



CRYSTAL
MAGIC
Series

CRYSTAL VISION

He is Earth, she is Air,
together they catch Fire...

New York Times Bestselling Author

PATRICIA RICE

CRYSTAL VISION - SAMPLE

CRYSTAL MAGIC #3



PATRICIA RICE



Crystal Vision

Patricia Rice

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ONE



JULY 8: SUNDAY, MORNING

Soaring on air currents, sensing movement and energy patterns, she floated high above the earth. Sunlight heated her wingtips. The sensual awareness of wind through her feathers soothed her jagged nerves, offering freedom from her self-imposed cage.

Floating from the bluff heights to the valley below, she encountered a void, a dead spot in the sea of energy, a black hole in the universe. This was what she'd been hunting.

A flash of blinding light followed by an explosion of life forces shattered the tranquil breeze. With the piercing cry of an eagle, she plunged back to earth—

And tumbled off the damned ledge she'd been sitting on.

With the breath knocked out of her, she couldn't even swear. Mariah—as she called herself these days—shifted her bruised body, gingerly checking for broken bones.

What the hell had that been?

She lay there, trying to summon the sensation again, but it had been fleeting, simply a disturbance in the energies she detected when she meditated.

Flexing her wrists and scraped hands, she scanned the horizon for smoke or a sign of explosion. After a greedy Null had

bombed Bald Rock, bringing down half a mountain side, she was understandably nervous about explosions—real or imagined. Earthquake?

No rocks rattled. No ground shuddered. The valley below appeared undisturbed, but Mariah felt as if a rip had been torn in her universe.

The Void, however, was still approaching. Damn.

“Miss Mariah, are you hurt?” A deep, Brit-accented voice called with masculine concern.

The Null of all Nulls. She hadn’t thought anyone could be more Null than the Kennedy brothers who pretty much owned Hillvale, but Keegan Ives equaled the two brothers put together. He had to have run up that hill where she’d last seen him, but he didn’t sound out of breath.

“I’m fine, Keegan,” she said, hiding her impatience and the fact that she probably wasn’t fine. Her knee hurt like hell.

But she didn’t trust an intrusive Brit who walked the land like a giant black hole. Not sensing his energies made her exceedingly nervous.

“You fell off a twenty-foot ledge,” he protested in his rounded Oxford English. “I doubt that you are fine, Miss. . . Forgive me, but I never learned your family name. Let me assist you to your feet.”

If only he had snaggleteeth or even a broken nose, she might tolerate His Voidness. But no, even his nerdy reading spectacles didn’t detract from his sheer masculine perfection. Keegan’s hair was softer and more blue-black than hers, with a hint of curl. He had amber eyes that had darkened to a polished chocolate gleam of concern. Well over six feet, he topped her by a head, which most men didn’t. And worst of all—he had to be twice her not-slight weight and it was all pure male muscle.

She despised him just for existing. If she meant to survive—

probably an unachievable goal—attraction had to be banned from her life. And strangers were meant to be avoided.

“I’m simply Mariah, like the wind. And if I tell you I’m fine, then I am.” Although she winced when he clasped her bruised hand in his big paw to haul her up.

“The wind?” he asked in confusion.

“They call the wind Mariah? Never mind.” She reluctantly accepted his aid and tried to hide her wince when her knee rebelled at her weight. “What was that explosion? Did you see anything?”

“Explosion?” He frowned, puzzled. “Did you hurt your head? I don’t see blood. How many fingers do you see?”

She would punch him, except he was so damned earnest. If she could find just one single ulterior motive in His Voidness’s actions, she’d rip him to shreds. So far, unfortunately or not, he had been an open book.

A mourning cry split the stillness of the air, and a chill shivered her bones despite the July heat. Their local goddess of death was never wrong. Someone had died—someone she knew if she’d felt the rip.

“Valdis,” Mariah muttered as the mournful wail continued, echoing off the hills. Had it been Val she’d sensed earlier? No, the blinding light had been accompanied by what she could only call a joyful cry, one of discovery.

There was nothing supernatural about Valerie Ingersson in her role of death goddess performing her operatic moans. It was just damned eerie to experience.

There wouldn’t be any resuming the freedom of her eagle spirit now. Returned to the tedium of solid earth, Mariah hobbled on her aching knee down the path.

She almost fell flat on her face.

“You’re injured.” There wasn’t an ounce of male told-you-so

in his voice, only concern. “Is it only the one leg? Take my arm, and see if you can walk using your stick.”

