

Vanished

Sarah Mason had always thought that when Death finally came calling for her, he would be better looking. You know, sort of like Brad Pitt in *Meet Joe Black*. The kind of guy you actually wouldn't mind taking off with. The jerk wearing the cheap plastic skeleton face Halloween mask was maybe twenty, around five-eight and scrawny, a dark-complected Caucasian with long, greasy black hair, a single fat silver hoop earring and a fuzzy goatee poking out from under the mask. His hi-tops were white, his oversized *Hornets* tee-shirt was red, and his denim shorts were long and so baggy that they threatened to go indecent with any too-sudden move. In other words, tonight Death was definitely not heart throb material. He wasn't even borderline impressive.

Then again, the gun he was pointing at her was big and bad. So big and bad that, Sarah realized as her shocked brain resumed minimal functioning, she'd quit breathing the moment she'd set eyes on it.

"You! Lady! Get over by the cash register!"

No doubt about it. The mask might hide his mouth, but he was yelling at *her*, aiming that big black gun at *her*, his movements agitated, jerky. She could see his eyes through the egg-shaped holes in the plastic. They were shiny black, the kind of shiny black that usually indicated pupils dilated from drug use, and they darted nervously around the convenience store aisle where he had her trapped.

She stood stock still, literally unable to move. Caught in that state of suspended animation in which the horrible event that was occurring seemed, for the first few seconds, no more real than a bad dream, Sarah continued to stare numbly at him.

I don't believe this. I just came out for dog food....

"Move!" he screamed when she didn't.

Her heart leaped. Her mind raced. She swallowed convulsively.

"Yes. Yes, okay."

Jolted back into horrible reality by the sheer volume of the shout, Sarah hugged the big blue bag of Kibbles N Bits - the urgent lack of which had brought her to this, her neighborhood Quik-Pik, at shortly after eleven p.m. - close to her chest, and moved.

"Hurry up! Hurry up!" He was practically waving the gun at her in his agitation, shifting from foot to foot, his too-shiny eyes roaming all over the place.

"It's okay." She drew on every day of her four years of experience in dealing with

criminal types as an Assistant District Attorney for Beaufort County, South Carolina, to keep her voice even. As Acting Head of the Major Crimes Unit, she ordinarily ate penny-ante thugs like this for breakfast. But this wasn't a courtroom, and his future wasn't at stake here: hers was. What she wanted to do, *needed* to do, was forge a human connection between the two of them. It was a basic tenet of the Woman Against Rape class she helped teach: make the perpetrator see you as a person and you're less likely to be harmed. "Just stay cool."

"I *am* cool. Don't you be tellin' me to stay cool. Who you to be like, *stay cool*?" His voice went shrill with indignation.

Okay, wrong thing to say.

"Get yo' ass over to that cash register." He bounced up and down on the balls of his feet, thrusting the gun toward her like a foil, and Sarah instinctively braced in anticipation of it going off. "Now."

Sarah gave up on the whole *try to make a connection with the criminal* concept, quickened her pace and lowered her eyes while she thought desperately, trying to come up with an angle, with some way to get out of this mess. She'd managed to call 911 on her cell phone as soon as she'd realized that a robbery was going down at the front of the store. That was the good news. At the time, dog food in hand, she'd been fleeing toward what she presumed was the back exit, heading toward the hall that led to the restrooms and beyond. Before she'd had a chance to say a word in response to the operator's brisk 911 this guy had come charging out of the ladies' restroom and down the hall and she had been forced to change her path and thrust the still connected - she hoped - cell phone into her purse. Where it remained.

Since it was her cell, though, even if the operator didn't just automatically disconnect the silent call, even if they followed through, the address that would come up was her home. No way to connect the call to this location at all.

That was the bad news.

The even worse news was that even if the cops realized what was going down, if they knew it was her they probably wouldn't come anyway. Just at the moment, she was pretty sure she was riding the Number One spot on their least favorite persons list.

"Dumb bitch," the robber said, the words just barely muffled by the mask.

Sarah's hackles rose instinctively. *Bitch* was one of those words that pushed her buttons, even though she'd been called one often enough that she should by all rights have gotten over it by now. *Don't answer*, she cautioned herself. She was almost even with him by this time, close enough to smell his acrid scent. Apparently either he didn't believe in showers or nerves were causing him to experience a serious case of deodorant failure. Whatever, he reeked. The aisle was only about three feet wide. She

was going to have to put herself within a few inches of him to get past. Goosebumps raced over her skin at the prospect. Of course, they could have been caused by the frigid breath of the cold cases to her left hitting her arms and legs, which were bare because she was wearing shorts and a tank top in deference to the ninety degree heat outside, but she didn't think so. She was pretty sure that prickly feeling she was experiencing was pure galloping fear.

Which, in a weird kind of way, was actually a positive. She'd thought she'd lost her fear of death sometime during the past seven hellish years. In fact, deep in the dark of night when things got really bad, she could have sworn she was looking forward to it. Probably it was the whole getting shot bit that was freaking her out now. Which was perfectly understandable. Nobody in their right mind wanted to take a bullet. Especially over a quick run to the store for dog food.

"What, you got shit for brains or something? I said *move*." Skeleton Boy glared at her. He was bobbing impatiently on the balls of his feet, making coins or keys or something metallic in his pocket jingle.

"Yes, okay." Sarah kept her voice soothing as she ostentatiously picked up the pace. Her flip-flops made quick little slapping sounds against the hard smooth floor. It was interesting to realize that the closer she got to him, to that unsteady gun, the harder her heart pounded. However her mind felt about it, her body clearly wasn't okay with the prospect of imminent death. She was breathing fast, she could feel herself breaking out in a cold sweat, and her stomach was tying itself in knots. Even her knees felt weak.

What did it say about her life that being scared to death almost qualified as a good thing?

"You okay back there, man?" the second robber, the one at the front of the store, called. "What you doing?"

"Yeah," Skeleton Boy answered. "Everything's under control." His gaze swung back to Sarah. His voice dropped. "I'm warning you: don't fuck with me. *Run*."

The look in his eyes turned as deadly as the gun he pointed at her. Sarah got the impression that now his *machismo* was at stake, and obediently broke into a ragged little trot. *Street Survival 101: never mess with a punk's self-image*. Averting her gaze, she hunched her shoulders, making herself as small as possible. She deliberately didn't look at him, didn't make eye contact. And because she didn't, because she kept her eyes lowered as she slogged past him, she spotted the little girl hiding beneath the round table piled high with packaged doughnuts at the end of the aisle.

There was a white plastic skirt covering the table, but the skirt was on crooked. On this side it lacked a good eight inches of reaching the floor. The child was lying on her side and had curled up into as small a ball as possible, but Sarah could plainly see two tan, thin, and dirty legs pulled up tight against her chest, a pair of equally tan, thin and dirty

arms wrapped around the legs, a bright yellow tee-shirt and blue shorts, bare feet and a small face half-hidden by a tangled fall of long coffee-colored hair. The little girl was looking right at her, her eyes huge and dark and afraid.

Sarah blinked. Her heart clutched. Her breathing faltered. Her eyes connected with the girl's terrified gaze for a pregnant instant that seemed to stretch into a pulse-pounding eternity. Her heart started banging in her chest - and then she recovered her wits enough to jerk her eyes up and away. He might follow her gaze....

Please God don't let him see the child.