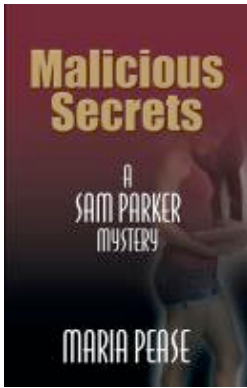


Malicious Secrets

A
SAM PARKER
MYSTERY

MARIA PEASE



As the second book in Maria Pease's Sam Parker Mystery series, this fast-paced detective mystery finds Samantha Parker in some compromising situations as she works her caseload. Financial scams, cheating spouses, missing persons and deviant behaviors are just the tip the iceberg but, with her sense of humor intact and her lucky undies to give her confidence, she's ready for whatever comes her way.

MALICIOUS SECRETS

A Sam Parker Mystery

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Praise For
Malicious Secrets
A Sam Parker Mystery

Maria Pease hits a home run with her second in the Sam Parker Mystery series.

Samantha Parker is a young determined women, trying to make it as a private investigator. Sam has what it takes; she is smart, energetic and curious with the raw gut feelings that that will make a great PI. Get ready to go to some pretty dark places with Sam as she gets herself into situations that are both thrilling and dangerous.

Sam knows what she wants, except when it comes to men. Her love life isn't quite as clear as her profession. Malicious Secrets is a page turner that you won't want to put down, so clear your calendar for another exciting adventure with Sam Parker, PI.

- Lisa Beach, Business Owner/Educator

Malicious Secrets, the second in the Sam Parker Mystery Series, is smart, sexy, funny, and exciting. It's a page turner that will keep you guessing and anxious to see what's next and you'll be extremely entertained throughout. Couldn't put it down!! It's a real winner, a must read.

- Andrea Tomes

Malicious Secrets includes eye-opening adventures involving financial trickery, cheating spouses and even the vampire culture. It's exciting to learn more about Sam Parker's "keen ability to visualize things and events" via Maria Pease's second installment in her mystery series that takes place right here in the Temecula Valley. You won't want to put it down!

- Jan Roberts, Temecula, CA

Malicious Secrets is a page turner from start to finish that I promise will keep you vastly entertained. I found Samantha Parker's character to be both engaging and charming. I am eager to read more about her in the near future and discover where the next novel may lead. The Malicious series is addicting and gratifying. Maria Pease is a hilarious author who delivers an outstanding murder mystery which is based in her home town of Temecula, California. Her writing style is filled with tons of suspense, wittiness and adventure. I guarantee you that this is a must read and Maria Pease will be one of your preferred authors too!

*- Christine Lowry Teskoski;
Educator; Temecula, California.*

If you thought Temecula, California was all about wine and cowboys...you'd be wrong. Strap in for the newest page turner from Maria Pease. PI Sam Parker is a little bit like the girl next door and a little like Stephanie Plum... in a PG kinda way. She's a wiseass, she's stubborn, and she's reckless. Lucky for her womanizing boss, Frank and the people of Southern California, she's also a very good PI.

While questioning the parents of a missing Temecula college girl, Sam senses that they're holding something back, that there's more to the story. And is there ever! The investigation takes some very interesting twists and turns as the story unfolds, revealing secrets, lies, friendships, cults, cover-ups, suicide, jealousy, alternative lifestyles, denial and murder. Did I leave anything out? Be prepared to stay up past your bedtime. Some questions can't wait until morning for answers. I guarantee you will never think of this sleepy California town, or your own, the same way ever again!

- Deborah Brischler, Business Owner

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First Edition

Malicious Secrets

A Sam Parker Mystery

MARIA PEASE

Dedication

This book is dedicated to my parents.
For my Mom, Barbara Murdock and my Dad, Ed
Murdock, who are always in my thoughts.
I miss you so much!

To my friend, Lyn Lauber,
You have been such a great friend and it means so much
to me. Your strength is an inspiration.
Stay strong, you've got this!

Acknowledgements

A big thank you to my editor Mary Linn Roby, who does amazing work. As always, this book is better because of you.

I also want to thank my family for all the support and encouragement you give me. It really means more than you know. And to my very good friends, who are there to support me, make me laugh, and give me inspiration for my next book. You know who you are.

Thank you to my team, photographer Andrea Tinc and stylist Ali Pease for making me look good.

To my husband and kids, I love you all so much and I'm so proud of you.

Scott, you are everything to me. A great drummer and the one who rocks my world, I couldn't love anyone more!

Steven, with your dedication, passion, and ability to look at every side of an issue, I know you will do big things.

Ali, you have a deadly mix...smart, beautiful, funny and talented. You're my girl!

Author's Note

While the fictional events in this novel occur in actual locations, the author has taken creative liberty with many details to enhance the reader's experience.

Chapter 1

Heading out of my office, I found myself having to do something I dreaded, you know, a chore that causes that feeling in the pit of your stomach like you don't know whether you're going to blow your cookies all over the place or be able to control it. Well, that's how I was feeling right now. I was on my way to perform a task that I really hated doing, but unfortunately, this was my responsibility and I had to do it in order to get the job done. It was square one, and there was no getting around that.

Her story is one you may have heard before. She's a nice, clean cut college girl. She's pretty and smart, has lots of friends, and as far as anyone knows, she isn't in any kind of trouble. But then she disappears...just like that.

Why should I care? It's my job. I'm not a seasoned cop and as a matter of fact, I haven't even been an investigator very long, but now it was my case and I was expected to find out what happened to her. It wasn't going to be easy, I knew that. So I read and re-read her file again and again, trying to come up with a clue, an idea, no matter how slight, about what could have happened to her. Everything I have read so far tells me

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she's dead...except the feeling in my gut. That's telling me a whole different story.

She's been missing for seven months, yet the police haven't been able to give her parents any answers and they could no longer stand not knowing what happened to their little girl. That's what they said. But she wasn't a little girl. She was a grown woman and could do as she please. They also told me that it wasn't like her to just go off. They were a close family and had been through so much. She would never leave, not without saying something and even then . . . no, she just wouldn't do it. That is what they told me.

