why don't we go to bed and look into it tomorrow?"

She shook her head. Her lips pinched together with determination. "I want to get onto this. Maybe we can check out some porn sites and find the picture ourselves. Something is wrong. I can feel it."

"I guess we could do that." He slipped one arm around her waist and pulled her to him. "If a beautiful hazel-eyed redhead wants me to look at porn, she's going to have to cope with the consequences." He bent and kissed her full on the lips. "We could Google porn and see what comes up."

Marina groaned. "I hope that wasn't your idea of a joke."

He grinned at her. "Come into my bedroom and sit on my

knee.” He walked into his room, sat at his desk and turned on his computer. He beckoned her over. “Let’s see what we can find.”

Marina followed him in, pulled up a chair and sat next to him. “I’m not sitting on your knee to look up porn sites. We won’t get any work done. Anyway, I’m going to have to concentrate. Touching you will distract me.”

“Sounds good to me.” He reached over and kissed her on the side of her neck.

“Stop it. I have to concentrate.” She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “I’m not looking forward to this. That photo was like living through a death. Literally.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll be with you this time. I won’t let anything bad happen to you.”

Marina pulled her hair back from her face and tucked it behind her ears. Her auburn locks bounced back immediately.

“Evelyn said my psychic strength comes from touch. Some psychics are telepathic, others get a feeling, some see the dead like her.”

“Weird.” James shook his head.

“What?” she snapped at him.

“Nothing.”

“We’ve got a murderer to catch, James. Will you stop looking at my breasts? Don’t you realize how urgent this is? Evelyn said a young blond girl is going to be next.”

He sighed. “Then I’m glad Lizzie’s with Fabio seeing as you’re convinced he’s not the man we’re looking for.” James turned to the computer and launched the browser

Marina twisted her hair into a bun. She rested her elbows on the computer desk. "The trouble is I'm so new at all this. I can't develop my psychic ability overnight. Evelyn said to practice by touch."

"Do you want to hold my hand and see what I'm thinking like you did last time?" He tried to keep his expression serious.

"No. You'll just be thinking about sex. I can tell by the hopeful expression you get on your face from the moment you see we've got the apartment to ourselves."

"Hmph. Might as well get to work." He typed porn into the Google site. Leaning back in his chair he expelled a loud sigh. "There's only several hundred thousand sites here. We could be up all night." He looked downwards. "Something else could be up all night getting nowhere."

"James!"

"What?"

"Just get on with it."

Several hours later, Marina sat resting her hand on her chin, looking at photos of naked women. "We're never going to find the site," she said wearily. "Fabio must have spent hours looking these things up. No wonder Lizzie gets so mad at him."

James shifted uncomfortably. "Maybe we should just go to bed. Snuggle up together. You can ask Lizzie tomorrow for the URL."

She frowned. "I can't sleep." She stood, paced up and down his bedroom. "Something's not right. I can sense it. This

apartment doesn't feel like it did when we left. The happiness is gone." She picked at the rough spot on her lips. "If I had that photo I could touch it and see if I get any feelings about the murderer."

James stood and stretched. "I'm beat. Come to bed, Marina." He walked over and massaged her shoulders.

"Don't." She shrugged him off.

His stomach growled. "Do you want something to eat?"

She shook her head. "I'm not hungry."

"Your clothes are looking a bit loose."

She glared at him.

"Okay." He took a step back. "Just asking." James, looking disgruntled, walked into the hallway.

"Hey, Marina. Did you cut yourself?"

She rushed into the hall. "No."

He pointed to a reddish brown spot smeared into the carpet. It wasn't big about the size of a ten cent piece but it stood out on the cream carpet. "Looks like blood."

Immediately, Marina bent and touched it. She stroked the area with the tips of her fingers. Her lips parted as her expression became still with concentration. "It's Lizzie's blood," she said slowly.

Still squatting, she stared into space until her hazel eyes became clouded. She continued to stroke the area like she would the tip of a kitten's nose.

"What are you getting?"

Marina's hand started to tremble. "No!" She jerked her hand away.

“What?”

She stood and clutched his arm. “Lizzie’s in trouble. I feel fear.” Her fingernails dug into his arms.

“Fabio,” he muttered. “I never liked that bastard she’s with.”

“God, James, we have to do something.”

His whole body tensed. He looked around as if trying to work out if something had changed in the apartment. He glanced over to the telephone and charged over to it. “Why is the phone disconnected?” He bent and plugged the connection back in. “Look, Lizzie’s mobile is here too.”

Marina stared at him her eyes wide. She snatched the mobile off the telephone table. James watched as she concentrated. Her hand trembled. She frowned. Her eyes narrowed with concern. “Fabio... fear... Lizzie’s...afraid of him. I’ve never picked up fear before.” Her gaze met his. “Oh my God, James. What if I’ve got it all wrong? What if the murderer is Fabio? I’m so new at all this.”

Marina bent and touched the blood again. Her forefinger stroking the small patch. “I need a vision.”

James surged into action. He snatched Lizzie’s mobile from Marina. “I’m going to call Fabio.” He turned on Lizzie’s mobile phone and scrolled through the numbers until he found the one he was seeking. He jabbed at the call button. His free hand balled into a fist. “Fabio’s mobile is turned off. Bastard.”

Marina sat on the carpet in the hall and placed her whole hand on the blood spot. She made a strange choking sound. Her chest heaved as she sucked air in and out.

“Lizzie’s terrified.” She shuddered, slapping her hand over

her chest. "I can't bear it. I need a vision so I can help her. I have to know where she is." Her voice rose in a wail.

