

NUPUR
TUSTIN



BEARER
OF
SECRETS

NUPUR TUSTIN

Bearer of Secrets: A Celine Skye
Psychic Mystery

Exclusive Excerpt

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Chapter One

Celine Skye gripped her wine glass and forced herself to look down at the thick file on her lap. The room spun around her; her head swam. She stared aghast as the floor surged up to meet her face.

Don't let me fall, she heard a frail voice whisper. *Don't let me fall.*

Celine felt herself choking; heard the sobbing sound that was wrenched painfully out of her throat.

"Celine!"

Blake's voice, warm with concern, filled her ears. Under the gentle pressure of his hand squeezing hers, the disorienting sensations subsided.

"It's okay, Celine. Take it easy."

She smiled gratefully at him. It had been months since she'd last looked at the FBI file on the Gardner Museum heist. Months before she could bring herself to even touch the thick folder, much less open it.

But Blake—Special Agent Blake Markham of the FBI's elite art crime team—had been remarkably patient with her. She hadn't expected him to understand the sickening sensation of guilt that engulfed her every time she thought about their last venture.

They'd recovered a Rembrandt, but at what cost?

But Blake understood—and sympathized. Not Julia, though.

Celine stole a cautious glance at her friend, retired FBI agent Julia Hood, who sat across the coffee table from them in a comfy plaid-covered armchair—grim and tight-lipped, with no trace of her usual warmth in her weather-beaten features.

"I'm sorry," Celine said in a low voice.

Julia nodded curtly, acknowledging the apology.

Celine swallowed hard, took a sip of her wine—a robust Syrah cultivated and fermented in the vineyard and winery she'd inherited last year—and willed herself to look down again.

Blake's hand was still on hers, dispelling the venomous voice in her head and the accusing pale blue eyes that perpetually haunted her.

The file was open to the page on the Gardner Museum's Dutch Room. The most valuable of the thirteen works had been grabbed from here. Celine had helped Blake and Julia recover three of them, but Penny Hoskins—the Director of the Museum—was hopeful Celine's psychic insights would bring back the other two Rembrandts and the Flinck as well.

Celine stared at the photographs. Black-and-white photos taken prior to the notorious heist contrasted starkly with color images of empty gold picture frames, stripped of the canvasses they should've encapsulated.

There was Rembrandt's *Storm on the Sea of Galilee*. Before it had been stolen. The facing page showed the same room with the empty picture frame. Next to that was Francisco de Zubaran's *A Doctor of Law*. And beneath that, a drop leaf table.

The black-and-white image showed a slender beaker with a flaring neck on top of the table. It was missing in the color picture.

"Are you getting anything?" Julia asked, her voice tight with an emotion Celine couldn't identify. Anger? Frustration? Impatience?

Accusing blue eyes swam into focus. Celine shook her head, trying to dispel the image. Her long red-gold hair fluttered about her face.

"Nothing?" Julia sounded skeptical.

"I just see Belle," Celine said as the black-clad Lady who'd never left her side shimmered into view.

Arms outstretched, she held the gu—the ancient bronze Shang dynasty wine vessel that had disappeared on the night of the theft as well.

Don't forget the gu, Celine.

"She has the gu," Celine repeated her guardian angel's words.

Belle wants you to know you're missing something, Celine, her guardian angel informed her.

I know, Sister Mary Catherine, Celine thought.

But what was she missing? What was she forgetting?

"Death?" Blake's voice broke in through the questions. "Is that what you're sensing, Celine?"

The presence of Belle—the spirit of Isabella Gardner—usually portended death. Violent death. Celine had sensed it for quite some time now. Ever since she'd gone to visit Clara Hibbert in the nursing home in which she was confined in Boston.

But why would anyone want to murder Clara?

She must've spoken out loud because Julia snorted.

"Oh, God! Not that again. No one wants to harm Clara Hibbert, Celine!" Julia's tone was strident with anger. She shot up, a short, sturdy, white-haired figure. "She's just fine. Has been all these months."

Why'd you take my son, Celine? Why'd you do it? Clara's pale

blue, tear-filled eyes gazed accusingly at Celine.

