

EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

Chapter One.

THURSDAY

The Eye of the Beholder Beauty Salon and Day Spa opened for business on an ominous Thursday in January. Since the day after Christmas a roof of clouds had loomed over Shadow Hills, for seventeen days the strongest rains in a century had pelted the wealthy horse suburb of Los Angeles and at last, on this particular Thursday, the valley's ceiling was showing small cracks. Blots of liquid blue sky were seeping through. The cerulean stains were widening and leaking clumsy shafts of sunlight that stabbed small greedy portions of the drenched, forest green hills. The effect was glorious, luminous swatches of color surrounded by hungry shadows that hovered, eager to swallow up the vibrant outbreaks.

Greer Sands passed through the glass doors of her salon, looked up to the less threatening sky and the promising hills, and took in all the beauty of the two combined. The effect was so huge and dangerous that it made her tremble.

She stood for a moment overwhelmed by the pull of crackling storm energy surging in her, she felt the force of the weather as an insistent thrumming, as though her torso were strung with cords that nature plucked with skilled fingers, playing on her like a musical six-string barometer.

She did not turn when her partner Dario came out and lit a cigarette as he settled next to her.

From his impressive six foot four frame, Dario smiled down at his friend with handsome, watchful eyes. "Feeling like a guitar in a mariachi band?" He had known Greer, and her special sensitivities, for almost twenty years.

Her face, which was smooth in repose, revealed her forty-three years when she turned and smiled at him. Soft lines crinkled around her amazingly green eyes and the corners of her mouth. "Something's coming," she said to him through lips so full they almost seemed to get in the way, lips made for pouting mischievously but not for conversation. And then she turned her eyes back up at the play of light as though whatever she sensed was coming was written up there like an Archangel's sprawling footnote.

Dario nodded, his thick, black, glossy curls brushing his shoulders, and he watched her with eyes that had been compared to a night sky in the desert, deeply dark, but spattered with stars.

Greer went on, "Changes, and that's always good, and the number three for me, three new friends, I think, but there's something..." She tilted her head to one side, pursed out her pregnant lips, placed a hand flat on her chest and shuddered, "...something else, something black."

After twenty years of friendship, Dario was accustomed to these bouts of psychic revelation, and though he had learned to trust them from experience, he'd never grown

particularly comfortable with them, especially not when they pained Greer.

He shifted his weight and felt a surge of protectiveness. Time for a distraction technique, he thought.

"Something black?" he asked in feigned exasperation. "I certainly hope not! I've got enough peroxide on Mrs. Lawless to bleach Mickey Mouse! It damn well better not come out black."

To Dario's relief, it worked. Greer laughed and with a last glance over her shoulder at the magnificent, panorama of water and light she turned and walked back inside.

Dario watched her, admiring the way he had cut her thick auburn hair. He admired— in a purely objective way— her full and womanly form but mostly he admired himself for having the good sense to have a woman like Greer as a best friend. Gratitude filled him like the warm burn after a shot of good whisky as he watched her walk back to the reception desk. He sighed and glanced at his watch, mini-break was over. Crushing out his cigarette on the bottom of his shoe, he put it carefully into the trashcan, scanning to see that there were no other butts or trash on the sidewalk in front of their brand new salon.

Greer watched Dario survey the busy salon as he walked back to his station and when she caught his eye they shared a proud wink. The Eye of the Beholder was off to a roaring start, even considering the weather. Or perhaps, because of

it, Greer thought. She and Dario had done their research well, this wealthy area was ripe for a luxury salon, and because of the mudslides and flooding limiting their routes to Los Angeles proper, the locals were eager to get out and be steamed, soaked, prodded, cut, trimmed, buffed, shellacked, blown dry and thrust back out into their Expeditions and their five bedroom ranch homes.

Greer turned to the pretty teenager standing next to her. Celia had a body that seemed capable of growing in only one direction at a time, and so far, it had been up. Her hair was stick strait, blue-black and hung so flat that it gave the impression that her pale face was peaking through a velvet curtain. She was wearing a tube-like, short black dress and clunky black Maryjane shoes. The overall effect was that of an exclamation point.