"Hell. I knew all along that you were wrong about Fabio. The guy is an obsessive, masturbating sicko. I'm going over to Fabio's. I know he's got Lizzie. I'll smash down his door if I have to."

Marina focused on feeling for Lizzie. She was close. She knew it. "Come on, Lizzie, speak to me." Her hand hovered over the blood spot, occasionally resting on it. She started to sway. "I need a vision, Lizzie. Send me a vision. Show me where you are."

James snatched up his car keys from the hook near the door. "I'm going to deal with this my way." He put his hand on the door knob, then jerked it back. "There's more blood on the door handle."

He turned to Marina.

"Stay near the phone. I'll call you as soon as I'm at Fabio's." He swept open the door. "Just what we don't need."

Marina glanced up, her trance broken by the interruption.

"Going somewhere?" asked Detective Davis. His flinty cop eyes flicked over James making him feel instantly uncomfortable.

"This isn't a good time. I'm going out." He made to move through the doorway but Detective Davis didn't budge.

"That's too bad because we need you to come down to the station to answer some questions." Detective Herbert stood just behind Detective Davis, so that their combined bulk filled the doorway.

"I'll come in the morning with my lawyer," James said.

Detective Davis made no attempt to move out of his way, instead he looked down the hall and saw Marina sitting on the carpet.

She stared back at them but made no attempt to rise. She knew she must look odd sitting there, her hand still covering the blood spot.

"Strange place to sit," Detective Davis commented.

Marina's mouth opened but she didn't say anything. Panic sat in her chest. She could feel her heart thumping. Lizzie's fear was her fear.

James walked over and pulled her to her feet. She felt woozy and he supported her with his arms as she tried to get her equilibrium back.

The moment she stood, she saw Detective Davis's gaze dart to the blood spot.

He walked in and bent to examine it. "Blood," he said to his partner.

Detective Herbert nodded. "Too fresh for the latest one." He placed his hands on his hips. "We want you to come down to the station to answer questions regarding the murder of Ms. Serena Porter."

Marina gasped. She felt James's body stiffen beside hers.

"I don't know who she is," he said.

"Your girlfriend does, don't you, Ms. Henry?" nodded Detective Herbert. "It's another one of your clients. The way you're going, you won't have any left."

"Not Serena." Her fingernails dug into James's arm. His

grip tightened protectively around her.

Marina didn't miss the sharp glance that passed between the two detectives.

"Marina has nothing to do with this. Nor do I," James said.

But the cops would keep searching until they found something to pin on them, Marina thought. That was the way it had been so far.

"Serena said she was going back to Melbourne on the weekend," Marina said, finding her voice. "She was only here on business. I told her not to date. I told her there was a psychopath on the loose." Her voice was high with distress, it barely sounded like her own.

James's grip tightened protectively around her waist.

"Seems like she didn't take your advice. A fishing boat pulled her out of the Harbour this morning. Makes it hard to determine the time of death when they've been fish bait. Forensics are working on it," Detective Herbert said, his speech bullet-like.

Marina gasped. "I can't bear it."

Detective Davis said to James, "While they're doing that, we want you down at the station. We want to know your exact movements for the past five days."

"This is harassment. You've already interviewed my boss this week. You know what I've been doing. I've been in Canberra at a trade fair and I can prove it."

"So was Serena Porter. We've checked the hotel records. She was staying at the same hotel as you. Nice way to get to know someone. Make them feel safe. When did you contact

her again?"

Detective Herbert took a menacing step forward.

"I told you. I've never met her." James's stomach muscles tensed. He thrust his chin forward. "You're not pinning this on me."

"We've accounted for Monday and Tuesday of this week," Detective Herbert said. "We know Ms. Porter was last seen alive on Wednesday when she had her appointment with Ms. Henry here. The day you returned back from Canberra."

"My sister's missing. I have to deal with that right now."

Detective Davis looked James over before settling on his waist. "There's blood on your t-shirt."

"Huh?" More blood? He looked down.

Marina pulled away from him.

"There is blood," she said. "Look James. There." She pulled at the side of his t-shirt.

He looked down to see a smear of blood. "How'd that get there?" He checked the rest of his clothing. "It's nowhere else."

Marina saw the accusation in Detective Davis's gaze.

"Mind if we look around?" Detective Davis asked. He didn't wait for a response, just pushed past James and Marina, looked left into Lizzie's bedroom, then walked into the small kitchen.

Detective Herbert checked the living room and James's bedroom.

Marina was about to tell them they were wasting their time, when Detective Davis reentered the narrow hallway from the kitchen, looked past them and said to his partner, "I think you

should take a look at this.”

James and Marina stepped aside as Detective Herbert strode past. They moved in behind the police to see what he had found.

“More spells?” Detective Herbert said to Marina.

“I don’t do spells. That’s Lizzie’s thing.”

James groaned. “What has Lizzie been up to?”

Whatever it was, Marina was certain it was going to look bad in front of the cops. She entered the kitchen, squeezing in behind the police trying to look around Detective Herbert’s shoulder. She saw drops of blood on the Formica kitchen table alongside Lizzie’s spell book.

“Not good,” James groaned. He shook his head as Detective Herbert slipped on a pair of plastic gloves and picked a blood-smeared envelope and folded it into a plastic bag. “Can you explain this?”

“No,” James said.

“Let me see,” Marina said.

James moved back into the hall to let her see better.

Both detectives stepped aside and Marina slipped around them. “Lizzie’s spell book is open. Vanquishing mortals,” she read out loud. “Look, the spell requires human blood. Why would she be doing that?”