Her staff was so much a part of her that she’d picked it up without thought. She leaned on it now and eyed his offered arm in suspicion. “I’m only a little bruised.” She tested swinging the bruised leg and leaning on her stick in its place. Awkward.

The cries from below were more insistent. Now there were more than one, and the weeping raised her hackles.

“Are they holding some kind of prayer circle?” he asked, studying the valley in bafflement.

“That’s Val’s death watch cry.” Which was why Mariah’s bones were cold and her hackles raised. Who? Who would have torn a hole in her universe? She didn’t have enough friends to spare even one. Panic crept in and she hobbled forward.

“I would go down to see, but I can’t leave you here.” Without a hint of warning, Keegan grabbed her waist and swung her up in his massive arms.

Mariah nearly dropped her staff in shock. “Damn you, put me down! I’m fine, I tell you. You go do whatever it is you do and leave me be!”

He was already striding down the hill in big loping gaits, covering ground faster than she could even if her leg had been functioning, which it clearly was not. He didn’t waste breath replying.

She considered beating him with her walking stick, but the wails below were so grief-stricken that she didn’t want to spend the next hour hobbling down. Someone had died. And the only person regularly down on the abandoned farm was Daisy. Mariah had to clench her teeth to keep them from chattering.

She couldn’t plead with the universe that it not be Daisy, because that would mean a younger friend had died—but Daisy was the closest thing to family Mariah had these days. Her birth

family had disowned her, moved and left no forwarding address. She couldn't really blame them for not wanting to be hounded into eternity.

So she had returned to the home of her ancestors, to where she'd remembered sunny summers of her childhood spent with her Nana. Daisy had been there then. Daisy had always been present—physically if not mentally.

A world without Daisy—would be a cosmic explosion, a rip in her universe. Recognizing what she'd experienced earlier, Mariah closed her eyes and forced back the tears, already knowing what they would find when they reached the bottom.

Closing her eyes was a mistake. It made her far too aware of the faintly erotic aroma of Keegan's skin, the rough calluses on his broad hands, the power of the muscle carrying her as if she were no more than a piece of lumber.

It had been a very long time since she'd had a man's arms around her. And none had ever dared carry her.

She opened her eyes again, only to notice the dark bristles emerging on his square jaw. Damn, but she despised helplessness with all her heart and soul. She turned to see where they were.

The Lucys were gathering from all across the mountain, up from the town, down from the resort, even Harvey was striding down from Menendez land, drawn by the cry of death. Mariah shivered and sent prayers winging to the universe.

The universe seldom listened—but Val did briefly shut up when she caught sight of Mountain Man Keegan loping down the path carrying Mariah. The silence was almost as haunting as the wail.

With a passel of eccentric kooks turning to watch their progress, even Keegan faltered. That cheered her considerably. “Put me down and give me your arm, but I advise disappearing

quickly once we're there."

He snorted. "I wish."

Given his size and looks, he had a point. But he set her down just outside Daisy's circle of foot-high stone guardians surrounding the old farm house foundation. Perversely, Mariah missed the strength of Keegan's embrace once she balanced on one leg, his arm, and her stick.

Cass wasn't here yet, but Samantha was striding up the path from behind the town hall. Standing on the remains of a stone chimney, Valdis returned to her wailing. Mariah waited for Sam before hobbling over to join the circle of women forming at the long-gone farmhouse. Afraid of what she would find, she needed a sensible head to keep her grounded.

Samantha Moon was the most sensible head Hillvale had produced in ages—probably because she hadn't grown up here. Slender, with wild platinum-blond hair and classic Nordic features, Sam was physically everything that dark, mixed-heritage Mariah was not. But Sam was young and not entrenched in Hillvale's superstitions and grudges, and she was a pragmatic scientist—so Mariah considered them sisters under the skin. Of course, Sam had no notion of who Mariah was, so there was that.

Sam eyed Super-Null Keegan with Mariah hanging on his arm. "I don't think I'll even ask." She proceeded onward, keeping pace with Mariah and Keegan so they arrived together.

Daisy's shabby, red-feathered cloak lay at an awkward angle across the sticks and stones of her artistic inventory. Wind lovingly lifted her long, graying hair, but the body hidden in feathers didn't move.

Mariah clutched Keegan's arm to keep her knees from buckling under her.