"Celia," Greer addressed her, "I've got an appointment coming in now, so you'll have to mind the front. Remember what I told you about the appointment book?"

"Double check the date before I write it in and only use pencil?" the punctuation mark of a girl asked as though unsure of the correct response.

"And?" Greer prompted.

"Get the phone number?" Celia added.

"And?"

The brown eyes flicked left and then back, widening slightly in fear. She couldn't remember anything else.

"And..." she bit her lip.

"And relax," Greer smiled at her, feeling the girl's nervousness bristling a foot away from her body and smoothing it down with caressing words and a warm hand on Celia's arm. "If something goes wrong, we'll fix it. It's not the end of the world or the salon. Okay?"

Celia smiled sheepishly. "Okay," she agreed.

Greer left the girl to worry her way through her first day. She entered the small treatment room and lit a candle; the cleansing scent of rosemary permeated the small room. Sensing a presence outside, Greer went to the door, opening it just as the woman was raising her hand to knock.

"Hello Leah?" Greer asked, extending her hand in introduction, "I'm Greer. Come right in and get comfortable on the table, face down. We're doing reflexology today, right?"

Greer wasn't surprised when Leah's nod seemed a bit reluctant, she was used to people who were hesitant their first time. So she asked a question she knew the answer to. "Anything in particular you want to work on?" Even without her special sensitivity Greer would have been able to read the signs of stress in this woman. Even after a sauna and a shower, Leah's hair was combed back so neatly it looked more like it had been mowed; there wasn't a trace of mascara smudged below her eyes.

"Just stress," Leah had the face of an Italian aristocrat, beautiful, with sienna brown eyes that appeared specially designed to veil any true sign of her inner life.

"General stress." The way she held herself perfectly upright spoke of relentless self-consciousness that never took a day off.

To give Leah privacy while she took off her robe and climbed up on to the massage table, Greer stepped out into the hall. Standing quietly, with her hands on her chest and her head bowed, Greer closed her eyes. She found and focused her mind and intuition on Leah's energy.

It had the usual amount of city smut all over it and a large dose of anxiety, things that were so prevalent these days that, sadly, most people had come to think of them as acceptable. There was damage too though, abuse. Greer sensed a man with a violent temper and the woman's fear, both all too common as well. Sighing, she re-entered the room after a soft knock and moved to the side of the table. Then she placed one hand between Leah's shoulder blades and the other on the small of her back. Greer held still and took a deep breath to sense the flow of energy through Leah's taught and toned body.

Immediately Greer's hands began to heat up, and the dark blockages showed themselves to her clearly. One thing in particular leapt up and stung her.

Before she could block it, into Greer mind rushed one of the two worst memories of her life. Since she was a child Greer had known things about people, little things, like who was on the phone when it rang. She had only sensed small things, until one night when she was fifteen.

She had been getting ready to go meet her best friend Sarah for a movie at the local mall and David Bowie's 'Changes' blared from her record player. As she had leaned into her mirror to dab on some sparkling lip-gloss that Sarah had loaned her, the reflection before her had suddenly faded out of focus. Her face had still been there in the mirror, but suddenly and sharply a sensation had overcome her that was so enveloping that she had been incapable of using her senses to experience anything else.

The phenomenon had removed her completely to another place, a place where time was bent, impossible to track, she had been aware only of utter and absolute terror. She had known, without words or question that Sarah was in mortal danger. Greer had stumbled, unseeing, to the phone, still holding Sarah's lip-gloss in her hand, to try to call her friend, to warn her. Then the room before her had disappeared and the vision had begun.

The fifteen year old Greer could see Sarah, she was walking along a dark sidewalk and coming the other way was a man, a man whose face Greer couldn't make out. In her vision the man was surrounded by jagged shapes, like shards of darkness that moved with him but were visually impenetrable. She could feel Sarah getting closer to him; she could sense the man's egregious intent as he stalked toward her friend. Alone in her room, Greer dropped to her knees in despair and cried out loud, "No! Sarah, run!" But of course Sarah couldn't hear her. Desperately Greer struggled to focus on

the numbers on the phone, but she could see nothing but the phantom figures, the night, and the strange, black, jagged shadows.