My name is Samantha Parker and I am a PI trainee. Having been on the job for four months now, I have spent much of my time trying to prove myself worthy. You see, I fell into this profession by accident, but I love it and would *really* like to be good at it. This, by the way, is no easy task.

The question I had to ask myself was, did I have faith in humanity? Since taking on this job I had spent a lot of time pondering that question. That about explains how I have to look at each new case that is assigned to me. Otherwise, I don't think I could even get out of bed to try. Now, I was once again, asking myself if I had faith.

Driving down Rancho California Road, way overdressed, in my opinion, in a navy blue skirt, white top and navy high heels, my mind was on the task at hand. Simply put, I had been assigned to assist in an investigation concerning a young woman missing for seven months. A job that becomes increasingly difficult as time passes by, and seven months for a case like this is... well, it can be very challenging.

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As I passed the Callaway and Miramonte wineries on my left and approached South Coast winery I knew I had a bit farther to go to get to the home of Mr. and Mrs. Hawkins, parents of Becky Hawkins, age twenty-one, allegedly missing but most likely deceased.

I had butterflies in my stomach and my mouth was dry. I had to talk to these people and bring them back to a painful time in their life, and ask them to remember all the details. I hate this part of the job because I always find myself feeling responsible for having to make them relive their pain. But if I could help to solve the case, well, it makes it all worth it in the end.

Turning right on Anza, I found myself on a small country road, surrounded by orange trees. The aroma was delicious, and for a moment, I lost the anxious feeling building up inside of me. But when I turned down the rocky dirt driveway, the anxiety returned ten fold and I didn't think I could do it, although I knew I had to.

The house was a one story, mid-sized ranch style home with fruit trees and an avocado grove. A small grey barn surrounded with an aged whitewash fence sat to the right side of the tattered lawn area where two frumpy old horses stood under the one tree that provided some shade.

Thankful that I had prepared a list of questions, and determined to remain calm, I rang the doorbell only to have it answered by a man who caught me off guard by presenting a more youthful appearance than I had anticipated.

"You must be Miss Parker," he said, extending his hand. "I'm Andrew Hawkins. Please come in. My wife is out back. Let me call her."

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Waiting, I took inventory of the place and found that the exterior, for which dumpy was the only word that came to mind, didn't do it justice since the living room into which he had lead me was warm and cozy with its neutral tones and colorful flowers.

"Miss Parker, thank you for coming." Marissa Hawkins said, as she elegantly approached me, holding out her hand to greet me.

"Please call me Sam," I said, and then, taking a deep breath, "I know this is difficult for you and I am sorry."

"Look, Miss Parker . . . Sam," Marissa interrupted me as we all sat down. "We need to know where Becky is and are prepared to do what we have to do in order to find her, so let's get started."

"When is the last time you saw Becky?" I asked Marissa.

"It was on December 17," she told me, her face expressionless. "Becky decided to come up to do some shopping and spend the night here in order to get in some quality study time. She had finals coming up and found it difficult to study at her apartment."

"Did you go shopping with her?"

"Yes, we went to the Promenade Mall for a few hours and then came home and had dinner. Then she went into her room to study and that was the last time I saw her."

"What time was that?"

"I went to bed after the eleven o'clock news and stopped in to say goodnight. It was about eleven thirty."

"So, she was in her room?"

"Yes, she was still studying. She said that she had a lot of information to cover and that she'd be up for a while longer."

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I looked to Andrew. "Were you watching the news with your wife?"

"No, I wasn't feeling well and went to bed right after dinner."

"Is that the last time you saw your daughter?"

"Yes," he said quietly, putting his head in his hands.

My heart sunk as I looked through my notes trying to get back on track.

"Did Becky see any friends while she was here?"

"No. I don't believe so." Marissa said, looking to Andrew for confirmation.

"Did she receive any phone calls or make any?"

"I don't think so," she said and Andrew agreed.

"You're sure?" I asked, my gaze moving between them.

"I'm sorry Miss Parker. I just don't know for sure. I don't remember seeing her on the phone." Marissa said, and now her voice was shaking.

"Does she have a cell phone?"

"Yes, but I didn't see her using it."

"Did you stay together while you were at the mall?" I asked. "Because I'm wondering if she might have run into a friend. Maybe she made plans for the evening. You're sure you were with her the whole time?"

Marissa put her hands to her temples and rubbed them gently in a circular motion. "We weren't together the whole time," she said as she looked at me. "She wanted to go to the Gap and I wasn't up for it. I was tired and the music is so loud. I went to Macy's to look for a gift for her and we met at the food court a half hour later."

"Did you see her speaking with anyone?" I asked, hopeful. "Or did she mention having run into someone?"

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“No. But if she had I’m sure she would have told me. We’re very close. She shares everything with me.”

I thought about that statement and although I know Marissa believed every word of it, I did not. It doesn’t matter how close you are with your mom, no kid shares everything. We all have secrets. I took more notes and started again.

“She was attending San Diego State University?” I inquired, my tone serious.

“Yes, she was in her senior year.” Marissa replied. “Marketing.”

“And she lived in an apartment complex?”

“Yes, close to campus. Villa Casa.”

“My records also indicate that she had a roommate, is that accurate?”

“Yes. Becky and Allison had shared the apartment for about . . . two years.”

“Have they had any difficulties or disagreements that you know of?”

“No, they were inseparable, like sisters. Best friends since they were kids.”

Andrew Hawkins had been listening patiently until suddenly, he rose and addressed me directly.

“Miss Parker,” he said. “This seems a little silly to me, you do have all of this information in that file, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Then why do you need to ask us about information you already have?”

“Mr. Hawkins, I like to start fresh, and not rely on information gathered by someone other than myself. It helps me to understand the situation leading up to the disappearance better, and my hope is that starting over might also help you to remember details you did not offer

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when you were interviewed before. Sometimes a little distance can assist you in recalling things more clearly.”

