



## **PSYCHIC DAMAGE**

### **Chapter One**

For what seemed like the thousandth time that week, Eva Stuart trudged up the stairs to the four-and-a-half. That floor had no elevator, and no cell phone reception, so she had to walk up and down the stairs to check the results of each operation. It was three o'clock. She was tired, and her legs ached.

She unlocked, then pushed open the heavy door and turned on the light. A cockroach scurried into a dark corner of this space carved out between the City Council offices on five and the Administrative Office on four. The connections to the terminals and P.C.'s that ran from the mainframe were here.

As Eva worked amid the grime and dead cockroaches, she was angry all over again when she remembered the promise that the room would be improved this year. Now she'd learned that the budgeted money had been spent on something more important to the City Council. So the room remained dirty, overheated in summer and freezing in winter.

Eva sneezed. It was no wonder she had one cold after another. Damn it, there wasn't even a place to sit.

Gotta finish quick, she thought. She spent too much time here. She unplugged a terminal, then plugged another into the connection.

"Goddamn it."

Eva whirled and looked around. Where had that come from? There was no one in the room. But she'd heard a voice.

"I warned you. No connection to the Council. Get it done, I said, but keep it away from San Carlos. You said you could do it, but now here it is."

Who was talking? Eva stood still, afraid to move.

"Sorry, Sam. I tried, but the guy's a real asshole. I'll take care of him."

Another voice. The words were clear, the voices distinct, almost as if they were in the room with her. Eva gnawed a fingernail. Where were they? Her heart pounded so loudly she was afraid they could hear it.

"Too late. The damage is done. There's no link between me and this guy, Bermudez, is there?" The first voice again. Eva recognized it now: City Councilman Sam Delmin. She'd heard it often in Council meetings.

"You're okay." The second voice, nasal and raspy, was one Eva didn't know.

"Where's the body?"

"You don't need to know. The evidence is all cleaned up. Nothing to tie you to it."

Eva held her breath. Body?

"You're sure?"

"Absolutely."

A door slammed. Eva let out her breath.

She remembered what they'd said. "Where's the body?" the Councilman had asked. "Get it done," he'd said. She stood still, wishing she hadn't heard what she had.

They'd been talking about murder. She shivered and felt goosebumps rise on her arms. She looked around at the space that few people even knew existed. Could they know she'd overheard them? The dust-laden air around her seemed heavy with menace.

She had to get out. Leaving her work undone, Eva hurriedly turned off the light and ran down the stairs to her office on the fourth floor. She must have heard wrong. They couldn't have been talking about murder.

For the rest of the day, she thought about what she'd overheard. She didn't know where the voices had come from. She tried to believe she hadn't heard right, but she was sure she had. Every time she thought about the four-and-a-half, she shuddered. She'd have to go back, but not today.

\* \* \*

“How can a man be shot dead from a car in a daytime driveby and nobody see or hear anything?” Lieutenant Al Henry asked no one in particular. Everyone at the scene ignored him, although they all had the same question. Antonio Bermudez had lived in an upscale residential area, yet he'd been gunned down in the middle of the morning on his own street, and no one knew anything.

Bermudez wore a well-cut navy blue suit, a light blue shirt and dark blue tie when he walked to the curb in front of his house instead of getting into the dark blue Mercedes parked in his driveway. Perhaps he'd wanted to check the mailbox. A throwaway newspaper lay in the driveway. Maybe he'd intended to pick that up. A car—make, model, year, and color unknown—had driven down the street, and a person or persons unknown had emptied six bullets into Antonio Bermudez' head and chest. By the time his wife reacted to the sound of bullets, the phantom car was gone, and Bermudez was dead. A neighbor across the street had heard an engine rev and tires squeal just after the pop-pop that was subsequently identified as the sound of bullets. That was just before she'd heard Mrs. Bermudez scream.

Lieutenant Henry had been called out in late morning to take a look at the crime scene before Antonio Bermudez' body was taken away. He'd been there all day. Crime scene investigators had taken pictures and made measurements; the M.E. had determined probable cause of death. The coroner's van had arrived to take the body of Antonio Bermudez to the morgue. Al and his partner had talked to Mrs. Bermudez while patrolmen canvassed the neighbors. He knew what had happened. What he didn't know was why.