The two figures came closer and closer to each other until, paralyzed with fear, Greer watched as the man passed Sarah, turned, and struck her on the back of the head, then he dragged her into her bushes of an empty lot that bordered the sidewalk.

Then, as abruptly as the vision had begun, it ended. Greer found herself lying on the floor of her room, the green shag rug carpet distorted as it came in view inches from her face, she was sobbing and sweating. With trembling hands she gathered the phone and dialed Sarah's number.

Sarah answered the phone with her usual bright, eager voice. Greer almost fainted with relief, she made an excuse for the call, and went to her bathroom to vomit up the bile of fear. Greer was so shaken by the force and depth of what she had seen and felt, that she was afraid to tell anyone, afraid to be thought a freak. Even Sarah, who had always treated Greer's talent with enthusiasm couldn't always conceal that she was vaguely uncomfortable with the oddness of it. This vision, Greer worried, would have both repelled and frightened her friend. So Greer didn't tell Sarah, she convinced herself that it had been a fantasy or an anxiety attack. She briefly considered telling her mother, but decided against it. It was a choice she was to regret until the day she died.

The two friends went to the movie that night, they had ice cream after and laughed and flirted with a group of boys they knew from school. Greer reveled in the familiarity and acceptance of her friend, but being unable to tell Sarah about her eerie experience made her feel distanced, different and lonely. And, no matter how hard she tried to deny it, she couldn't shake the uneasy apprehensiveness.

In the days that followed, she'd tried to put it out of her mind. She had been afraid that she was crazy, that people would think she was some kind of bizarre mental case. That she was some kind of mental case. And Sarah was fine, wasn't she? The whole thing had been the product an overactive imagination coupled with teenage angst, she told herself. As the days went by, the convincing reality of the vision faded.

But two months after the vision, just after midnight on a cold Saturday night, the doorbell woke Greer from a sleep riddled with ugly dreams. She could hear her father's muffled voice and that of another man conversing through the closed door and then the sound of the locks being unlatched, opened, and her name being called.

Confused, frightened, and sleepy, Greer was summoned to speak to the visitor, a police officer, in the kitchen. He wanted to know what she'd done earlier that evening. She told him that she'd gone to a coffee shop with her friend, Sarah, they had stayed until about nine and then said goodbye and gone their separate ways.

The officer shuffled his feet, sighed, rubbed his eyes as though they pained him, or maybe he was trying not to cry, and then he told them.

Sarah had been assaulted on the way home. She'd been knocked unconscious, sexually assaulted, brutally beaten, and left for dead in an empty lot. After a neighbor had heard moaning and called the police, she'd been taken to a hospital where she was in critical condition. All they could do now, he had told them, was pray that she would pull through.

Greer blamed herself, prayed until her knees were raw that Sarah would pull through. She had not.

On the day of her best friend's funeral, she sobbed out the story to her mother, and her mother took her by the shoulders and looked into her eyes. Greer had never forgotten what had been said to her on that dismal day.

"Listen to me. You have a gift. One woman in every generation of our family has had this gift for as long as anyone can remember. My sister had it. There's nothing wrong with you, there's nothing to be ashamed of or even afraid of, *but you cannot run from it and you cannot make it go away.* You have to use it, embrace it, and welcome it, as best you can."

Greer also remembered what she had said in response. "So, if I had told you before, I could have saved Sarah's life?"

And her mother's quick reply; "No." Then she had paused, looking troubled, and Greer knew that her mother had told her a lie and couldn't live with it, so she changed her answer. "Maybe. Some things you can change, some things you can only let go of."

That was it. Some things she could only let go of.

Like Sarah.

The forty-three year old Greer looked down at the woman on the massage table in front of her and knew exactly why she was remembering the feeling of terror so vividly right now that she'd had for Sarah, so long ago.

She was having it again.