He stared at me with sadness in his eyes. He looked, well . . . defeated, and I couldn't have that.

“Look, I want to find out where your daughter is,” I went on, “but in order for me to do my job I need your cooperation.”

He glanced at his wife, and then retook his place on the couch. I resumed asking questions about Becky, her lifestyle, friends, classmates, boyfriends, coworkers and anyone else she may know, and of course, I also had to ask if they knew of anyone that may want to harm her.

“No, absolutely not,” Andrew professed. “Becky is a lovely girl; there isn't anyone that would want to hurt her.”

I knew they were tired of answering my questions because I was surely tired of asking them. Before I was escorted to my car, I requested and was given several photos of Becky and some friends, her high school yearbook, and a list of all the people she knew and where I might find them. Well, at least the ones they knew about.

As I drove back down the dirt drive and back onto Anza Road, I couldn't help but think about how normal her life was. She was a popular college girl, attractive, outgoing, smart and looking forward to a bright future in the advertising industry after graduation. A normal girl, a normal life. But she was gone, and no one knew where.

Chapter 2

Although I work several cases on my own, I am considered a trainee and I do have to check in with Frank Meeker, my supervisor, and good friend. I have a small desk at the office but mostly I work from my study at home in Temecula, California. You see, previously, I had been working as a paralegal, and because I don't trust attorneys myself, most of them anyway, I had to find a clientele that either didn't like or trust them as well, or just couldn't afford one, which was the likely scenario on most occasions.

My job consisted primarily of doing the paperwork for divorces, wills and living trusts, but on occasion I'd get a case doing legal research which, for me, could consist of engaging in a bit of snooping around. Most of the time I was just barely able to pay my rent and eat, but I loved the freedom the job offered me, and knew I could never be restricted to a desk in a stuffy law office.

So you wonder, how did I get this gig? Well, I solved a pretty significant case as an amateur, and my friend Frank, a former cop and real life PI, asked me to come aboard and assist in some of his cases. I was originally supposed to work only part-time but circumstances changed all that. Personally I think Frank warmed up to the idea of having me take on some of his crappier

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cases, most of which include following around a spouse, hoping to find them in an uncompromising situation, and then getting it all on film. But that's not the best part of the gig. The topper is that I also get to show the photos to the paying spouse, and let them know that their suspicions were correct. They had married a cheating low life scum of the earth. It's all so much fun!

Well, it can be if they don't take it out on you and punch you in the face, as one woman did upon viewing photos of her husband with her next door neighbor, who was a dog, by the way. She had a hell of a left hook though and I told her she should use it on him, which she did, and was tossed in the tank for aggravated assault. When I went to bail her out, she said it felt so great she was planning to do it again real soon. I didn't doubt it. Frank got a kick out of the whole thing but also informed me I wasn't to give marital advice, not having experience and all.

Frank and I have an unusual relationship. He is married for the third time and depending on the minute, he's either is madly in love or can't stand his wife, who is named Susan. He also happens to have a wild crush on me, which I have learned to take full advantage of. No, I would never have a fling with him, but I do so enjoy our playful flirting, and let's face it, we all know that a fling ruins that kind of fun. Also, I happen to be dating a very nice, handsome man. Matt is his name, if you must know.

Upon my return home, I put a call into Frank to fill him in on my meeting with Mr. & Mrs. Hawkins.

"Sammy!" he exclaimed. "What did you come up with?"

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“Nothing so far,” I confessed. “They told me she just came home to do some shopping and get in some study time.”

“Stay on top of it. She didn’t disappear into thin air.”

“Yeah, I know. I just thought . . .”

“This one isn’t going to be easy. If it were, the cops would have solved it.” I was silent as I thought about it. He was right and I knew it. “Hey, have you eaten?” he asked as an afterthought. “How about getting a bite at Mad Madeline’s?”

“No thanks Frank. I’m going to go over my notes from the meeting. Can I get a rain check?”

“You bet, Sam. Keep me posted on the case,” he said, and hung up.

I was too tired to go out but found myself becoming extremely hungry after Frank’s mention of Mad Maddie’s, as I fondly call the little burger joint in town. Although my mouth was watering for a juicy burger, I didn’t have any of the ingredients to make one and was forced to settle for a tuna on rye with lettuce and pickles and a cold glass of wine. Then, with my belly full, I was ready to take out my index cards and started to write down the information I had so far. The index card approach is one I learned while attending paralegal school at USD, and have used faithfully ever since. It is also how I solved my first case, and I am a firm believer that if something works, you should stick with it.

The deck was slim but I knew it would grow as I was able to uncover more information about the life of Becky Hawkins. After writing out every detail I had, I put my case file and cards away and called it a night. I got a tall glass of ice water and headed up to my room, put on a T-shirt and shorts - sexy I know - and turned on the news.

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When I awoke at 3:00 A.M., with the late, late movie on the television, I dragged myself out of bed to turn it off. Falling back to sleep was not easy as I couldn't stop wondering about Becky. I was eager to speak with her roommate and friend Allison Taft since I knew if anyone could provide me with some insight into Becky's life, it would be her.

My restlessness wouldn't allow me to fall back to sleep so at five I gave up and got out of bed. The morning was warm and cloudy, yet I felt compelled to plant myself out in my small, yet cozy back yard and enjoyed two cups of coffee as I listened to the birds chirping away, after which, foregoing my usual workout, I showered and dressed, feeling as though I had a big head start on my day. Taking out my notes, I dialed Allison Taft's number, only to be chilled when the machine picked up with, "Hi, this is Becky and Ally's place. You know what to do."

Although I had never heard her speak, I somehow knew that the fun loving, innocent voice belonged to Becky Hawkins. I left a short message with my cell number and I hung up, but not being one to wait, got my keys and files and headed out on the 15 freeway which was wide open as I traveled south toward San Diego. The day was gloomy, only hazy sun coming through the clouds now and then, but as I got closer to the coast, it became even more overcast and by the time I had reached San Diego, the drizzle was light yet steady.

