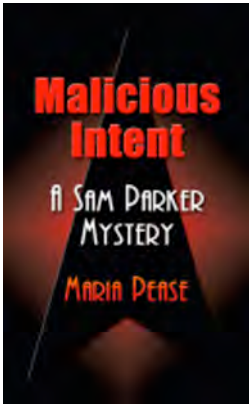


Malicious Intent

A SAM PARKER
MYSTERY

MARIA PEASE



Samantha Parker is a refreshing amateur sleuth solving a case that twists and turns to the very end! If you like mystery novels, like the Janet Evanovich series, you'll love this one. Sam and Stephanie would be fast friends.

Samantha Parker is not a cop or a private investigator. She's a nosy paralegal with a talent for snooping, so when a handsome stranger walks into her office and gives her twenty-five thousand dollars to have her find out who is following him, she can't resist taking his case, even if she doesn't believe him.

Malicious Intent

by

Maria Pease

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A Sam Parker Mystery

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Maria Pease

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MALICIOUS INTENT

A Sam Parker Mystery

MARIA PEASE

Dedication

For my husband Scott, and my children,
Steven and Ali,
I love you with all my heart.

Steven, if you hadn't negotiated staying up that extra
half hour longer than Ali so successfully, this book
never would have happened!

Acknowledgements

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I would also like to thank my family for their inspiration and support, but especially my sisters, Andrea Tomes, Lisa Beach and Deborah Brischler for their continued encouragement and unwavering confidence in me.

And Mom & Dad, thanks for everything!

Author's Apology

If things and places in Temecula or Coronado are not as you know them or remember them, I claim literary license. I hope that any liberties I have taken will be forgiven.

CHAPTER 1

Here I am, in a great little town called Temecula, also known as “Wine Country” because of the many fine wineries that are located here. Temecula is somewhere between Orange County and San Diego, California. Yes, I know what you’re thinking, you didn’t even think there was anything between Orange County and San Diego, and if there were, why would anyone want to live there? Well, I like it here. It is a growing city that still has the feel of a small town. Small towns appeal to me, they are cute and comfortable. Comfort, justice, and fairness are all important to me. My name is Samantha Parker, I like to be called Sam, and I am a paralegal of sorts. No, I never did want to be a lawyer. In fact, I really don’t like lawyers, which makes working for them almost impossible, at least for me, since I seem to have a bit of trouble when it comes to holding my tongue.

Although I am technically a paralegal, I specialize in research and do a bit of snooping as well. Somehow, I seem to find myself in trouble on a regular basis, due, perhaps, to my intolerance for unfairness and injustice. Basically though, I just become too engrossed in things I have no business being involved in. In fact, I freely admit that I don’t know my boundaries.

Monday morning. February 12. Another beautiful day in my little town, and the last thing I wanted to be doing was sitting inside at my desk, staring at my computer screen. I had received an odd visit late Friday afternoon from a dark

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haired stranger with a mustache and the most unbelievable crystal blue eyes I have ever seen.

He said his name was Ronald Gregory. Perhaps it was because of the way he had paused before introducing himself, or maybe it was how he looked at me. Whatever it was, I didn't believe him. He also said he was sure someone was after him but he wasn't sure why. I didn't believe that either, but when someone gives you a large envelope with twenty-five thousand dollars in cash in it, in return for vaguely outlined services of finding out who was following him and why, you don't argue, especially when your income, like mine, is less than regular.

After he left my office I put the cash in my safe, so I could take the weekend to sort things through without worrying too much about the money part of it. Now it was Monday and had I sorted things out? No. I couldn't get past the fact that none of this made any sense whatsoever. I'm just an overly curious paralegal for God's sake. Why me?

I wasn't sure where to start but I thought I'd better do something. I needed the money and as I mentioned, I do love to snoop. I sat there as I always do when I get a new file, head in my hands, eyes closed, thinking intently about a plan. Yeah right, a plan. Well, what better way to find out if someone was after "Ronald" than to follow him myself for a while?

Ronald had given me a bit of information about himself, his address, where he was working, what he did . . . a construction worker, and a hunky one at that. But that about covered it. There wasn't a long explanation of why he thought he was being followed and I appreciated not having to listen to a bunch of crap that would just confuse things. I really can't deal with people who bullshit. I guess that's because I'm from New York where people tell you exactly what they think, whether you want to hear it or not. This

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particular trait is one that happens to appeal to few people, but I don't concern myself with that; I've been there, and caring what other people think is too much work. It only took me twenty-seven years to figure that one out!