\* \* \*

At five o'clock, Eva headed home, the heat and smog of August in Southern California lying over her like a blanket. Traffic was heavy, and every light turned red as she reached it. The air conditioning in her car was sluggish, and although the drive wasn't long, she was tired and sweaty. At one of the interminable lights, she fished a rubber band out of her purse and gathered her dark hair into a ponytail.

Her building was a two-story structure built around a courtyard. There was a pool, and she paused, considering a dip. But when she looked at the kids splashing and jumping, she knew she couldn't swim now. Tomorrow morning she'd get up and do her laps as usual.

Upstairs, she dumped her purse and the things she'd picked up for dinner. She turned on the television, changed clothes and poured a glass of wine. It had been a long day at work. She hadn't finished her job on the four-and-a-half, but Jason, who would have taken some of the workload from her, had called in sick, and she had been busy all day with calls from analysts with computer problems. Then there was that scary conversation she'd overheard. At first she'd been sure it was talk about a murder, but after a while, she convinced herself that she'd misunderstood what had been said. It just wasn't possible that two men were talking about murder in City Hall on a perfectly ordinary Monday morning. Relaxed now, she settled in front of the TV, wine glass in one hand, remote in the other, and turned on the news: Iraq, Al Quaida, Afghanistan, global warming—all depressing. Idly thumbing the remote, she found the local news channel in time to hear, “Antonio Bermudez, long a high-profile figure in the trash and hazardous waste disposal business, was shot to death today outside his home in San Carlos. There are no witnesses to the shooting, which appears to have been a driveby. Police have no motive for the murder. Mr. Bermudez, who emigrated from Mexico forty years ago....”

Eva sat up quickly, splashing wine from her glass onto her lap. Bermudez—that was the name Councilman Delmin had mentioned in the conversation she'd overheard. “Get it done, but no connection to San Carlos,” he'd said. “He's dead, for sure?” he'd asked. Bermudez was dead. Was that what the councilman had wanted done? With shaking hands, Eva put down her wine. Was there any way they could know what she had heard?

She needed to talk to Star. She glanced at the time. Nine o'clock. She didn't have an appointment, but Star would see her. Grabbing her keys, her heart thudding and her breathing rapid, Eva hurried down to her car.

Star occupied a storefront on a side street off Main in San Carlos. It was a visible location, and the neon signs in her window provided good advertising. “Psychic Readings,” they said, then “Palm Readings” underneath.

When Eva tried the doorknob on Star's storefront, she found it locked, although the light was on in the shop. Star was busy. Back in her car, Eva nibbled on a ragged cuticle and waited. She kept thinking about what she'd overheard and the murder reported on television. What if someone knew

that she'd been listening? Her stomach churned, and she shivered as she remembered what she'd overheard.

Finally the door of Star's shop opened, and an older woman said goodbye and walked to her car. Eva opened her car door and hurried to the shop, checking to be sure there was no one else on the street, and entered the small front room. Star came out from behind the curtain. She was tall, her long dark hair caught in a single braid that cascaded nearly to her waist. She wore a roughly woven caftan striped in red, blue, and orange, and her feet were bare.

"Eva. I didn't expect you." Her voice was deep, intimate.

"I need help, Star. I'm in trouble."

Star gestured Eva into the room behind the curtain. Inside was a round table on which lay several decks of Tarot cards. The small room was lit with candles, and together with the heavy scent of incense burning on a table in the corner, they created a thick, smoky atmosphere. On shelves next to the round table were books about the occult and the Tarot, as well as texts on the Kabbalah and other ancient mystic practices. Strings of crystals hung from the ceiling, catching and reflecting the candlelight. Star took her usual hard, upright chair, while Eva sank into the overstuffed comfort of the client's wingback.

"I'm glad to see you," said Star. "I was afraid you'd left for good."

"I've been busy." Eva whispered, as if she was afraid to be overheard.

"I thought you went to see that new psychic, the one you talked about last time. My cards said you wanted to." Star held the pack of cards in her hands and leaned toward Eva. She had strong hands, the fingers long and sinewy, the nails painted a deep red. She wore a silver ring set with a large opal on the second finger of her right hand, and her wrist held one heavy silver bracelet.

