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MARCIA MULLER

A Sharon McCone
Mystery

"Her stories crackle
like few others on the
mystery landscape."

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

THE DANGEROUS HOUR

MARCIA
MULLER

THE
DANGEROUS
HOUR



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ACCLAIM FOR MARCIA MULLER'S SHARON McCONE NOVELS

THE DANGEROUS HOUR

"A new Muller book is cause for celebration . . . Interesting and entertaining . . . an ideal way to spend a lazy summer afternoon . . . McCone's world is one we never tire of visiting."

—*Romantic Times Bookclub Magazine*

"Fans should be well satisfied."

—*Publishers Weekly*

"Muller once again gives us a solid slice of a community and a protagonist with character . . . Fans of the sturdy series will be especially pleased."

—*Booklist*

"One of Muller's better efforts."

—*Kirkus Reviews*

"A tight and engrossing read."

—*Anniston Star* (AL)

DEAD MIDNIGHT

"A lively novel . . . Readers will appreciate Muller's eye for detail and the strong sense of place."

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

"A well-laid plot . . . high-tech gloss on a tricky case."

—Marilyn Stasio, *New York Times Book Review*

more . . .

"Muller packs plot, personality, and lots of life's messiness into the continuing saga of the San Francisco private investigator . . . Highly recommended."

—*Library Journal* (starred review)

"Her cases continue to be complex and chilling . . . This book is a good one."

—*Sunday Oklahoman*

"McCone remains one of the most popular of hard-boiled female private eyes . . . You don't have to be a card-carrying McCone fan, however, to appreciate the tightness of plot and wealth of intriguing background in her latest adventure."

—*Booklist*

"*Dead Midnight* is superb, above and beyond Muller's past work . . . Muller is one in a million, and so is McCone."

—*Denton Record Chronicle* (TX)

"A fun who-done-it for those readers who want a story line faster than a world class 100-yard dash."

—*Midwest Book Review*

"Another guaranteed hit for a master of the craft."

—*Anniston Star* (AL)

LISTEN TO THE SILENCE

"A series best."

—*Los Angeles Times*

"Engrossing . . . quite possibly this talented author's best effort to date."

—*San Diego Union-Tribune*

"Especially satisfying."

—*Orlando Sentinel*

"Muller realistically unravels this intriguing tale, weaving Indian culture to enrich the plot. A very satisfying mystery."

—*San Francisco Examiner*

"Fans of this long series will enjoy seeing a more vulnerable side of McCone here. Newcomers will be pleased to be along for the ride."

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

SHARON MCCONE MYSTERIES

BY MARCIA MULLER

DEAD MIDNIGHT
LISTEN TO THE SILENCE
A WALK THROUGH THE FIRE
WHILE OTHER PEOPLE SLEEP
BOTH ENDS OF THE NIGHT
THE BROKEN PROMISE LAND
A WILD AND LONELY PLACE
TILL THE BUTCHERS CUT HIM DOWN
WOLF IN THE SHADOWS
PENNIES ON A DEAD WOMAN'S EYES
WHERE ECHOES LIVE
TROPHIES AND DEAD THINGS
THE SHAPE OF DREAD
THERE'S SOMETHING IN A SUNDAY
EYE OF THE STORM
THERE'S NOTHING TO BE AFRAID OF
DOUBLE (*with Bill Pronzini*)
LEAVE A MESSAGE FOR WILLIE
GAMES TO KEEP THE DARK AWAY
THE CHESHIRE CAT'S EYE
ASK THE CARDS A QUESTION
EDWIN OF THE IRON SHOES

NONSERIES
POINT DECEPTION
CYANIDE WELLS

In memory of Sara Ann Freed,
dear friend, and editor for twenty-one years

A number of people have volunteered their time and expertise during the writing of this novel.

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Paul Cummins, San Francisco District Attorney's Office.

And, of course, Bill Pronzini, who is always there for me.

Friday

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JULY 11

I dropped the legal pad full of notes on my office desk, went to the high, arching window that overlooked San Francisco Bay, and waved exuberantly at the pilot of a passing tugboat. He stared, probably thinking me demented, then waved back.

The reason for my impulsive gesture was that I'd just come from a midafternoon meeting with my entire staff in our newly refurbished conference room—a let-the-phones-go-on-the-machine, everybody-must-attend gathering, during which we'd discussed McCone Investigations' present healthy state and bright future prospects. When the session broke up, the others were as high-spirited as I.

During the past two years our business had tripled. Last year we'd taken over all the offices fronting on the north-side second-story catwalk at Pier 24½. My nephew, Mick Savage, now headed up our new computer forensics department and was about to hire another specialist in that area. His live-in love, Charlotte Keim, was overwhelmed with her financial investigations—locating

hidden assets, tracing employees who had absconded with company funds, exposing other corporate wrongdoing—and I'd authorized her to begin interviewing for two assistants. Craig Morland, a former FBI agent, was invaluable on governmental affairs, as well as a damn good man in the field; and my newest hire, Julia Rafael, had shaped up into a fine all-around operative. I didn't see any reason why either wouldn't eventually supervise his or her own department. Of course, my office manager, Ted Smalley, had yet to settle on an assistant who lived up to his exacting standards of efficiency—so many had passed through his office that I'd stopped trying to remember their last names—but I had no doubt that in time the individual whom he called "a paragon of the paper clips" would appear, résumé in hand.

Not a bad situation for a woman who once worked out of a converted closet at a poverty law firm.

Still, sometimes I missed those days when my generation had held the firm conviction that we could change the world. Which was why the ratty old armchair where I'd done some of my best thinking inside that closet now sat under my schefflera plant by the window of this spacious office at the pier—covered, of course, by a tasteful handwoven throw. I flopped into it to savor my professional good fortune.