First off, I decided I'd better contact a private investigator friend of mine who, more than once, has come to my rescue when I found myself in over my head. Frank is a former policeman. His short haircut makes him look like a military officer, and he is built like a truck and quite intimidating at first glance. Actually, the real Frank is more fun loving than anything really, unless of course, you upset him, in which case he has a tendency to turn ugly. He has a great hearty laugh, prefers to wear blue jeans, and complains endlessly if he has to dress up for anything. He is also well into a third marriage that does not seem to be going well.

Frank and I are friends, and since we are both nosy, and can lie a blue streak to get the information we want, we understand each other pretty well. His work is much more interesting than mine, needless to say, but we often find ourselves trying to figure out why the people we come in contact with seem to be so universally stupid. We also both spend a good deal of time hoping someone finds themselves in trouble and calls us to get them out of it.

As I waited for Frank to call me back, I realized I had to get to the bank before my rent check bounced and I got another lecture from Mrs. Bennett, a well tanned old lady of about seventy-two, who has a permanent chip on her shoulder. Mrs. Bennett happens to own the house I live in, and ever since the passing of Mr. Bennett two years ago, she lives to tell me how inconsiderate and irresponsible I am which means that I avoid her at any cost, even when I'm in her good graces, which admittedly is not very often.

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I was so focused on the impending lecture to come that the ringing of the telephone about knocked me off my chair. Obviously I've had too much coffee as usual.

"Hey, Sam, what's going on?"

"Hi, Frank, I'm glad you called. Listen, I've got a guy who dropped twenty-five thousand dollars in my lap in return for finding out who's following him."

"No one gives anyone that kind of money for a simple job like that, Sam," he told me. "Take my word for it, he's lying."

"Of course he's lying, that's why I called you, I figure with your demented mind and experience in police investigations you could tell me what this guy is about. Why give me twenty-five thousand dollars if he's lying? Is he setting me up?"

"Sammy, how do these people find you?"

"I'm just lucky I guess. So, where should I start?"

"You tell me. What's your first move?"

"Background check to see if anything he's told me so far is true. Then tail him for a while, and see where he hangs out."

"Call me if you need some assistance with this. You know my fee."

"Yeah, expensive. Bye, Frank."

As I hung up the phone, I thought maybe I should have asked Frank to help me out with this one, fee or not. But that would be too easy and I'm not known to take the easy route. Never have or I'd have some cushy, high-paying job in one of those high-rise stuffy law offices in San Diego, a thought that literally made me sick. No, I'd figure this one out on my own. I rarely know what the hell I'm doing when I start working on something new, but I have pretty good instincts, and I can always call on Frank if I need to. He loves this shit. After all, I do have twenty-five thousand dollars sitting in my safe.

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I spent the next two hours searching the databases that I have come to know so well, and love or hate depending on whether or not I find what I am looking for. As I checked to see if Ronald Gregory has an insubordinate past, I saw that although it appeared that “Ronald” had used more than one nomenclature, the name he was currently appearing under was one he also used more than twenty years ago, while living in Arizona. Apparently he was attending the State University there when he had his first brush with the law while posing as a campus security guard in order to inspect the girl’s dormitory during the evening hours. This seemed to me like a fairly harmless prank. What guys will do to meet girls is beyond the realm of even my imagination. But with my limited access I was unable to find anything else.

I started listing the names that my new friend had used over the years, hoping Frank still had friends at the department who owed him a favor. If I could get a full picture of this guy’s activity, I might be able to start putting this puzzle together. Still, at the back of my mind I wondered where I fit into all this. If he really thought he was in danger, he could have gone to the police or contacted a licensed PI but he didn’t, he had come to me and I wanted to know why.

Gathering together the file I had so far on Ronald, I headed out with the idea of stopping by the bank and then locating Ronald Gregory at his construction site although I knew I’d rather put sharp sticks in my eyes than sit in my car all day in pursuit of this guy. But before I tried to find Mr. Gregory, I decided to get his file to Frank to see if his guys could uncover anything else.