Celine flinched, her hold on Blake's hand tightening.

"Let's call it a night, shall we?" Blake glanced up at his former colleague. "It's been a long day."

"I'll say." Julia snorted. She scooped up her wide leather tote bag and slung the strap around her shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Julia," Celine spoke softly. "I'm trying. I really am."

Julia glanced down at her, her features softening. "Yes, I know, kiddo. You just need to . . ." She waved her hand in a vague gesture as though bidding the words to come to her.

You need to let go, Celine, Sister Mary Catherine said. *Just let go.*

It was the only way she'd get any useful insights. Celine knew that.

But all she could see when she did let go were the despair-filled blue eyes of Jonah Hibbert's mother.

Slipping her hand out of Blake's, she rose, walking Julia to the cottage door.

Julia swung her head around, her thick white ponytail brushing against Celine's chin.

"Look, I know it's been hard on you. For me, too. These past few months have been tough. But we can't change what happened."

She exhaled heavily, staring out at the pinpricks of light in the pitch-black sky.

"And brooding over it doesn't help."

Turning around, she reached up to give Celine's shoulder a quick squeeze and then headed briskly out into the night.

Celine watched as Julia's form rounded the corner of the driveway and receded beyond the boxwood hedges that

screened her cottage from the rest of the Mechelen Estate—the vineyard and winery she’d inherited from Dirck Thins and his friend and partner, John Mechelen.

They’d been the closest thing to a family Celine had possessed since she’d lost her parents at the age of twelve. Then John had died—an unexpected heart attack. Months later Dirck had been cruelly garroted, leaving Celine with the raw pain of being orphaned yet again.

It had been Julia who’d filled the void in Celine’s being, drawing her into the case, giving her something to live for. And now she’d managed to botch that relationship, too.

Will things ever be alright between us, she wondered, clinging to the doorjamb.

“She’s right, you know.” Blake’s voice and his warm, strong hand on her bare shoulder hit Celine like a tiny jolt of electricity.

“Julia’s right,” he repeated, turning her around and gazing earnestly down at her. “Clara’s going to be fine.”

Left unsaid was the undeniable fact that Clara Hibbert had been just fine on the countless occasions Celine had dropped—abandoned, Andrea Giordano, her winemaker would’ve said; deserted, Wanda Roberts, her marketing manager might’ve added—her responsibilities here in Paso Robles to visit Clara’s pricey nursing home in Boston.

There’d been no signs of abuse that Celine could detect. Annabelle—Dirck’s sister—who was visiting her son, Bryan, and had offered to check in on Clara from time to time hadn’t reported seeing anything amiss either.

She stared wide-eyed into Blake’s dark eyes. Logically, he was right. But . . .

He gave her a rueful glance. “But you still sense death, don’t you?”

She shrugged, glancing out the still-open door. "There's no reason for the General to want her dead, I realize that."

No one connected with the heist could possibly want Clara dead. There was nothing she knew. The poor woman had Alzheimer's, was on the verge of complete dementia. She represented no threat at all.

"But what if she's being abused?" Celine's green eyes returned to Blake's face.

What would she do without him? There'd been a time—not too long ago—when she'd have aired these worries with Julia, seeking and receiving reassurance from the older woman.

"She's not, though," Blake said quietly. "You've checked it out a thousand times.

He closed the door and led her back to the couch.

"Isn't it possible you're wrong? About Clara being the intended victim, I mean?"

She allowed him to pull her down onto the couch. They both knew he was thinking of Sofia. Celine had been so convinced a witness in their previous case was in danger that it had blindsided her to the true target.

Blake had been furious with her at the time, she recalled. He'd deserved to be. A woman had been killed because of her. How could anyone get it so wrong?

It was Julia who'd comforted Celine then.

Who would reassure her if she got it wrong yet again?

Chapter Two

Blake wished he could do something—anything to erase that forlorn, haunted look from Celine’s green eyes. She was hurting; Julia was hurting.

He wished he could heal the rift between the two women.

He understood exactly why Celine was traumatized. He’d been there when she’d hurtled out of Clara Hibbert’s room—as though chased by a thousand demons—and crashed straight into his arms.