“It’s just another of Lizzie’s dumb spells. Lizzie does these nutty things. All the time. If it’s not spells, it’s visualization. If it’s not visualization, it’s something else. It’s harmless.”

“Women are being murdered in this city. Strangled and dumped in the Harbour. There’s nothing harmless about that,”

Detective Davis said. He reached out and grabbed James by the arm. "You're coming with us."

"Are you arresting me? Aren't you supposed to be reading me my rights or something?"

"Detaining you. We don't have enough on you to arrest you," Detective Davis said.

"Not yet," Detective Herbert joined in. "But we have our boss on us night and day to find this killer and that's what we're going to do." He reached out and grabbed James too. Marina saw his hand bite into James's forearm. He nodded to his partner. "The waxer and the weirdo. Nice couple."

"All we have to do is find the witch and we'll have this case stitched up," Detective Davis said.

"Are you crazy?" Marina cried. "This is not the man you want."

"I suppose you know who it is then?" Detective Herbert rounded on her.

"Of course I don't," she shouted. She glared at him. "And if you were any good at your job you'd be helping us find Lizzie."

"The witch," said Detective Herbert obviously enjoying Marina's fury.

She gave him a filthy look.

"Your boyfriend's got what looks to be her blood on him. Now she's missing. Of course he doesn't know anything about it. He never does. Let's see if his memory comes back in the station when we question him."

"And stick around. We'll be questioning you soon, too," Detective Herbert added.

Detective Davis gave James a tug and he stiffened, his fists clenched.

"Don't fight them, James," Marina warned, "you'll give them a reason to charge you."

He let them frog march him to the door. "Marina, get that card I gave you. Call my lawyer."

"I will," she answered.

"You can call him yourself from the station," Detective Davis said, his tone nasty. "You're going to need all the help you can get."

Marina raced into her bedroom, picked her handbag off the floor where she'd dumped it and tugged at the zipper. The zip stuck. She clawed at it. Tears splashed on her hands. "Argh!" Lizzie was missing and now James was gone too. How long could the police hold James? His lawyer would know. If she could just find the card.

The zip gave way and she pulled out her purse, flicked it open looking for the card James had given her. Grabbing it with trembling fingers, she ran to the phone in the hallway and punched in Anthony Ford's number. The legal firm's answering machine kicked in. She listened, wiping the tears from her face with the pad of her thumb. "Come on. Come on. There must be some emergency number." She scanned the business card, which listed the phone number, fax and email address. Ordinary people didn't need to do business at one thirty in the morning. The answering machine clicked on telling her to leave a message. "Hello. This is Marina Henry. This is an urgent message for Anthony Ford. The police have detained my flatmate, James Worth. We need you. Please call

me.” She rattled off her and James’s contact details.

She sat on the telephone table seat, her fingernails digging into her palms. “What can I do now?” If she could turn herself into an emu and bury her head in the sand, she would. But she couldn’t run, couldn’t hide. Lizzie needed her. An image of her elfin friend with her spiky blond hair came to mind. Lizzie alone with a monster! “Oh God, please help me! I can’t bear this.”

Marina stood and paced the hallway. It helped her think. Through the panic of her mind she heard Evelyn’s voice. “Your power is through your touch.” Evelyn had called it a gift. If she ever needed a gift it was now.

She raced into Lizzie’s room. Head turning from side to side, she looked for something that was precious to Lizzie. Anything she could get a reading from. Lizzie’s white painted dressing table was piled with beauty products, all of them necessary but none of them special.

She whirled around. “Come on Lizzie, there must be something I can use that you love.” She pushed open Lizzie’s wardrobe. She pulled stuff out throwing it to the floor then she spotted the Talisman—the green silk pouch Lizzie had made to attract love for herself. Lizzie’s Talisman sat in a jar on the top shelf. Marina grabbed her own Talisman around her neck. Hers was still safely there.

Strangely, a certain calm came to her when she touched it. Her mind stopped racing like a rat in a maze. She knew what Lizzie loved. The answer was so simple. Her mobile phone. She stumbled into the hallway to the telephone table and picked up the pink mobile phone. She’d try and get an image off that. Evelyn had told her the Talisman filtered the psychic

messages. She yanked it off. This had to work or Lizzie would die. Images assaulted her. She buckled at the knees, crashing to the ground, a prisoner of her vision.

Chapter 21

“Lizzie!” Marina didn’t feel the pain of the impact when she dropped to the floor. All her senses were filled with her vision.

Lizzie lay on her side on bare floorboards, her back against the wall, her hands and feet bound so that she was in a fetal position. Terror spoke from her eyes.

A crawling sensation of evil invaded Marina like termites intent on destruction, powdering her insides to dust. The killer was in the room. Marina groaned. She was in the killer’s head, forced to stare through his eyes at her best friend, his victim. Pleasure coated his evil as he pondered Lizzie’s death. Time was short. Lizzie would be missed. Pity. He was enjoying this. The rush exhilarated him.

He flexed the cord, then wound one end around his hand for traction and walked toward his victim. He’d spent so much time preparing this cord. He’d collected the used wax coated with her pink pubic hair and melted it so that when he rolled the cord in the used wax, the hair stuck. It added to the thrill, seeing the terror in the victim’s eyes when she recognized how much effort he had gone to preparing for the kill. This one had flaunted her pink pubic hair. The whore. She deserved to die.

“Please don’t hurt me.” Lizzie cowered.