"No. I didn't want to leave you." Eva didn't want to talk about the other psychic. She wanted to talk about what she'd overheard. "I need help, Star."

Star leaned back, holding the cards in her hands. "Yes, I see. You don't usually appear without an appointment. What's happened?"

"I heard something at work today, and it scared me. I wanted to know what I should do about it."

Star asked Eva to choose a deck of cards, and Eva picked the one she always did, the one with the brightest pictures. Star had Eva cut the cards, then began to lay them out. "What did you hear?"

"I heard it by accident. I wasn't eavesdropping or anything. I was up on the four-and-a half. That's the floor where all the terminals and PC's connect to the mainframe. Then I heard voices."

"Where were they coming from?"

"I don't know. I'd never heard anything up there before. What they said...I thought maybe I didn't understand. It was so strange." Eva twisted her hands together in her lap.

"What was strange?" Star moved the cards and laid out others. She seemed hardly to be listening.

"I overheard talk about a murder. Then tonight there was a report on television about the murder of a guy who made a fortune in trash. Do you see anything about me being involved in a murder? Is there any danger for me?"

Star looked startled, an expression Eva had never before seen on her face. Star never seemed surprised by anything.

The woman stared at the cards, then asked, "Did you hear someone planning a murder or talking about it?"

"They talked as though it had already happened. What do the cards say?"

"I see Death," Star said. "Past Death. It's already happened. The victim is a stranger, someone you do not know. The murderer is someone you know. Not well, but you do know who it is."

"He's one of the councilmen," Eva blurted, then wished she'd kept her mouth shut. She tried to take back her words. "Or maybe it was his voice. Maybe not."

"The cards do not say."

"Does the murderer know me? Do I have anything to be afraid of?"

Star pointed to another card. "The Tower, the Tower is the truth."

"Truth about what?" She always wished Star would be more definite about

what she saw.

“It is not clear. A lightning flash of truth collapses the facade of lies.” Star was bent over the cards, one of her hands holding her head. Her eyes were closed now, and she swayed slowly back and forth over the table.

“What? What do you see?” Eva nibbled on a cuticle.

“I see trouble for you. I see danger.” Star’s voice was flat.

“Can the cards be wrong?”

“I see a lover. He will help you, but you are both in danger.”

“I don’t have a lover.” Eva brought her hand to her mouth again.

“He will help you, but you must be careful. He is someone new, but you know him.”

“Someone I know? Can you see who it is?” Eva sat up straight.

“Someone who is new to you. I can’t see his face. Tall, with dark hair. His name starts with J. Danger awaits you both.” Star sat up straight and shook her head. “That’s all I can see. Be careful, Eva.”

“J? Are you sure?”

Who could J be? Certainly not Jason. Who else had a name that began with J?

Eva paid Star and drove back to her apartment. She almost wished she hadn’t gone to see the psychic now that she’d predicted the worst of Eva’s fears. Star always predicted future lovers for Eva, and they seldom materialized, or, if they did, they didn’t stay around long. Still, it was nice to have a new lover to look forward to, although the thought of being in danger was frightening.

Eva looked over her shoulder as she left her car in the apartment parking lot. It was late, and she had to park in the back, away from the lighted entrance. She jumped at the sound of a car driving in from the street and stopped to watch. When the SUV pulled into a space near her car, she hurried her steps toward the silent building, not waiting to see who got out of the vehicle.

After she opened the door of her apartment, she stood for a moment. The

light above the fish tank glowed softly. Suppose someone had been waiting for her? Stop it, she thought. Nobody knows what I heard today.

She closed and locked the door, flicked the light switch, and looked into the bedroom, the bath and kitchen. Everything seemed okay. She sat on the floor in front of the fish tank and checked to be sure all the fish were healthy, relaxing as she watched them swim. Iridescent cardinal tetras, zebra danios, neons, and tiger barbs moved back and forth while the velvety black angelfish hung motionless in the water. The long-whiskered catfish sat on the bottom, and the Chinese algae-eater clung to the glass of the tank. She dropped a little food in the tank and watched her fish come to feed, thinking of the new lover who would come to help her.