Clara had lost her only son and Celine blamed herself.

But as a law enforcement officer—albeit one who’d never had to pull the trigger on a suspect—Blake was keenly aware of what Julia was going through as well. Celine’s reaction—no matter how understandable—would only seem like a betrayal to Julia in her current state.

His former colleague had been given no choice. Not that he’d been there. But Blake figured that was the case.

He suppressed a groan. He had a unique perspective on the situation. Trouble was he had no idea how to handle it. What could he say—what words could he use—to repair their relationship?

Aware of Celine’s eyes still on him, he put down his wine glass.

"What exactly did you see?" he asked.

It was how Julia would've approached it. He'd heard her do it more times than he could remember.

Whenever Celine's impressions didn't seem to jive with reality as they knew it, Julia asked her to describe her visions in detail.

Celine's beautiful eyes shifted away from his, gazing dreamily into the distance.

"She was holding the gu."

"Belle?" he asked, although it was obvious who it was.

Celine nodded. *"Don't forget the gu."*

She was repeating Belle Gardner's words to her, he realized.

"I feel like I'm missing something." She turned back to him. "Forgetting something."

He nodded, frowning. What, he wondered, was she forgetting?

The last time the FBI had checked out a tip on the twelfth century B.C. Shang dynasty vessel, all they'd found was a well-made copy of the item.

That had been nearly eight years ago.

"Problem is we have no probable cause for a second search warrant on Hugh Norton's premises." He was talking to himself.

Struck by a thought, he turned to her.

"If you're sensing death, Celine, isn't it most likely to be you?"

Who else could it be?

But she shook her head, smiling faintly.

"The General doesn't want me dead. Not yet anyway. Not until I lead him to the Dutch works he lost the night of the theft."

The same works Julia wants you to focus on.

The thought entered unbidden into Blake's mind. He

squelched it.

There'd been a time when he'd been suspicious of Julia. Absolutely certain she was as corrupt as her co-workers, who'd been discovered working hand in glove with the Irish mob in Boston. Not anymore, though.

Julia was on the up-and-up, he told himself firmly.

The same works Julia wants you to focus on.

The thought inserted itself insidiously into Celine's head. Where had it come from?

The poisonous suspicion was followed immediately by another. Had Julia really been given no choice?

If Jonah were still alive, Celine thought, we could've questioned him. Figured out what he knew.

But as it stood, the rookie journalist had taken his secrets to the grave.

Assuming he had any, Celine, she reminded herself.

Impulsively, she leaned forward, resting her palm on Blake's knee. She saw his eyes widen but didn't comprehend the reason for it.

"Would you have done things any differently if. . .?" her voice trailed off.

He seemed to know what she was getting at.

"I wasn't there, Celine," he reminded her gently. "If you were in danger"—he swallowed—"I'd have reacted the same way Julia did."

His dark eyes gazed into hers with an intensity that made her turn away.

"And I'd have no regrets."

"*I had to . . . you know that, don't you?*" Julia's question echoed in Celine's head.

Of course she'd had no choice, Celine upbraided herself. To think otherwise was churlish.

"Julia saved your life, Celine," Blake's voice interrupted her thoughts. "It was a tough call, but you were in danger. She did the only thing anyone could under the circumstances."

He's right, Celine, Sister Mary Catherine said. *Let it go.*

Inexplicably, the dark clouds that seemed to have been hanging over Celine lifted. Relief flooded through her being.

She turned to Blake.

"Thank you for being so patient with me!"

Smiling, she flung her arms around him, drawing him into a close hug.

"You've been a good friend."

Blake groaned. It was the second time she'd thrown herself into his arms. He didn't think he could take it anymore.

He tightened his hold around her. Then before he could stop himself or even think about what he was doing, he'd lifted her chin up, dropped his face down, and claimed her mouth.

To his utter amazement, she was returning his kiss.

"Celine!" he murmured, stroking her face, her hair, his hand sliding down to her breast.

She thrust herself closer into his arms.

Then just as abruptly, she'd pushed him away, her eyes staring at him—wild, confused . . . *betrayed?*

Goddammit!