Marina’s eyes clicked open with the shock of her vision. “Damn it. Where are you?” she wailed. She staggered to her feet, her knees burning from the impact of her fall. Desperate to get the image back, she clutched the pink mobile phone but

she couldn't get anything from it. No feelings. Nothing. She threw the mobile phone aside, cracking the casing. "Lizzie," she wailed. She needed that image back. She needed to know exactly where Lizzie was. "Focus. Think of the image." There had to be something, some detail that would give away where Lizzie was. Anything!

* * * *

James wanted to ram his fist into the smirking face in front of him, but that wouldn't get him anywhere. In fact, it would only get him arrested and that was what they wanted.

The police interrogation room contained one table and two chairs. Detective Herbert sat at the table fingering a cigarette. Boredom crossed his features. Occasionally, he took a puff and blew the smoke in James's direction.

James twisted on his chair trying not to cough. He glanced at his watch. It was hours until his lawyer started work. He didn't have hours. Lizzie needed him.

"Let's go over this again," Detective Davis said, leaning against the wall. "Serena Porter was staying at the same hotel."

James's jaw clenched. His hand balled tight. "I told you. I don't know Serena Porter. I never met her."

The same questions again and again. He glared at the Detectives. "Do something useful," he yelled. "Help me find my sister. At least go round to that steroid-taking, pumped-up dick of a boyfriend and search for her. I'm telling you he's your murderer." He knew shouting wouldn't get him anywhere, but these cops were driving him nuts.

He saw Detective Herbert glance at Detective Davis. No

doubt they hoped to break him by their constant questioning.

Detective Herbert flicked his lighter open then closed it again. It must have been the hundredth time he'd done it. Click, click. James wanted to take the lighter and crush it under his heel.

"There's nothing to link your sister's boyfriend to any of the murders. We've checked." Detective Herbert's gaze flicked over him. He opened and closed his lighter. Click, click.

James's stomach muscles tightened in agitation. "Look, the guy's not normal. He's a pornography addict."

Detective Davis's eyes narrowed. "Child porn?"

"No. Women."

Detective Davis shrugged. "If we arrested guys for jacking off to pictures of naked women, we'd have to take in the whole of the force."

Detective Herbert laughed. "This boyfriend sounds like a normal guy."

"He's a creep." The pulse in James's temple beat like a drum.

"We've got several guys who work out with him here. They say he's a dedicated trainer," Detective Davis added. "A good guy." He glanced at his watch. "There's no need to wake him. We'll call around in the morning. Check up on your sister."

"That's not good enough. You need to check now. Do you hear me? Now!"

Detective Herbert stood, flicked the ash from his cigarette onto the floor, ground it in to the dirty linoleum and walked around to James's side of the table. He sat on the edge of the

table looking down at him. "You know what I think? I think your sob story regarding your sister is a distraction."

"You weren't complaining she was missing until we showed up," Detective Davis said. "She's probably cuddled up in bed with her boyfriend at the moment."

"What we're interested in is you." Detective Herbert jabbed a pudgy finger into James's chest. "We can link you to all three murders. I'd say that's more than a coincidence, wouldn't you? Now why don't you start by telling us where you met Serena Porter?"

The smoke from his cigarette curled around James like a hazy noose. He was so close to thumping the cop he had to look away, fighting for calm.

Detective Herbert's mobile phone rang. He reached inside the pocket of his black jacket. "Yeah? Right. That so. You in the salon right now? You're not." He looked at Detective Davis and shook his head. "So how do you know Lizzie Worth's in there? You had a vision. Great. Just fucking great. We'll check it out. Yeah. Yeah. We'll get there soon. Don't go in the salon."

"Was that Marina?" James asked.

"What's going on?" Detective Davis said at the same time.

Detective Herbert flicked his lighter on and off. "This joker's got his girlfriend in on the act. The waxer's having visions that the sister's in the salon about to be murdered."

James stood so quickly, the chair he sat on tipped and clattered onto its side. "Fabio's taken her to the salon." His voice was hoarse. "He wouldn't kill her in his own place. That's not his pattern. He's smarter than he seems." James raced to the door and pulled at the handle. It was locked. He smashed

the door with his fist. "Get moving," James shouted. Beads of sweat formed on his brow.

Both policemen stared at him. Detective Herbert hadn't moved.

"I suppose we'd better check it out," Detective Herbert said. "I could do with another fag first."

Detective Davis nodded.

James turned, his hands clenched into fists and moved toward the police.

* * * *

Marina stared at the telephone in disbelief. Detective Herbert had barely seemed interested. Would he get to the salon in time? She doubted it.

She knew where Lizzie was. The colour of the walls in her vision had given the location away. Yellow wash. Natalia insisted on the colour throughout the salon. She'd wasted precious time. She threw the cordless phone away from her in despair. It landed with a thud near Lizzie's broken mobile phone.

"Lizzie. Don't die!" The words came out in an agonized cry. She upended her purse searching through the loose change for the salon key Michael had given her. Grabbing it, she rushed out of her bedroom, threw open the door of the apartment and ran down the stairs into the street.

The salon took five minutes to get to at a run. She knew. The girls had timed it once when they'd slept in and that was with dodging pedestrians. She tripped on the uneven path, got up and kept running unaware that her shin was bleeding. One

thing kept her going. Lizzie.

Her lungs hurt as she raced around the corner onto Darlington Road. It was quiet. Even the smells of car fumes, coffee and people had abated. There was no one about, just the occasional car, but she didn't have time to think about flagging down help.

Panting, she reached Salon City and rattled the door but it was locked. She fished in her pocket for the key, jammed it into the lock and turned.