The apartment building stood three floors tall and was full of life. Several apartment doors were opened wide, music blaring. Some students sat outside their door with text in hand staring at the falling rain, while others didn't even pretend to be studying. I couldn't get over the

atmosphere. It was the summer session and this place was still hopping.

Finding apartment # 306 on the third floor, (big surprise, huh?), I knocked on the door which was answered by a tall, thin, slightly quirky looking girl still sweating from whatever activities she had been engaged in. I suspected she was a runner due to her lanky build, not to mention the fancy sneakers. Noticing these things is why I am a paid investigator, you know.

"I called this morning," I said after introducing myself. "I'm investigating Becky Hawkins' disappearance. Her parents gave me your name. May I come in?"

"It's not really . . ."

"I drove a long way," I said, not giving her the opportunity to refuse.

"I'm just going to grab a towel, I just finished my run." She told me as she led the way into a small living room. "Have a seat."

Her tone of voice was high pitched and I knew immediately that the voice on the answering machine must belong to Becky. For a moment I wondered why she hadn't changed it, and then remembered that the girl was just missing, not dead. Not until we have a body anyway. Allison returned with a towel and sat down on the chair across from me.

"What can I do for you Miss Parker?" She said, her eyes beginning to fill with tears. "I gave the police all the information I had about Becky."

"I know, I'm so sorry to have to bring this up again, but her parents feel that by having me work on the case along with the police, we will be able to locate Becky sooner." I told her, as gently as possible.

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She wept for a few moments as I sat still, suppressing the need to cry myself. I'm not usually brought to tears very easily but this young girl's pain pierced through my heart like a knife.

"I'm sorry," she said, still sniffing. "I just miss her so much."

"I heard you were very close. Look, we're going to find her, but I need your help, and because of that, I need you to try to be strong. Tell me about Becky. When did you meet?"

"We have been friends since the fourth grade," she said, adding proudly, "she's like a sister to me."

"The fourth grade," I repeated. "That's a long time. Have you always been so close?"

"Yes, we stick together through everything. I can't imagine making a move without talking to her. And she does the same with me, you know?"

"Does Becky have a boyfriend?"

"Not anymore, she was seeing a guy from her marketing class but she said he was getting too weird."

"Too weird?" I said, perplexed. "What does that mean?"

"Becky liked him but we both feel like we should graduate from college, get a good job and start our career before we get serious about a relationship. He wanted to get serious and she didn't. She's very goal oriented."

"So, she said he was getting weird, meaning he wanted to be intimate with her?"

"Yes. She wasn't ready and he kept pushing her. He told her to relax, said it was no big deal."

"Did he continue to push her?"

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“Yeah, we’d laugh about it, saying if he didn’t think it was such a big deal why was he making it one?”

“What’s his name?”

“Why do you need to know that?” She asked hesitantly.

“Because I’m trying to find your friend.” I said, trying not to seem impatient.

“His name is Ken, Ken Adler.”

“Do you know if Ken is attending the summer session?”

“I’m not sure. Why do you want to know?”

“I might need to talk to him, that’s all. Do you know his major or where he lives?”

“No, but he could be in the business department. That’s where they met, in a marketing class.”

“Did they date often?”

“Maybe once or twice a week. Becky’s involved in a lot of clubs and also has a job, so her time was pretty limited.”

“Where does she work?” I asked, being careful to use the present tense.

“We both work as cocktail waitresses at Diego’s,” she told me. “The money’s good and we only have to work weekends and one night during the week. It’s a good job for now.”

“Where is Diego’s?”

“In P.B., it’s kind of hot spot for college kids.”

“P.B.?” I must have looked confused.

“Oh, Pacific Beach, we call it P.B. around here. It’s a little beach town not far from here.”

I’d been there, but didn’t realize it was a college hangout. Obviously I’m not as with it as I’d like to think.

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“Allison, is there anything out of the ordinary that you remember?” I went on, convinced there must be something else of significance that she could tell me. “Did Becky act strangely or mention anyone or anything that didn’t sit right?”

She hesitated as she thought about it and then flatly said, “No, she was fine.”

“Was she into drugs or sex or anything like that?”

“No, I told you, Becky is very dedicated to her education. She would never be involved with any of that.”

“Are you sure? Sometimes even a best friend might not know . . .”

“No way!”

“How can you be so sure?”

“I’m not sure if I should be telling you this...”

“What?” I wanted to know what she was hiding.

“Her little brother . . .” Her eyes filled with tears. “He . . . he killed himself.”

“What?” I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. “When?” I scratched my head, stunned by the information. Becky’s file hadn’t even mentioned that she had a little brother, much less that he had committed suicide. Why wasn’t it in her file?

Crying, she tried to tell me about it, when she hesitated, it was clear that she didn’t know whether or not she was doing the right thing.

“We were seventeen, and Shaun was fourteen. He was . . . I shouldn’t be telling you this.” She wiped her eyes, as the tears continued.

“It’s okay Allison. This could help me to find Becky.” I said, wondering if it really could.

“Shaun was a little wild. He started hanging out with some tough kids and got into smoking pot and then other

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stuff. Becky tried to talk to him but he wouldn't listen to her. Then his behavior changed. He went from him being tired and stoned to acting really strange."

"Strange, how?" I asked.

"He used to talk to someone, but no one was there, you know?"

"So, what happened?"

"It really scared Becky so she told her parents about it. Of course, they already knew. They tried to get him under control, putting him in rehab several times. But every time we thought he'd be okay, he ended up having a setback and getting into more and more trouble."

"What kind of trouble?"

"He broke into houses and took things, got into fights, hung out with some strange people, stuff like that."

"What did his parents do?"

"They had said, if he was old enough, they would have let him go to jail so he'd dry out, but at his age he would have gone to some juvenile prison. But because they thought that going to a place like that may actually be more harmful, they enrolled him in a locked rehab facility, and three months later, when he came out, he was like a new person."