The bank was empty so I ran in and deposited the two hundred and fifty bucks I’d earned on the living trust I completed for a nice old couple who just moved into the area. The Casey’s, Carol and Harold, are in their mid-sixties and

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great storytellers. I must have spent about five or six hours gathering the information to complete their trust, although to be honest, they don't own a whole lot. They seemed to want to chat about old times and although I had a lot on my plate, as usual, I was happy to listen.

They moved to California from Chicago, where, according to Carol, it was cold as hell in the winter, but to quote Harold, "We're not going to go to Florida and wait to die. We figured we'd come here and maybe be too busy golfing to worry about dying." They reminded me of a couple of kids the way they were always joking with each other. They even pulled out the photograph albums, to introduce me to the family. Okay, so maybe I do become too friendly with my clients but I have found, through experience, that people like to share information, and that information, after all, is how I get my snooping jobs. And besides, it's not like my social life is booming with excitement.

Once I was assured my rent check wouldn't bounce, I was off to the small office Frank shares with an investigator friend of his located on Front Street in Old Town Temecula, the cultural and historical part of the city that was brimming with history. As I pulled into the parking lot, I saw Chuck, Frank's friend, driving off. Chuck is a quiet guy who acts like a real private investigator is supposed to, very serious. I always pictured him saying, "Just the facts, ma'am, just the facts." He also makes me a little nervous. Probably because I've never seen him smile or heard him laugh. He's just too damn serious for my taste.

As I walked up the stairs to Frank's office, I realized it was almost noon. I'm not a big eater, and when I do eat, I'm pretty particular about what I eat. Most of my friends say that I am much too fussy. I say selective, which goes to show that it's all in how you look at it. I admit, when I think too much about how particular I am, I wonder how I survived

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this long without some wait person punching me out. Oh well, life is short and if I'm going to eat, I want it the way I want it!

I had just reached the top of the stairs and was about to open the door when it flew open and Susan, Frank's present wife, just about knocked me down on her way out. She was obviously upset and to be honest, I don't think she even saw me, but then who knows what was going on. I try to stay out of other people's love lives since my experience in that area is pretty limited. I have a boyfriend but it's as casual as it could be and still be considered a relationship. I'm not the dependent type and most guys, after a while, can't understand why I'm not bugging them about the "M" word. I like being able to do what I want when I want without asking permission. Selfish? Definitely. But who cares?

I waited while Susan jumped into her red bug and flew out of the lot, almost causing an accident as she took off going north on Front Street thinking that giving Frank a minute to calm down would be a smart move on my part.

"Hey," I said finally, giving him a heads up, "do you live in a barn? Your door is open."

He stood by the window, gazing out over the lot. His face reflected irritation and I knew I'd have to watch my step.

"I know you saw her, Sam," he said, flatly. "I was looking out the window, watching you come up the stairs when she decided I was more interested in what was outside than listening to her problems."

"And were you?" I asked him, as I gently played with my hair. Yeah, I know, but the timing just seemed right.

"As a matter of fact, I was," he admitted. "It's getting real old listening to her complain about what I'm doing wrong on a daily basis."

"So, what are you doing wrong?"

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“Are you hungry?” he said, avoiding the question. “I need to get some lunch and have a cold beer.”

“Where do you want to go?”

“Let’s try The Bank, just in case we need to have a margarita chaser.”

We walked down the street to The Bank, a popular Mexican restaurant. As we got closer, I could smell the tortillas and hear the Salsa music coming from inside. Even on a Monday, the atmosphere was festive. Just what Frank needed, I thought.

“So what’s going on with you two?” I asked, as we took a table near the window.

“I don’t know. We just can’t communicate anymore.”

“Frank, don’t take offense to this, but do you even care?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “You’d think I’d have learned something after two divorces.”

Not wanting to spend my afternoon as a marriage counselor, I decided to lighten things up a bit.

“I know what the real problem is.”

“Well . . . let’s hear it. I’m on the edge of my seat.”

“You’re secretly in love with me,” I said, only half joking.

“So now that you know, what are we going to do about it?” he said, going along with the gag.

“Not a thing, Frank, not a thing.”

He just stared at me with that big smile on his face, like he knew something that I didn’t. I quickly took a sip of my beer. After sucking down a cold one, we decided to order.