There were no lights in the salon. Once inside, light from the street gave the salon foyer a shadowy glow. She stopped for a moment. Ears straining, she listened for something that would tell her where Lizzie was. Nothing. No noise except her heart beat. It thudded in her ears making a whooshing rushing sound. A tiny noise, the slide of a foot perhaps, had her racing past reception, toward the stairs at the back of the salon. Every breath she drew sounded like a roar.

Taking the stairs two at a time, she saw that her cubicle door was closed. Heart in her mouth, she opened it. Nothing. Next she opened Lizzie's. Nothing.

Senses wired. She paused. Where are you, Lizzie? Her thoughts rose like a scream.

"Whore!"

Marina jumped. This time the voice was not in her head. The man's voice came from above.

A sickening gurgle reached her ears.

She ran toward the attic stairs and skidded, her shoulder hitting the wall. She clutched at the handrail to steady herself

then pounded up the stairs.

In the attic room she saw a man bent over Lizzie, the rope she'd only seen in her visions around her throat. He had pulled her to a sitting position so he could look into her eyes as she died.

The man turned with the noise Marina made as she entered the attic. Marina froze. Her mouth opened in surprise. "Michael! No!" She hurled herself at him giving him no time to get to his feet. Anything to get him away from Lizzie who was choking, her bound hands clawing at her throat, her fingers desperately trying to release the rope.

Michael let go of it as Marina launched herself at him, rolling back with the force of her landing on him. Forming her fingers into a V shape she dug them into his eyes as James had taught her.

Her middle finger made contact gouging his right eye deeply, while her index finger skidded off the bridge of his nose failing to wound.

But she did damage. A howl of pain rang in her ears much to her satisfaction. Michael pushed her off him. She rolled backward, scrambling to her feet.

In a lumbering movement he stood and advanced toward her. One eye was closed, the other open. Hatred burned there. Madness too. "Mother," he said, his voice high like a boy's.

"What?" Who was he talking to? The word made her heart miss a beat. This man was not the quiet Michael she'd grown to like. He was the monster!

In a few strides he closed the distance between them and shoved her against the wall. The impact made her gasp as the

back of her head slapped the wall. The edges of her vision darkened. She gasped raw air. Don't black out. Every muscle in her body tensed. Fight him. It's your only chance. Lizzie's too.

He clamped his hands around her throat. Automatically, she dug her fingernails into his hands to loosen his grip, but his hands were strong. Workman's hands.

"Filthy whore."

The hatred that burned his eyes churned her stomach. She fought for breath, as his thumbs dug into her larynx, the pressure crushing.

"You stripped off your pubic hair for every man to see. You thought I wouldn't find the photos. Filthy whore."

"She's not your mother, you mad man. Let her go," Lizzie cried, her voice hoarse. Her words made no impact on Michael, but a small shot of relief zinged up Marina's spine when she realized that Lizzie had freed herself from the bite of the cord.

"This time, Mother, you'll stay dead." Michael tightened his grip around her throat.

She choked. In the background she could hear Lizzie screaming, but her words made no more sense than Michael calling her mother as she fought for air. Fight him. Your life. Lizzie's life. Fight him. Desperately, she raised her foot and slammed her heel onto the top of his knee.

Michael howled in pain. He released her, toppling over clutching his knee. His face was red. His eyes crazed. "I'll kill you, whore. I'll do it properly so you don't come back." He climbed to his feet, putting weight on his disabled knee, and

fell again. "Argh!"

Marina glanced at Lizzie who was unraveling her bonds. Marina ran from the attic to her cubicle. A weapon. She had to find something, anything to stop him. Throwing open the door of her cubicle, she raced inside. The door hit the wall with a bang and bounced shut. She remembered her bikini trimmer kit included a small sharp pair of scissors. It wasn't much but it was the only thing she could think of.

She heard Michael's footsteps thudding on the attic stairs, his gait unsteady but advancing. He swore in pain. The sound rose above Lizzie's screams for help. Good, Michael. Leave Lizzie. Come for me. Her heart beat so fast she was sure it would burst. She shoved her massage table aside, flung open the cupboard under her workbench and pulled out her bikini trimming kit. Upending it, she grabbed the scissors, her fingers curled around them.

"Where are you, whore?" Michael had reached the landing.

Break glass, James had said. People come to the sound of breaking glass. Picking up the bikini shaver, she raced to her window and broke the pane of glass sending it smashing to the street two stories below.

Her door crashed open.

Marina stood frozen.

Michael's head turned from side to side trying to find her in the semi-darkness. He flicked the light on. He reached out using the wall for support. "You can't hide from me, whore. This time you'll stay dead."

The massage bed blocked his way.

"I'm not your mother, Michael. I'm Marina Henry. I work for your wife, Natalia."

At the mention of his wife's name, Michael's face gentled. A movement on the landing behind Michael caught her eye. Lizzie. Marina's heart leapt. She had escaped her bonds. Creep past him, Lizzie. Go get help.

Marina kept talking to keep his attention on her. "Don't do this, Michael. Think of Natalia. Think of the baby. You love that baby. You're so proud." Focus on the stuff that keeps him in the present.

"The baby." His expression softened.

"That's right. Your beautiful child growing inside Natalia." She kept her voice even, gentle. "Think how lovely it will be to hold him..."

Smash!

Michael roared. He turned. Lizzie had hit him over the head with the flimsy salon chair she kept in the corner of her cubicle. The chair broke. Michael didn't.

"Shit!" Lizzie cried.