"Then, how did he . . . ?"

"About a month later Becky came home from cheerleading practice and found him in his room on the floor next to his bed. He had a needle sticking out of his arm. He'd – he'd overdosed on heroin."

It must have been devastating for a girl who thought her brother had escaped the impending fate that doing drugs offer, I thought. But now, for all I knew, she could be dead herself.

Chapter 3

To say I was fuming would be an understatement. I was pissed off that my file was incomplete. I was pissed off that Mr. and Mrs. Hawkins failed to mention they had a son who committed suicide, which was, to say the least, vital information, and I was pissed off that Frank had probably known all this when he assigned me this case. Arriving back in Temecula, I decided to go straight to the office and find out why I was being screwed with.

When I walked in, Frank was sitting across the desk from a frail looking elderly woman. When he saw me he shot me a stern look. Shit! He was with a client, or potential client, which meant I'd have to wait, and do it patiently. Not one of my strong points.

Frank and Chuck shared the top floor of an aged building in Old Town Temecula, which is an old western town brimming with history in the middle of this fine city. Chuck was in Seattle on a case and was expected to be there for a few weeks so Frank was without the aggravation of dealing with me and Chuck being, as we usually were, at odds with one another. You see, Chuck doesn't like me very much, or maybe he just doesn't have the patients to deal with someone learning the ropes. He expects perfection, and I'm not able to give that to him. Not yet anyway. We get into it on a regular basis and the

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subject matter is irrelevant. Bottom line, we bug each other and are both bullheaded. Sometimes it's fun and sometimes it just sucks.

As I sat in the outer waiting area, I couldn't help overhearing this woman's story. Apparently, she had been swindled of her life savings and didn't know what to do. The police hadn't been able to find the older couple who had come into her home, looked her straight in the eye, and told her they were financial planners who could double her money in six months. Not only had they not invested it where they had agreed on, but she could no longer reach them by phone and the office they once inhabited was now up for a lease.

Frank questioned her as to why she would have listened to them in the first place, and her reply was simple: they were about her age, which I put at about seventy-eight or so, and she felt they understood her financial situation. Her husband had passed on last year and she was having trouble managing her money.

All I could think of was how devastating this must be for her. She had trusted them because they were of the same generation and she thought they really cared about her plight. I was surprised that an older couple would do something like this, but crooks come in all shapes, sizes, colors and ages. As I thought about it, the fact that they were older would probably be helpful in finding them. If, in fact, Frank took the case.

Deciding I had waited long enough, I got up to go when Frank called out to me.

"Sam. Sam, will you come in here for a minute? This is Mrs. Charlotte Moore. Mrs. Moore, this is Samantha Parker, one of my investigators. Mrs. Moore has had the bad luck of having been the target of a financial planning

Malicious Secrets

scam. I wondered if you have heard anything about this operation around town.”

“No, I haven’t, but I’d be happy to look into it.”

“Great.” He said, smiling. “Mrs. Moore, we will be in touch with you soon. Give us a chance to look into the matter and we’ll let you know what we find.”

I knew that he intended to reassure her, but the look in her eyes as she left the room gave me reason to believe that he hadn’t done so, and I felt sorry for her.

“So, why are your panties all in a bunch?” he said sarcastically, as he closed the door behind him after escorting her down the stairs to her car. I didn’t know what he was talking about for a moment, and then it came back to me. My incomplete file.

“Did you know that the Hawkins’ son killed himself about four years ago?” I demanded.

“It wasn’t in your file?”

“No, it wasn’t in my file. How am I supposed to investigate this case if I don’t have some basic information?”

“Chill out Sam!” he said, sternly. “This is how it works. If you think the cops are happy that your interfering in an ongoing case you’re crazy.”

“You gave me this case!”

“Yes, I did. So you’re going to have to find a way to work with the cops or they will continue to withhold information from you.”

“So what am I supposed to do?”

“You’ve met a couple of cops since you started here. Call one, explain your situation, and be nice.”

“I am nice.” I responded, feeling ridiculous for letting this get to me. By this time, I should know better.

“What about Mrs. Moore?”

Maria Pease

“Get on that too. Maybe the cops know something.”

I found myself wishing that I had as much confidence in my being able to handle multiple cases at the same time as he did.

I dialed the Temecula police department and asked to speak with Detective Jake Reilly. Jake was a newly appointed detective in the department whom I had met a few weeks ago at Chuck’s bon voyage party and we had immediately hit it off. His vital statistics included the fact that, at age thirty, he had had only one serious girlfriend with whom, even though they had, as he said, met when they were too young, he was apparently still in love with her, which was too bad because, given his stocky build, dirty blond hair and warm hazel eyes, he was my kind of guy.

He wasn’t in, so I left my name and number and mentioned the party, hoping that would be enough to jog his memory.

I decided to hang out with Frank for a while and utilize some of the paid web services he has available to him. Being a former cop, he knows exactly where to find what, and it comes in handy to be able to get into the game and access certain information. Today I decided that a background check of the Hawkins was in order.

However, as it turned out, they were as straight as a couple could be. As a psychologist, she had worked at Inland Valley Hospital for six years before opening a practice of her own here in Temecula, specializing in marriage and family counseling. Talk about a job that sucks the life out of you. What could possibly be worse than listening to couples griping and complaining about each other on a daily basis?

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Andrew was a regional sales manager for pharmaceutical company, and had been with them for twelve years. I had to wonder if he had supplied Marissa with any drugs to keep her from going off the deep end. Hey, it was just a thought.

The fact was, however, that there had been no arrests, warrants or even a jay walking ticket between them. They were up on their bills, have no credit cards and own their home outright. Clean, squeaky freaking clean.

Finally, tired of looking at the computer screen, I logged off and started to gather my files, telling Frank I was going to work from home.

“How about a cocktail?”

“I’d love to Frank, but I’m waiting for a call from Jake Reilly and I’ve been here longer than I expected to be.”

