

# **The Madness of Mercury by Connie di Marco**

## **EXCERPT**

“Thank God you’re there.” Gale sounded very shaky.

“What’s wrong?”

“I’m at the Mystic Eye. Something very strange just happened. I heard a knock at the back door. I thought it might be you.”

“Are you alone?”

“Yes. I closed up and sent Cheryl home. When I opened the door . . . oh God, Julia. Someone left a dead cat on the doorstep.”

I cringed. “I’ll be right there.”

“I’m sorry. You don’t need to come. I wrapped it up and put it in plastic in the dumpster. It looked like its neck had been broken.”

“Don’t argue. I’ll be there in twenty minutes. Less than that.”

I drove the length of California Street as fast as I could, slowing at each red light. Once I was sure no other cars were crossing I ran through several intersections. When I reached the Eye the shop was closed but the display lights were on in the front windows. I pulled down the alleyway and parked next to Gale’s car. I tapped on the door. “Gale, it’s me.” She opened the door immediately. The storeroom was dark. A stack of empty boxes and packing materials stood against the wall. Inside, the only light was a small desk lamp in the office.

Gale is tall and self-assured with a regal bearing. Tonight she was completely shaken. She hugged her arms, more from fright than from cold. “I feel bad now that I’ve called you. I was just so freaked out. I recognized the cat, it was the little gray one that hangs out behind the apartment building next door. I think it’s a stray. Everyone around here feeds it, even the restaurant people, and it’s such a friendly little thing. Some sick bastard probably gave it some food and then snapped its neck. God, I think I’m going to be sick.”

“Shouldn’t you call the cops?”

“And tell them what? I found a dead cat? Please. Like they’d listen. Even if they thought someone had killed it, what could they do?”

“It shows a pattern of harassment. Might be worth making a report.”

She sighed. “Yeah. You’re probably right. I just wasn’t thinking straight. I was so upset.” She collapsed in the chair behind her desk.

I shrugged out of my coat. “Why are you here so late?”

“We just got a huge shipment of books and supplies in. Cheryl’s been working late every night so I sent her home. I had just finished stacking the boxes in the storeroom.” Gale shivered involuntarily. “Look, let’s get out of here. Have you eaten? Why don’t we go up the block and grab some food? Actually a drink sounds even better.”

“Okay.”

“Get your coat. We can leave the cars here and walk. I’ll just get my purse.”

I headed to the front door and checked that the locks were all in place. The drapes separating the display windows from the shop were drawn for privacy. Gale left the desk lamp on in the office and walked out to the front counter. As she reached under the counter for her purse, we heard glass breaking. Then I saw a flash of flame through the doorway to the back storeroom. I screamed. The empty boxes and packing materials had caught fire in an explosive flash. The smoke alarm started to ring, filling the shop with earsplitting sound. Using my coat like a blanket, I dropped it over the center of the flaming pile. It wasn’t going to be enough, but I had to do something before the entire storeroom went up, if not the building.

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