Michael lunged at her. He grabbed at her flimsy pink top. When she pulled away, it came apart in his hands. This time she ran screaming all the way down the salon stairs. Hobbled by his knee, he didn't attempt to go after her. Instead he turned, his anger fixated on Marina.

"All my life you lied to me. There was nothing you wouldn't do for money. I wanted an ordinary life. You worked as a prostitute." His face darkened, distorted with the memories. "Why couldn't you leave it at that? No. You had to do the

photos, too. The whole town knew. People humiliated me. I couldn't hold up my head. I couldn't go to school. I've got a new life now. I won't let you back in," he screamed.

The photo from the eighties. The strange likeness. Could that woman be Michael's mother?

He flung the massage table aside and lunged for her.

Marina's hand tightened against the small scissors as he came for her, the blunt end butted up hard in her palm, the sharp end pointing outwards. She backed up against the wall. If this didn't work, he'd crush her throat the way he had done to the others so many times before.

When his hands closed around her throat she punched upward hoping to drive the scissors home into the flesh of his belly. The scissors hit his belt and fell to the ground.

She let out a sob of disappointment. In blind panic she kicked out at him, clawed at his face. Anything to release the relentless pressure crushing her throat. His hatred suffocated her. She could feel the power of it through his hands as they tightened on her throat. She was choking. Gasping. No air.

"Marina!" James burst through the door closely followed by the two detectives. He lunged at Michael dragging him off her, his fists thumping into him.

Michael howled.

Marina's legs buckled under her as she fought to stay conscious. Her hands clutched her throat as she sucked in air.

James's fists whirled, his face black with fury, until the policemen stepped in. Blood streamed from Michael's face where James had hit him. The policemen half dragged, half

marched Michael from the room.

In an instant, James covered the distance between them, knelt beside Marina and gathered her in his arms.

"You made it," she croaked. Her voice came out hoarse. "I didn't think you would." Weakly, she raised her hand to his face.

"Don't try to talk," James said.

"Marina," Lizzie shrieked. She rushed toward and hugged her friend. "There's an ambulance coming. The cat lady is downstairs. She heard all the commotion and called the police, the ambulance, everyone."

In the background Marina could hear the sirens.

"Huh! We don't need the police now," James said. He picked Marina up. "Let's get you seen to. Damn it. I don't want to let you out of my sight. Ever."

She gave him a slow smile, glad of the security of his arms. "We got him."

He nodded. "Yeah, we did. I thought I'd lost you." James crushed her to his chest and kissed her. Just a tender kiss but it meant so much to her. She closed her eyes. So tired. Woozy. But she was safe. They'd caught the 'Brazilian Wax' Murderer.

Epilogue

"I still don't understand why you want to go home," Lizzie said, her voice plaintive. She sat on Marina's purple comforter watching her as she pulled her suitcase out from under her bed.

"Stay out of it, Lizzie," James said. "It's what Marina wants." He, too, sat on Marina's bed, his expression glum. He picked up one of Marina's pillows, pumped it into shape and put it behind him.

"Be gentle. Watch the beading on that pillow," Marina said.

"I don't like hippie beading," James mumbled.

Marina looked from Lizzie's petulant face to James's protective one. A surge of love made her grin. "Guys, I won't be gone for long. I told you why I need to go. My assistant wants to buy my business so I have to finalize the sale. Plus I want to spend some time with my mum. She's been out of her mind with worry."

Lizzie folded her arms in front of herself and stared at her. James picked imaginary lint off his jeans. Marina knew he hated letting her go. Would they always feel abandoned when someone they loved left them?

"And?" Lizzie said.

"Okay. I admit I also have other unfinished business back home." Marina sighed. She pulled out her suitcase from under the bed and put it on her bed between them. Her over-religious father had drummed in the "do unto others" clause since she'd been a tiny child. But she wasn't going to

apologize to Tony because of her parents' values. Apologizing to Tony about the cruel things she had called him would also help her move on. She needed that.

She walked over to her dressing table, opened the top drawer and pulled out fresh underwear and bras. Selecting her favorites, she put them into the suitcase, all the time aware that both of them were watching her every move as if they'd never see her again. Uncomfortable with their combined scrutiny, she frowned. She didn't want to hurt them, not after everything they had been through together.

"You're going to see him, aren't you?" Lizzie asked. James crossed his arms in front of himself, his gaze flicking over her.

"You mean Tony?" Marina asked.

Lizzie nodded.

James grimaced, but said nothing.

"Ha! I knew it. That's why you're really going." Lizzie sighed dramatically and rolled her eyes. "Don't take your expensive lacy underwear. Let him buy his own."

"Lizzie," Marina warned, "don't start." She looked at James. "I want to say sorry. I treated Tony badly. I was so mean to him because he was different." She thought about coming face to face with her ex. Taking a deep breath, she waited for panic to set her heart racing. Nothing. She smiled to herself. After what she had been through, she wasn't scared anymore. She'd never run from her problems again.

"But he did the wrong thing by you, too," Lizzie said. "He should have told you he was a cross-dresser before he proposed. He should be apologizing to you."

"It isn't like that, Lizzie. We all have our problems...our secrets. It's how we deal with them that counts." And she could deal with things so much better after she'd lived in the city. Sure, living in freewheeling Sydney had its drawbacks too, but she'd learned so much about herself.

"Oh my God. You're becoming so mature, you're boring me," Lizzie said.

Marina smiled, knowing she had changed. "I realize now I needed to grow. I could never have done that if I'd stayed home living life the way my parents wanted me to."

"Praise the Lord!" Lizzie said.