“Jake Reilly? Is he the kid we met at Chuck’s send off?”

“Yes, I’m hoping he’ll help me out.”

“Oh, he will.”

“How do you know that?” I asked suspiciously.

“Trust me, Sam. Just don’t go talking about Matt and how wonderful he is.”

“I don’t do that.”

“Well, don’t start now. You need a connection in the department.”

“I know. Can I take a rain check on that drink?”

“Sure,” he said, his attention on his computer screen.

“Oh, did you find anything on Mr. or Mrs. Hawkins?”

“Yes. I found out they are saints who have had rotten luck with kids. Let me ask you something. Why wouldn’t they tell me about Shaun?”

Maria Pease

“Maybe it still hurts too much. It’s tough for parents to lose a kid, and it must be worse to lose him to drugs after they thought he was on his way to a full recovery.”

“I can’t even imagine how painful it would be. I cried for three months when my dog got hit by a car.”

“Go easy on them. Just be clear that you need to know everything about their lives if you’re going to find Becky. Everything is important, even if they don’t think it’s relevant.”

“Okay Frank. I’ll call you in the next day or so with an update.”

“Hey, Sam. You dress up real nice,” he said grinning. “You should wear skirts more often.”

I turned and blew him a kiss, showing him some leg at the same time. He raised an eyebrow and I knew that was my signal to get out while I could.

I was eager to see if Jake had returned my call, and was already trying to figure out what to do if he hadn’t. Should I call again? That might make me look desperate and that was definitely not the impression I wanted to make.

Pulling into my driveway, I saw my friend and neighbor Kim talking with Mrs. Bennett, my landlord. The first thought that came to mind was, no, please, not today. You see, Mrs. Bennett is a mean old lady of seventy-two whose mission in life, since the loss of her husband, seems to be to make my life miserable. I have been trying to talk her into selling me the little house I have come to call home but she refuses, claiming that the house is her insurance policy. I happen to think the real reason is that she enjoys bickering with me far too much to give it up. Some of her ongoing complaints consist of leaving the garbage cans out too long after

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pickup and not watering her garden enough to keep the flowers thriving. And that's not where it ends, believe me, it's just the beginning.

Still sitting in the car holding the door open with my high heel shoe, I gathered my briefcase. As I exited the car, Mrs. Bennett was still engaged in conversation with Kim. I attempted to get past them but Mrs. Bennett, interrupting Kim, turned to me before I could escape.

"Miss Parker, I need to speak with you."

Kim knew this was a bad sign and waved goodbye as she moved quickly into her backyard.

"What now, Mrs. Bennett?"

"I'm wondering when you intend to change the timer on the sprinkler system. The settings need to be adjusted for the summer heat."

"I'll take care of it." I said, impatiently as I walked to the front door, uncomfortably aware that she was close behind me.

"Miss Parker, my son may be moving into the area, to be closer to me," she said. I turned to face her, and saw that I'm-so-sorry expression on her face, and my heart sank.

"I may need you to move out. He'll need a place to live and . . ."

"When?"

"Thirty days," she told me. "I've sent a letter by registered mail to notify you."

"Okay, I'll start looking for a place," I said and closed the door behind me. Once inside, I dropped my briefcase and slumped on the couch and cried.

Chapter 4

The ringing telephone jerked me back into reality and I tried to pull myself together, not wanting to sound as if I had been crying, which is difficult to do when your nose is stuffy and your throat is dry. I decided I'd better just let the machine pick up, knowing that I wouldn't be able to pull off my usual positive attitude, not now, when after four years of renting this lovely little house, with hopes of owning it soon, I was being given my thirty-day notice to move out. But when I heard Matt's voice, I ran over and snatched it up.

"Hi Sam, I was hoping I'd catch you," he said. "What are you doing?"

"I'm trying to get some work done." I said, unable to keep from sniffing.

"Are you all right?"

"Not really."

"What's up? Do you have some news about the missing girl?"

All of a sudden I felt completely ashamed of myself. Here I was feeling like my world was coming to an end because I had to move, when the reality was that there was a family with a dead son and missing daughter, not to mention all the other people in the world that have had tragic events in their lives.

Malicious Secrets

“No, I...I’m fine,” I assured him. “I guess I’m just tired.”

“I’m sorry Sam. I wanted to see if you’d like to go have some dinner, maybe it will take your mind off things for a while. Are you up for it?”

Was I up for it? By the time he said he’d pick me up at seven, I already felt better.

I hung up feeling like I had a new energy. I was going to find Becky. I could feel it. I took out the photos her parents gave me and examined them carefully. In one, Becky stood in the center of the group of seven friends, all dressed casually in shorts and T-shirts with arms around each other, standing on the beach with a sailboat passing in the distance as the sun sparkled on the water. It was a beautiful sight.

On the back of the photo someone had written “graduation weekend” followed by the names and I wondered how long it’s been since they have seen each other. After recording each name on a separate index card, I decided to contact each one personally.

After looking through the other photos and putting them in the large envelope, I read the comments made by other seniors and staff members in the yearbook, many of them wishing her the best in the future, and as I read, I caught myself hoping she would indeed have one.

The phone rang, and I moved to pick it up.

“Hello?”

“Hi, um . . . is Samantha available? This is Jake Reilly.”

“This is Samantha,” I said calmly, noting how strange it was to hear someone call me by my full name.

“Hi, I received a message to call you.” He said, with a questioning tone.

Maria Pease

“Yes, I...do you remember me? We met at the party for Chuck Farrell.” I asked hopefully.

“Oh, sure I do.” He said, “What can I do for you?”

“Is there any chance you might meet with me for a cup of coffee?”

“Okay, when?”

“Are you available tomorrow?” I asked, trying not to sound too desperate.

“I’m working but I take my lunch at about two, do you want to join me?”

“That sounds great.” I said, relieved.

“I usually go to Milano’s, he said. “Do you know where it is?”

“Yes, I’ll meet you there, okay?”

“Okay, I’ll look forward to it.”