I'd basked in the afterglow of the meeting for only a few minutes, while conveniently ignoring a couple of personal issues that had been nagging at me, when the phone buzzed. I went to the desk and picked up.

Ted. "You'd better get out here fast!"

Something wrong. Really wrong. So much for basking.

I dropped the receiver into the cradle. As I hurried onto

the catwalk, I heard the words "... silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law."

Two men near the top of the stairway. Plainclothes police officers; I recognized one. He stood poised to assist as his partner struggled with Julia Rafael, attempting to handcuff her. She bent over, kicking backward at his shins, trying to break his grasp. Beyond them Ted and Mick stood, looking confused and helpless.

"You have the right to speak to an attorney . . ."

Confusion gripped me, too. "What the hell's going on here?" I demanded.

Before either man could reply, Julia screamed, "Help me, Shar! I didn't do anything!" Then the fight went out of her, and she collapsed, nearly taking down the officer.

He steadied himself, went on, "And to have an attorney present . . ."

He finished Mirandizing Julia and yanked her upright by the cuffs. She cried out in pain, and I warned, "Careful. You've got witnesses."

He ignored me.

I turned to the other officer. August Williams, an inspector on the SFPD Fraud detail. On several occasions I'd supplied him with leads that I'd stumbled across. "What's the charge, Augie?" I asked.

"Ms. Rafael has been accused of grand theft," he replied. "Specifically, stealing and making purchases with a MasterCard belonging to—"

"I'll take her downstairs," his partner said.

I looked at Julia. Now she stood erect, dwarfing the arresting officer by some two inches. Her severe features were stony, her dark eyes blank. She didn't meet my eyes.

She'd been in this situation before, as a juvenile, and knew the drill.

I said, "Go with him, Jules. I'll call Glenn Solomon."

At my mention of the city's top criminal-defense attorney, the inspector who was ushering Julia toward the stairway paused, then glared at me. Great—a hard case, one of the types that the department was attracting, and eventually having to discipline, in increasing numbers. Thank God he was partnered with Williams, an even-tempered and by-the-book cop.

As his partner ushered Julia down the stairway, I touched Williams's arm. "Augie," I said, "make him go easy."

He nodded, his jaw set.

"As you started to say," I added, "a MasterCard belonging to . . . ?"

He looked down at me—a big, handsome man with rich brown skin, close-cropped gray hair, and concerned eyes that were pouched from lack of sleep. For a good cop, sleep is always in short supply.

"A credit card belonging to Supervisor Alex Aguilar. He alleges she stole it from his wallet after he rejected her sexual advances last month, and has used it to run up over five thousand dollars' worth of purchases."

Alex Aguilar. Founder and director of Trabajo por Todos—Work for All—a Mission-district job-training program designed to bring the city's disadvantaged Hispanics into the mainstream. Two-term member of the city's board of supervisors. Rumored to be positioning himself to become our first Hispanic mayor.

Alex Aguilar—our former client. He'd hired us to investigate a series of thefts from the job-training center. I'd assigned Julia, since she was my only Hispanic operative. When I called Aguilar after she'd brought the in-

vestigation to a satisfactory conclusion, he said he was pleased and would recommend our services to others.

Now he was accusing her of grand theft.

"I don't believe it," I said.

Williams shrugged. "I'm sorry, Sharon, but there's more. I have a warrant to search any part of your offices that Ms. Rafael has access to."

I took the document he held out as a pair of uniformed officers came up the stairway. It specified packages and merchandise from Amazon.com, Lands' End, J. Jill, Coldwater Creek, Sundance, Nordstrom, Bloomingdale's, and The Peruvian Connection, as well as a MasterCard in the name of A. Aguilar.

The warrant was in order.

"Go ahead and search," I said.

I accompanied Williams and his men to the office Julia shared with Craig Morland. Craig wasn't there, and neither were any of the items listed on the warrant. When they finished, Augie asked, "What other areas does she have access to?"

"All of them. I trust my employees and don't restrict them."

But was I wrong to put my trust in Julia? Given her history?

I pushed the doubts aside and added, "We'll start with my own office."

After Williams and the uniforms had left empty-handed, I said to Ted, "Get Glenn Solomon on the phone for me, please."

Ted hesitated, looking at Mick, who had remained on the catwalk with him. "May we speak privately?"

"Of course."

We went inside his office, and he shut the door. "You didn't tell them about the mail room," he said.

"... It slipped my mind."

"Nothing like that slips your mind. You deliberately didn't tell them. Does that mean you think Jules is guilty?"

"I don't know what to think. They must have some pretty compelling evidence, to walk in here and arrest her without first asking her to come in for questioning."

Ted crossed his arms, leaning against his desk, and shook his shaggy mane of gray-black hair. He'd been growing it long—always the prelude to some change in fashion statement—and it was at the unruly stage. "I can't believe you don't have more faith in her. After all, you hired her in spite of her juvenile record. You're the one who keeps praising her for the way she's turned her life around."

His implied accusation made me feel small, disloyal to an employee who had, up until now, given me no reason to doubt her. But doubt still nagged at me. Ted saw I was conflicted and let me off the hook. "I'll get Glenn on the phone now."

"Thanks. And then will you please print me out a copy of the Aguilar file?"

I went back to my office and flopped onto my desk chair, numb. All the good feelings I'd been reveling in were gone now. Once again life had reminded me that things are never as secure as they seem. That none of us is immune to the sudden, vicious blow that can descend at any time and place.

Ted put Glenn through a few minutes later.

"This is bad news, my friend," he said when I finished explaining the situation.