"Lizzie!" James growled.

Lizzie put her hand over her mouth. "Sorry, Marina. I liked your dad. He was always very nice to me even though he disapproved of the way I looked."

Marina smiled at her. "I know you did. But let's face it, he wasn't exactly the most open-minded person and I...I wasn't much better. I needed to come here."

"We're glad you did," James said.

She walked back to her dressing table, opened the bottom drawer and pulled out several neatly folded tops. She searched for long-sleeved ones, knowing it would be cold back home. When she turned, she caught the look on James's face. His green eyes glinted.

Marina dumped the tops in her bag, climbed on the bed over to him and pushed his knees down so that she could sit astride his lap. "I don't love Tony anymore. I know that. I love you."

He squeezed her tight. "I love you, too. Don't stay long."

"Blah." Lizzie made a gross sound. "Don't get all soppy in front of me."

Marina pressed her lips to James's, ignoring Lizzie. He kissed her back. His love, his relief that she had survived poured from him into her.

"Sick. Do you two have to smooch in front of me? My best friend and my nerdy brother." Lizzie stuck her fingers down her throat.

Marina laughed. James too. "You planned to get us together. That's part of the reason you asked me here."

"Yeah, I knew you straight types would suit."

"You had me fooled," James said to his sister. "I thought you'd hate it if I came onto Marina."

Lizzie grinned. "I wasn't going to tell you I'd found your perfect match, was I?"

Marina looked at James.

James's face broke into a grin.

"Didn't imagine I'd get you boring types together so fast." Lizzie climbed off the bed, walked over to Marina's dressing table and started picking up Marina's beauty products. "You'd better get moving. You'll miss your train."

"Look at the time," Marina said, looking at her watch. She had half an hour before James took her to the station. Quickly, she pushed herself away from him.

"Here. Don't forget these." Lizzie handed her some grooming products: hair straightener, moisturizer and hair removal cream seeing as she didn't wax.

"Thanks." She took them and put the products in her bag, then walked to her wardrobe, to pull out some jeans. "Now don't you get into any trouble while I'm away." She put her jeans in her suitcase.

"Ha! You should talk. This all started because of you." Lizzie put her hands on her hips and stared at her accusingly.

"Lizzie!" James admonished her.

Marina patted his leg. "No. That's okay. Lizzie's right. The murders were about me. If only I could have understood why earlier."

"Come on, don't blame yourself," James said.

"I can't stand it when you get saintly." Lizzie threw a box of make-up removal pads at her.

Marina ducked. They bounced off the suitcase. "Thanks. I'll need these."

"Michael's a psycho," James said. "The man murdered his mother when he was fifteen because she did porno. If the cops had solved that murder, these others never would have happened." He reached over and gave her hand a short squeeze.

Marina stopped packing for a moment, thinking over what the police had told her. "Michael was always unstable, but when I turned up looking so like his mother, it sent him over the edge. It was like his past had come back to haunt him."

"Funny that, seeing as he killed his mum. That would haunt me too," Lizzie said. "By the way, you'd better pack your hairbrush." She picked it up off the dressing table.

"Dating my mum is haunting me," James said.

Lizzie threw the brush hitting James on the head.

"Ouch!" James cried, rubbing his head.

"Sorry," Lizzie said, looking anything but.

Marina reached over, kissed James where the brush had hit him, then picked it up and packed it. "You have to remember that it destroyed Michael when his mother posed for pornographic photographs when he was young. He couldn't cope that she was a prostitute. The fact that she did porno with a Brazilian drove him totally crazy."

Lizzie raised one thinly plucked eyebrow. "You can say that again." She picked up a small tube of Marina's eye cream. "Here. Catch." She threw it to Marina.

James ducked.

It landed on the bed. James picked it up and put it in the suitcase.

"Thanks," Marina said.

"You're welcome," James said.

Lizzie scratched her head. "Why didn't he just kill you instead of all the others? They didn't look like his mother."

"Lizzie!" James growled. "Marina's been through a lot. Don't keep hounding her with horrible questions. She's supposed to keep calm." He got off the bed and stood protectively near her. "You nearly done?"

"It's okay." She touched James's shoulder. All her life she'd wanted a partner who cared about her. After what she had been through, she knew James was that man. "The doctor said to talk. It helps. Stops me replaying what happened like a bad video." She turned to Lizzie. "I've been thinking about that.

Mainly prostitutes and pornographic models did Brazilians in the eighties," Marina said.

"Really? Gosh. Everyone does them now," Lizzie said.

"But that's just it, Lizzie. Not everyone does it." Marina smiled.

Lizzie's eyes opened wide. "I get it. Gosh, I'm so smart. You never had a Brazilian. That's why he didn't kill you."

"He wanted to though," Marina said. "Remember the night he paid us to train but the cops interrupted? The police say he taped that. They found a peep camera in my air-conditioning duct. He recorded every waxing. They have audio too." She raised one eyebrow taking in Lizzie's look of horror. "He was so intense I could hear his thoughts."

"Yuck! That means the cops have been looking at tapes of me being waxed. How gross. Bet he didn't record Swinging Sixties Cynthia," Lizzie said.

Marina laughed and put up her hands. "Don't remind me. The police are going through the tapes now. There are masses of them."

"So that's how he knew what we were doing," James said. "He listened to every word you girls said at work. He knew what you were thinking so he could manipulate you."

Marina nodded at Lizzie. "Look how he managed to get you into his car late at night when he came to the apartment. He knew we liked Natalia, so he told you she was having a miscarriage and needed you."

"And I went like a dummy." Lizzie grimaced.