“Bye Jake.”

“Bye Samantha.”

I had thought about asking him to call me Sam, but I decided that I liked the way he said Samantha. I hung up feeling encouraged that Jake might just be nice enough to keep me in the loop as far as the department went, although I wouldn’t know until I asked.

The rest of my afternoon was spent searching online for the whereabouts of Becky’s high school friends. As I located the colleges that each was attending I had to note that they had indeed all gone in separate directions, and all far from home. All but Allison Taft and Becky Hawkins.

As is usually the case when I’m caught up in research, the time got away from me and before I knew it I was running around like a lunatic trying to get ready for dinner with Matt. Since we had been going out for close to six months, he was aware of this routine and although

Malicious Secrets

he is very punctual, he's always patient as I attempted to put the finishing touches on my appearance.

We had discussed an evening of sailing so I threw on my blue jeans and a low-cut black top, excited about the prospects of what the evening would bring. You see, I still had a mad crush on him and the thought of his touch . . . well, it was enough to send chills through me. Besides, I found that I was badly in need of a distraction.

As soon as I heard his car pulling up in front of the house I grabbed my sandals and my bag and headed down the stairs in time to open the door before he even had a chance to knock.

In no time at all we were on Coronado Island boarding the *Lucky Man*. With Andre aboard as our chef, and Peter there to tend to pretty much everything else, we were here to simply relax on our deck chairs and gaze at the horizon. The sunset was an explosion of orange and cranberry, and as we sailed into the night, the sound of the waves hitting the sides of the yacht soothed me. The rocking of the boat, the sound of the ocean and a little red wine was just what I needed, not to mention Matt's strong arms around me and the romance that followed.

Despite getting home late, I woke early, eager to get in a good workout and make contact with the comrades that were so special to Becky. I wasn't sure if any or all of them were attending summer school or whether they come back to their home base during summers, so I put a call into Allison to see what information she might be able to provide. Forced to leave a message, I kept it short. I hoped it wouldn't be too long before she got back to me.

Maria Pease

In the meantime, I found out where each of them had lived while in high school and discovered that their parents had stayed put, a practice that is quite normal for Temecula. I was about to start making phone calls but decided to just head out and see who was around. If anyone had any information about Becky, I wanted to be able to see their face. Nonverbal communication is way under rated in my opinion. It also helps me to see if they're lying.

Just as I was closing the door, keys in hand, my phone rang, drawing me back into the house. Jake called to say that he couldn't meet me this afternoon because something had come up and suggested that we meet now at Richie's Diner on Temecula Parkway where, within a half hour we were seated in the back where there seemed to be a bit more privacy. I was glad since I might be groveling pretty quickly.

The diner is a fifty's place, very cute with great food and friendly service. It's also close to home so I frequent it quite a lot. Our waitress arrived just as I opened my menu and since I wasn't hungry, I ordered an iced tea with lemon while Jake opted for coffee and a bagel with cream cheese.

"What is it you wanted to see me about?" He asked, cautiously.

"Well, I was hoping. . ." I began. "You know I'm a private investigator, right? I work with Frank Meeker and sometimes with Chuck Farrell, as well. Right now I'm investigating the case of a missing girl."

"Is this the Hawkins girl?" he asked, eagerly.

"Yes, her family hired me to assist in locating her. Do you know the case?"

Malicious Secrets

“Yes,” he said. “I’m one of the cops on that one. Why did they go private? We’re still following leads.”

“I know. They just want more manpower involved. They lost a son to a drug overdose about four years ago and they don’t want to lose their only daughter as well.” I said, although I assumed he knew that already.

“Well, what can I do for you?”

“I was hoping we could help each other.”

He sat back, his hazel eyes questioning me. “I know what I can do for you, but how do you think you can help me?”

“Jake, I’m not a cop,” I reminded him. “I can do some stuff that you can’t. That fact alone should be enough.”

“What kind of stuff are you talking about?” He asked me in a way that told me he was interested.

“You tell me. I have the guts to do what I have to do to get the information I need, and I’m not afraid to take chances.”

“But. . .”

“Look, here’s Frank’s number. Give him a call and check me out. If you decide not to work with me, I’ll understand. But this job is tough enough and everyone can use a hand sometimes. I don’t want anything but the opportunity to help.”

I was still pleading my case when Jake’s phone rang.

“What’s going on?” I asked when, signing off, he rose and threw a ten dollar bill on the table.

“I have to go,” he told me. “A girl’s body was just pulled out of Lake Skinner.”

“I’m going with you.”

“No, Samantha.”

“Jake, I have to know if it’s Becky.”

Maria Pease

He hesitated and took a deep breath. "All right, but stay out of the way."

At any other time, my feelings might have been hurt, but given the case I was working on, I knew that I had to follow up on any leads that came my way. And then there was that small matter of playing nice. If I wanted the man's help, that was the way it was going to have to be.

Chapter 5

By the time we reached the spot where the body had been found, cops were swarming the area. I did as I was told and stayed out of the way, but as I observed the frenzied chaos at the crime scene I couldn't help wondering who it was under the coroners white sheet. I found myself holding my breath, not sure if I would be able to take it if it was, in fact, Becky.

I paced back and forth by Jake's car inspecting the thick brush that surrounded the outer areas of the lake and in the process I became increasingly aware of the feeling that we were being watched. A flash of sunlight hit my face and I went towards it, down the path that veered around the outer region of the lake and in the direction of the park area where visitors played ball and enjoyed the open space, shrugging off the sense that as I distanced myself from the area cordoned off by the police, I was being hunted.

The path came to a fork and I looked down each way. Because of the trees, it was difficult to see, and so, although reluctant to go too far from the crime scene which was still buzzing with activity, I went a bit further on until I saw a flash of light, this time coming from the lake. The call of a black crow made me jump, and deciding that I was too much of a chicken shit to go any further, I started

Maria Pease

to return to Jake's Chevelle, telling myself that I was letting my imagination get the better of me. All of the sudden I was confronted by a tall, thick, Hispanic man wearing dark glasses and a police uniform. His bald head glistened with sweat.