Clearly, he'd misread her signals.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I shouldn't have. . ."

Words failed him. *Goddammit*, he cursed himself. What had he been thinking?

Heaving himself off the couch, he headed for the door.

“Blake, wait!”

Celine watched, dismayed, as Blake pulled the door open and strode out into the darkness.

Thanks, Sister Mary Catherine, she thought bitterly. Thanks.

The kiss had been unexpected but not entirely unwelcome. She’d actually been enjoying it until her guardian angel’s bellowed “*What are you doing, Celine?*” had completely ruined the moment.

Startled, she’d pushed Blake away only to see the pain of rejection slamming into his eyes. His face had shuttered down, a frozen blank expression settling upon it.

Then he’d stalked out.

Great, that’s another friend I’ve lost.

Don’t be silly, Celine. You haven’t lost a friend, Sister Mary Catherine retorted. *But sleeping with him would have been a mistake.*

How would you know? Celine was defiant.

It’s always a mistake, the nun said firmly. *Because of the expectations people bring to the situation.*

Trust me, I had no expectations. Good grief, she was an adult, she knew what she was doing!

You need to get to know someone bef—

That’s what we were doing, Celine interrupted the nun, *until you nearly shattered my eardrum.*

Good heavens, how else were you expected to get to know someone?

“You’ve got to test-drive a potential partner,” a college boyfriend of hers had once said sagely. The relationship hadn’t lasted beyond a few months, but his advice had stayed with her.

She recalled it now, repeating it for her guardian angel's benefit.

Blake's not a car, my dear, the nun responded. Celine could've sworn she was chuckling. *Neither are you.*

Celine rolled her eyes. Was she never to have companionship? She'd lost her family. She was losing what few friends she had. And now it looked like she was going to be denied the consolation of sex as well.

Don't be ridiculous, Sister Mary Catherine admonished her. *Go to confession, Celine. It'll do you good.*

Why? Celine rolled her eyes. *For the sin of almost having sex? So that you can take communion again, Celine.*

Was that her mother's voice? Celine shook her head. No, it was probably just her imagination.

She'd refused to take communion after her parents had been killed. *What is the point of it all?* she'd cried when Sister Mary Catherine had tried to overcome her objections.

Determined not to give in, Celine had refused to go to confession as well. You couldn't take communion if you didn't confess your sins.

Pushing her memories away, Celine hefted the thick file Julia had left behind onto her lap.

She'd managed to offend both her friends. The least she could do was to make herself useful. It was possible looking at the photos of the crime scene and the stolen art would trigger some impressions.

Gritting her teeth, she turned the pages.

If only she could come up with something useful. Maybe then she'd be able to win them back.

Chapter Three

Celine shivered, huddling closer to the stone pillar that flanked the wooden church door. Why had she come here? She wasn't even dressed for the cold. It was freezing, the series of narrow arches above her affording little protection against the miserable weather.

A gust of wind blew in, spraying her with tiny pinpricks of sleet. Dear God, the weather was awful! Wrapping her arms around her slender body, she turned to face the double wooden doors.

To her amazement one of the panels stood ajar. They'd both been tightly shut just a moment ago. A warm glow of light illuminated the gray mist outside. Heat seeped out, sharpening the unpleasant sensation of the sopping wet socks that clung to her icy feet and the thin cotton shirt that was twisted around her torso thanks to the gust.

She stretched out a frozen hand, gripping the brass door handle, barely able to feel the cold metal against her skin. It took an effort to tug the door open, but she managed it at last, wincing at the grating sound of wood scraping against concrete.

"Celine!" Sister Mary Catherine, standing by a pillar, waved her in. "I'm so glad you could make it."

"You're alive?" Celine stepped forward. She was vaguely

aware of the stained glass windows high above her, illuminated in the flickering light of innumerable candles.

“Of course, I’m alive, child.” The nun sounded amused. “Why wouldn’t I be? Come on in. There’s no need to stand out in the cold.”

Carefully treading upon the cold floor, Celine approached the nun. Were they back in the private Catholic school she’d attended in Los Angeles? She craned her neck back, taking in the enormous vaulted ceiling.