"You weren't dumb. I didn't suspect him. He had me totally

taken in because he loved Natalia. I thought he was a family man. I liked Michael. He seemed like a hard worker. Loyal to Natalia. He reminded me of the good things back home. He knew I dreamed about meeting a nice family man so he acted like that. Boy, was I fooled.”

James shook his head. “That bastard was so manipulative. He framed me because I...um...um.” A guilty expression crossed James’s features. He glanced at Lizzie.

Marina gave him a small smile. “You went down to the salon and warned him you’d beat the crap out of him for bothering Lizzie. He hated you. He couldn’t get near Lizzie or me with you around.”

“See? I told you he was sleazy. You wouldn’t believe me,” Lizzie said. She picked up a bottle of shampoo and threw it at Marina.

Marina caught it and put it in her luggage. “I promise to trust your instincts in the future and develop my own.” Plus, she’d promised herself she was going to develop her gift, once she’d had a break. She was wiser now. More open. She knew she could do it.

“I know you don’t go for Fabs either, but he’s a good person, except for his...um...you-know-what habit,” Lizzie said.

“I never thought he was the murderer until the end. But that was because I read your feelings about him when I touched your mobile. I felt you feared him,” Marina said.

“I admit, I wondered for a while if he was the murderer. You must have picked up on that,” Lizzie said.

“I guess I’m still learning how to interpret things,” Marina

said squashing everything into her suitcase. "At least I've learned how to solve my own problems instead of running from them."

Lizzie sat on the edge of Marina's bed. "We all have to do that. Fabs is going to start counseling."

"Good," James said.

Lizzie gave him a look.

"I thought the murderer might be Peta because I could feel there was violence around her," Marina said, distracting Lizzie. "I feel bad about that. Poor Peta. She called me when I was in the hospital. That man she liked beat her up. I wish I could have understood more. I realize now I couldn't get a good reading from her. I think the Talisman was blocking the frequencies she was giving out." Her hand went to her throat. She realized she didn't have it on. Looking around her bedroom, she spied it on her dressing table.

"Do you think that was why you didn't know that Serena Porter was murdered?" James asked. He picked the suitcase off the bed for her.

Marina shrugged. "I guess so. I sensed the others that Michael killed. I never had a vision with Serena, but I was wearing the Talisman." She walked over and picked the Talisman up off her dressing table and tied it around her neck. "Just in case. I need a break from visions."

"Good idea," James asked. "I think we all could do with a break from the kind of visions you have. You ready to go?"

Marina nodded. They walked into the hall, James carrying the suitcase.

Lizzie rushed to her bedroom and came out with a handful of tops. "Here. Take your ex these. I'm done with them. This will save him some money on women's clothes."

Marina narrowed her eyes at Lizzie. "Behave. I'm not going back to stir up trouble. I'm going to make peace. So, I'll pass on the tops thanks." She pushed them away.

"Suit yourself." Lizzie sniffed. "He's missing out on some good designer labels here."

"Bye, Lizzie." She reached over and gave her a kiss.

Lizzie dropped the clothes, threw her arms around her and hugged her close. "Come back soon," she pleaded. "You can't just shag my brother and leave him."

Marina felt the heat rise up her neck. Lizzie could be so embarrassing. "I'm only planning to go home for a couple of weeks."

"Lizzie!" James growled and walked out onto the landing. He turned to look at his sister. "Stay out of my business."

"As if." She rolled her eyes. "I'll miss you, Marina. Apart from being a good friend, you're the only one who can tame my brother. Thanks to you, Fabs is welcome here."

Marina hugged Lizzie back.

"Yes," James said. "I'll never call him a steroid-using, masturbating, porno-addicted oaf again."

Marina punched his arm. "Got that out of your system, did you?"

"Don't you start bullying me." James rubbed his arm. "You are so ballsy since you faced the 'Brazilian Wax Murderer.'"

"You better believe it," Marina said. "I still need you though."

She stood on her tip-toes and kissed him. "If it weren't for you, I'd be dead. I couldn't fight Michael off alone."

"Yeah, we still need men, weird fetishes and all," Lizzie said philosophically.

"Don't look at me," James said. "I don't have any fetishes."

Marina kissed him again. She couldn't seem to get enough of him. "Guess we will have some fun finding ones we both enjoy when I'm back."

About Cathleen Ross

http://www.lyricalpress.com/cathleen_ross

I've always been psychic but what really made me develop my skills was when my daughter started seeing dead people from the time she was two years old. I realized that I wasn't going to be able to console her with, "Darling there's nothing really there," especially as she grew older and could describe a dead relative right down to his mannerisms and favorite shirt. I started meditation classes and opened up my psychic eye and now several years later, I'm more at peace with "the gift" than I was earlier.

With my character Marina, I wanted to catch that stage when a psychic person thinks they could be going nuts because they know, see or hear things they think they shouldn't. I also wanted her to grow and use her talent for good, which is how I have developed mine. I also wanted to play around with the other side of being a psychic, so I developed the reluctant clairvoyant character, Evelyn, who gets messages from her mother-in-law.

(Just for the record, my mother-in-law is doing well and we get on beautifully.) Spirits don't have a sense of time or place in the way we do, so it's really annoying being woken up at three in the morning with a message for someone you don't know well. Some people who have crossed over can be very persistent, so the trick is learning to manage "the gift".

The book also explores Brazilian Waxing. I'm amazed at the hairstyles my girlfriends admit to having and I'm not talking

about on their heads. As for me, just let me say that one trip to Brazil was enough for me!

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