"Where do you think you're going?" he demanded.

"I saw something in there." I said, pointing to the area I had been exploring, expecting him to at least look.

"You need to leave." he said sternly.

I muttered something about waiting for Jake which seemed to satisfy him since he left me leaning against the car where, what seemed like hours later, Jake found me.

"What's going on?" I asked anxiously. "Do you know who she is?"

"No, but it doesn't appear to be Becky. It's difficult to tell."

"Is it a drowning?"

"No, someone stabbed her and dumped her in the lake." He turned back to see what was happening behind him. "I've got to get you out of here. This is not something you need to see."

"No, it's okay. I can't see anything from here anyway." I said, not wanting him to feel like he had to baby-sit me. "I'll be right here. Go do your job." I added, giving him a little push.

He walked back over and spent a minute looking under the canvas that covered the body before it was loaded into the coroner's vehicle and was gone. Jake stood and watched, as they drove away. He was making his way back toward me when a pretty female police officer joined him, and they chatted – oh lets be real, they were flirting – as they came toward me.

Malicious Secrets

This woman, who was introduced as Officer Monique Collins, looked too feminine to be a cop. For goodness sake, she actually looked great in the uniform, with her curvy frame settling in all the right places. She was unusually beautiful too, like make-a-million-as-a-model beautiful and I had to wonder why she decided on a career in the pursuit of which her face could be severely damaged, not to mention her other assets.

I could tell from the way she looked at me that she had come to the conclusion that I couldn't be classed as competition and she was right. I was so glad I didn't have to be.

"Jake was kind enough to let me tag along," I explained. "I'm working on a missing girl case. I had to be sure it wasn't her."

"Did you see her?" she asked.

"No, I didn't."

"So you don't know if it was your missing girl?"

"Jake doesn't think it is." I answered, feeling awkward.

She looked at him. "I've been working on the case as well and it wasn't her," Jake explained as the Hispanic cop that had stopped me from moving around joined us and muttered to Jake that there was something he should see.

Jake and Monique followed him back to the edge of the lake as I waited until he finally returned and let me into the passenger side of the car. As we drove away, I became increasingly aware that he had something on his mind. I wanted desperately to know what the officer had shown him, but despite that, I made the decision that the smart thing to do was remain quiet. Until, that is, we reached the diner's parking lot, at which point I concluded

I would have to take a chance, and ask straight out what he had seen.

“Nothing,” he said, obviously preoccupied.

“Fine, don’t tell me,” I said, feeling miffed.

“Samantha, I can’t tell you,” he said impatiently.

“Why not? Do you think I’m going to go blabbing it all over town? I’m a professional.”

“It’s evidence, I can’t disclose it. I could lose my job.”

“I know. I’m sorry Jake,” I said, certain he was right. “Thanks for bringing me along, I appreciate it.”

“You know what,” he said suddenly. “I need a drink. Let’s go to Aloha J’s.”

Perfect Margarita’s were the drink of choice. Jake ordered by the pitcher as we sat at the bar, which felt like a place in the tropics complete with island music, Hawaiian shirts, bongos and palm trees. If I hadn’t known better, I’d think the beach was right outside the door. Bobby was our friendly bartender. He was short for a guy, I’d say 5’4 or so and was large around the middle. Oh, he also had what I call horseshoe hair, you know, the style where the hair is only around the back edge of the head.

My first impression of him was that he was not a happy person, but as we sat and talked to him that changed. He had a dry sense of humor and was sarcastic to boot, and he had us laughing pretty hard with his funny one liners. So hard in fact, that I had a cramp in my side. Now I can’t tell you how long it’s been since I’ve had that happen to me.

Anyway, I have to admit that I was having a great time. Jake was in better spirits and I was enjoying the company of both of these men. When Bobby’s shift ended we moved over to a table under a grass hut.

Malicious Secrets

As soon as we were alone, Jake moved in as though to tell me a secret. "You're beautiful." he whispered.

"Jake, you're drunk."

"No, I'm just telling you the facts. Just the facts ma'am," he said. Obviously the margaritas had kicked in.

"Jake, I have a . . ."

"No, don't say that," he demanded.

"Aren't you seeing Monique?" I asked, trying to change the subject.

"No!"

"Why not? She's gorgeous."

"Samantha, you don't get it."

"What don't I get?"

"She is not my type."

"Why not? I thought she was every guy's type."

"Maybe for a quick . . . never mind."

"A quick what?" I asked, wondering how he would explain his slip of the tongue.

"She's what I call high maintenance." he said.

"High maintenance?"

"Too much work," he explained.

"So what *is* your type then?"

"I like girls that are laid back and fun."

"Can I ask you a personal question?"

"Sure, why not?"

"Your old girlfriend . . . what happened."

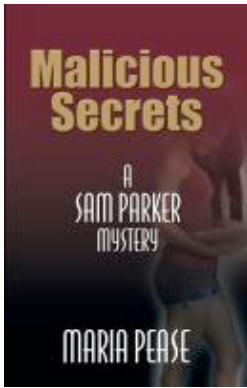
"That is old news. I really don't feel like talking about it."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have mentioned it." I said, hoping he wasn't too irritated with me.

"No problem," he said. "We better settle up and get going."

Maria Pease

I knew that I had really hit a sore spot and I probably should have just kept my big mouth shut, but I wanted to know what she did to hurt him. He really is a nice guy and so cute too. Not that looks are everything, but hey, let's be honest here, they can't hurt. Still, I had to remind myself that what I was really after was some cooperation from the police department.



As the second book in Maria Pease's Sam Parker Mystery series, this fast-paced detective mystery finds Samantha Parker in some compromising situations as she works her caseload. Financial scams, cheating spouses, missing persons and deviant behaviors are just the tip the iceberg but, with her sense of humor intact and her lucky undies to give her confidence, she's ready for whatever comes her way.

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