This place looked different, though. Gold-framed paintings hung on the walls on either side of her. Where were the Stations of the Cross?

But Sister Mary Catherine gave her no time to ask any questions.

“Come, I want you to meet Jesus.” The nun dipped her hand in the silver stoup of holy water attached to the pillar beside her and made the sign of the cross on Celine.

“He’s here?” Celine said, surprised. “Jesus is here?”

And he wanted to see her? What about?

“Where else would he be?” Sister Mary Catherine was already striding down the nave.

Celine hurried to keep up with her. The walk seemed interminable. Empty pews stretched on either side of them. Paintings hung on the wall.

It seemed an eternity before they were at the altar. Pushed forward by the nun, Celine glanced up expectantly. There was the crucifix at the center, the Savior hanging from it. It was flanked by a figure of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and another of the Holy Virgin.

Then to Celine’s astonishment, the figure of the Sacred Heart came to life and Jesus stepped down, coming closer.

What was that in his hands? A chalice? Celine leaned forward, squinting her eyes to sharpen the hazy image wavering before her eyes.

But the Savior was already directing her attention to his right toward the immaculate heart of Mary.

"I need you to visit my mother, Celine."

Celine swiveled her neck, staring at the lifeless statue of the Virgin Mary in a white garment and a blue cloak.

"Visit your mother?" She heard herself repeating. How was she to do that?

The rosary? But she hadn't prayed it in over a decade.

"Visit my mother before it's too late, Celine. You need to see her—before it's too late."

His voice echoed in her head, taking on a familiar nasal overtone.

Where had she heard that voice before?

"Are you listening, Celine?" Her guardian angel gently pressed her arm.

Before it's too late. Before it's too late.

The words were still reverberating in her brain when Celine's eyes opened. The pale light of dawn streamed in through her curtains.

She twisted her head, squinting at the clock on her nightstand. It was barely six. She'd been dreaming.

Clearly. But what had it meant? Anything?

Celine turned her head back, her gaze fixed on the white ceiling looming over her. She'd been poring over the Gardner Museum file—just as Julia had suggested—before she went to bed.

"Who knows, it might trigger some psychic dreams," the

former fed had suggested. It was the only thing they could think of when their usual strategy of inducing a trance had failed miserably—producing only vivid and terrifying images of the shot that had taken Jonah Hibbert’s life.

“I can’t do this,” Celine had gasped. “I can’t do it anymore, Julia.”

Even the memory of it made her shudder. Tight-lipped, she tore her mind away from the impressions swarming her brain.

So, she’d been looking through the Gardner file last night. What had she focused on?

The gu. Belle had told her there was something about the wine vessel she was forgetting.

Then she’d turned the page to the five Degas sketches taken from the Short Gallery. A large color photo of the Manet the thieves had made off with was mounted on the facing page.

In her mind’s eye, Celine had seen a large golden key sitting atop the pages. The image had been so vivid, she’d reached out to touch it, only to feel the glossy paper of the photographs and the thick, rough texture of the paper on which they were mounted.

She’d understood that to mean that the stolen Impressionist works were the key to—what exactly? Some clue or information she was missing about the gu?

Would finding the Degas and the Manet lead to the Shang dynasty wine vessel?

And how did the church fit in? Why had she found herself there anyway?

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About the Author

A former journalist and current homeschooling mother, Nupur Tustin misuses a Ph.D. in Communication and an M.A. in English to compose mayhem in Joseph Haydn's Austria and paint intrigue in Sophie's Adventures and in the Celine Skye Psychic Art Sleuth Mysteries!

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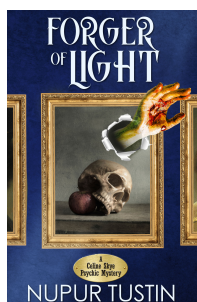
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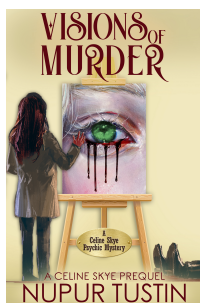


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