Peter, our waiter, was a tall, very blonde, pale complexioned kid of about twenty-two who was wearing thick dark-rimmed glasses too big for his face which made him look to be the kind of nerd who would be more comfortable in a science lab or behind a computer than in a restaurant, taking orders. He gave us the spiel on the specials, none of which sounded special to me, and we

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ordered. As usual, Frank looked at me like I was crazy as I explained to Peter what I didn't want on my salad, after which we ordered a couple more Beck's.

I watched Peter as he left. He seemed oddly self-assured in a way that was almost defiant. Whatever the difference, it made me uncomfortable. As I looked back at Frank, he was staring at me the way he does when he wants information, personal information.

"What?" I said.

"You tell me," he said, raising an eyebrow. "What's going on with you?"

"What do you mean? My love life?"

"Do you have one these days?"

"Yeah, I'm still seeing Jack, you know, when we're not too busy."

"You mean, when you feel like it, right? Is he happy with that arrangement?"

"He's fine with it, and besides, if I spent more time with him, we wouldn't be able to keep up this steamy relationship we've got going."

"Stop teasing me, Sam."

I knew he really meant it but I just couldn't resist. I think deep down he enjoyed it too.

After lunch, Frank paid the check, despite my protests. Sure, I may go a bit too far asserting my independence, but you'd think he'd at least agree to split the check, after all, doesn't he recall a little thing called women's lib?

We walked leisurely back to Frank's office, discussing my next move as far as investigating Ronald. I gave him the little information I had and he said he would check it out and let me know if anything showed up, no charge. In the meantime, he made it clear that he didn't think I should follow my new client, money or no money, which of course, made me even more determined to get on Ron's tracks as

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soon as possible. Once back at my car, Frank made me promise I'd stay out of trouble. I reluctantly agreed. I knew in order to move forward I'd need some basic information, and took off to find out what Ronald was driving. I thought that if I got his license plate number, I might be able to gain access to Frank's computer and see what else comes up.

As I headed out to the construction site, I thought about what information I had so far, and realized it really wasn't much. I'd have to get something solid soon and I knew it might take a bit of game playing to get it. Lucky for me, I love games.

CHAPTER 2

Ronald had given me the name of a new housing development located about ten minutes from my home office as his current place of employment. I probably shouldn't have believed this, due to the fact that he had lied about his name or should I say names and the fact that my gut still told me he was lying about why he had hired me. However, for some reason I knew I'd find him there among the twenty or so other sweaty guys working on the framing, roofing and plumbing of those new dwellings. If nothing else, I'd enjoy searching for him among those muscular men in their tight T-shirts.

One thing that really irritated me about all the development is that all the houses look the same. As you drive down the street, it's like your watching a cartoon in which you see the same background over and over again. This can make looking for someone a bit difficult because when you get a description of the house they were last seen at, it doesn't mean much except that you could be watching the wrong house. I guess I should stop whining; at least we have nice weather most of the time.

I didn't want Ronald to see me snooping around so I drove my black Toyota Corolla up the hill to another home site, where, standing at the edge of an empty lot, I had a clear view of the workers below me. Since the area is full of beautiful mountain views, it was not unlikely that someone would be up here checking them out. As a matter of fact,

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there was a young couple walking around one of the lots, probably making plans for their new backyard. I tried to make it look as though I was doing some planning of my own, all the while sneaking glances at the workers below, searching desperately for Ronald.

It took me about five minutes to locate him, but there he was, hiking around the site, talking to all the other workers and pointing a lot. It occurred to me that he might be a supervisor of some sort which would help to explain where the money had come from. He was wearing a black T-shirt, blue jeans that fit perfectly, and black work boots. In fact, he looked so great from that angle that I found myself wondering about his personal life. He hadn't mentioned that he was afraid for anyone's safety, such as a wife or child, but he was too good looking not to have someone. Those beautiful crystal blue eyes had captivated me, and that was not an easy task, as any one of my former suitors would happily expound upon.

Clouds were gathering overhead, making it look much darker out than usual. This time of year is when we usually have our rain and although we haven't seen too much yet, our weatherman promised we would be having various rainstorms moving in over the next several weeks. Promises, promises.

I hadn't waited long enough to even find a decent radio station when a rusted out, light blue Dodge pickup truck pulled up to the sidewalk. The driver shouted out the window and Ronald hopped in. It took off down the street quicker than I had expected, so in order to keep up without getting too close, I decided to take a chance and cut through the neighborhood to catch up with them on the other side.

Bingo! When I had arrived at the light, there they were, waiting for the light to change on their side. I tried to get a good look at the driver, who appeared to be tall and thin,

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with dark-brown shoulder-length hair. As the light turned green and they pulled ahead and I made a note of the license plate number. I was glad that I could turn right on red because I was able to stay within one-car length of them without the worry of them making a quick turn and losing me. For someone who was willing to part with twenty-five thousand big ones because he was afraid someone was following him, Ron seemed strangely oblivious to the fact that I was on his tail.

As I followed them down Margarita Road going north, I realized the clouds were moving in steadily. Maybe the weatherman was right for a change, since it did look like a storm was approaching. I was hoping the rain wouldn't start for a while, it will definitely make it more difficult for me to follow Ronald and company, and I wasn't up to dealing with too many complications. I continued to follow the truck when it suddenly took a right into an apartment complex. They slowly followed the driveway around to the back, and stopped at Building D for a moment, before pulling into a parking place by the steps in front of the building. I moved cautiously into the complex and around the corner. Turning my car around, I backed into a parking place where I could easily see the truck just as Ronald and his buddy got out and headed toward the walkway.

As soon as they had disappeared into the apartment, I hurried over to hide behind a dirty green minivan parked across the parking lot. This was a vehicle that was involved in a lot of car pooling from what I could see. There were soda cans and McDonald's bags on the floor, French fries were everywhere and several of those cheap little toys that come with the kids' meals were on the seats. I often wonder how one can stand to get in a vehicle that is so disgusting, and not be bothered by it. Do you just stop noticing the mess? Are parents immune to it? Or do you just give up on trying

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to keep things in order? It's like when a kid has a nauseating runny nose and the only ones who don't notice it are the parents. This is why the whole marriage-and-kids thing is so unattractive to me. I just don't think I could handle being so unaware.

I had a perfect view of the stairs through the dirty windows, one of which had, "Wash Me" written on it, an understatement if ever there were one, but there were a couple of spots clean enough for me to see them go into the second door on the right. I walked around to the back of the building to observe if any windows were ajar. I didn't expect to see any open due to the cold weather, but you never know. As I moved around slowly I discovered I was right. No open windows.

Standing there in the cold, I decided to go back to my car, listen to the news for a while and make up my mind whether to wait for the group to come out. I didn't have much else planned for the night beyond putting on my most comfortable pajamas and cuddling up on my couch with my candles and fireplace lit, reading a good book, which, by the way is my favorite pastime. It was just about five-thirty now and with the impending storm, I couldn't think of anything I'd like better.

On my way back to the car, I heard someone behind me. Ignoring a flicker of fear, I whirled around and saw a couple of guys so close they were almost stepping on my heels.

"Hey, guys, what's up?" I said.

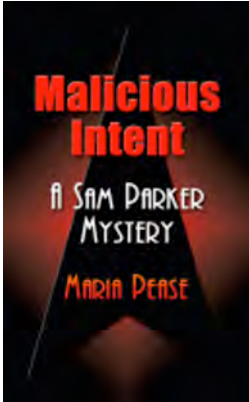
Just then, lights came on throughout the complex and suddenly, I could actually breathe again. This was when I noticed that one of them was my waiter, Peter, from lunch that afternoon at The Bank. The other kid was short, stocky and had dark hair and eyes. Unlike Peter, who looked so innocent, this one looked pretty tough. I don't think Peter recognized me, and I didn't say anything that would make

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him think he'd ever seen me before. I found it's best not to be remembered especially when you're snooping around.

"Not much." Peter's companion said, as they started up the same stairs Ronald and his buddy had gone up earlier. I sent them a nod as I watched them go into the same apartment. I couldn't believe it. Now I'd have to stay. This was getting interesting.

By the time I got back to my car, the rain was coming down so heavy that I could barely see through my windshield. I asked myself why it was that I was putting myself through this shit. Then I remembered. Twenty-five thousand dollars, that's why! I should just stop complaining and think about this case. I was very intrigued and although I was more confused than ever, I was loving it.



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