KEEGAN IVES FELT MARIAH SAG AND SYMPATHETICALLY COVERED HER brown hand with his. As fascinated as he might be by the black-braided female on his arm, he recognized that the eerie lament of the black-veiled woman suggested an occurrence beyond his ken. He didn't know the person on the ground, but she was uncannily drawing people, even in death.

He'd only been in Hillvale a few days, but it was a small town. He recognized many of the faces weeping or looking stoic. But tall, intriguing Mariah had been the one intriguing constant these past days—always at the café, ready with his tea, showing up when he inspected the pottery accumulating in the warehouse, even on the mountain when he thought he was alone.

Dark-eyed, seldom smiling, Mariah was as mysterious as the ghosts she claimed to catch in the colorful nets she hung on the ceilings around town. He'd thought her strong and unsentimental, but he could tell she was battling tears now.

He studied the feathered cloak spread on the dusty ground, recalling seeing it upon occasion whizzing by in a golf cart. He assumed there was a woman under it. "Shouldn't someone test her pulse?" he murmured to the two women at his side. They both served in the café, but he knew they were far more than waitresses. It would take time to unearth the town secrets.

He had a responsibility to his family and their livelihood to rip Hillvale wide open, if necessary, to prove his father's innocence. He hoped the women weren't part of the problem, but his sorry experience led him to believe otherwise.

"We're waiting for Cass," Sam admitted. "But you're right, we're being superstitious. Daisy was old, but she always seemed healthy." She stepped past the curious circle of stone men and stooped down beside the cloak, pushing it aside to find a withered arm and look for a pulse.

Shaking her head in a gesture of sorrow, Samantha was about to return the cloak to cover the fallen woman when Mariah gasped. She released Keegan's arm and hobbled with the aid of her stick across the guardian circle to push the cloak back farther.

A puddle of blood was congealing and soaking into the dust.

Escalating to a high pitch, the banshee's wail would have shattered cathedral windows had there been any. Standing above the crowd in a long black veil and flowing black gown, she even gave Keegan cold shivers, and he didn't have a superstitious bone in his body.

"I'll get Walker." Samantha stood and hurried toward the path she'd arrived on.

Mariah's hawk-like features turned to stone as she gazed around the circle and finally focused on him. "Who are you?" she demanded in hostility.

That stabbed his innards. Did she think he was responsible for this crime? He'd been regarding her with admiration, while she was thinking he was a cad who would harm an old lady? "Keegan Ives," he replied coldly. "Would you like my passport?"

"That's Walker's job, but you're the only stranger here. We don't know how long she's been here, but you were in the vicinity recently." She glared at the other weeping women. "Stand back, don't touch anything."

The tall, lean male dressed in black who Keegan knew as a street musician shifted from behind the women to amble over. "Don't mind Mariah. She's grieving. Daisy was family of some sort. But shooting a harmless old bat seems a particularly senseless act. Did you see anyone up here?"

Harvey. The musician's name was Harvey. Keegan didn't relax, but he did apply his formidable brain to the subject. "I was studying the bluff and looking for the source of the potters' clay.

My eyes were on dirt. I was not aware of anyone until I noticed Mariah. I heard no shot.”

Harvey wrinkled his brow. “Neither did I. Sound tends to echo out here.”

“Mariah claimed to have heard an explosion. I thought she’d hurt her head.” Whatever she’d heard, it had caused her to fall off a ledge, but Keegan didn’t see the need to explain that, or that he’d been so fascinated with the native goddess perched like an eagle in its eyrie that he wouldn’t have noticed the sun falling off the sky.

“I figured you’d knocked her down in a fist fight. That’s the only way I can imagine Mariah allowing anyone to carry her,” Harvey said. “Here comes Cass. She’ll try to send us home and carry Daisy off before the police chief arrives.”

Wearing her gray hair in a tight bun, the tall, slender, professorial woman who marched down from the roadway bore a striking likeness to Samantha. Keegan knew from experience that small towns were filled with related families, so he assumed there was some connection. The woman Harvey called Cass lived in a Victorian mansion out by the cemetery, Keegan knew, but she seldom appeared in town.

She didn’t bother acknowledging the crowd but stepped over the stone border everyone else was respecting to kneel beside Mariah. “You felt her spirit depart. You know she’s happier where she is now. Let’s send her off properly, shall we?”

“This is where I’d normally bug out,” Harvey said with a set look to his shadowed jaw. “But Walker will want us all in place when he arrives. Unless you’re into chanting, let’s wait up by the road.”

“Native customs are educational, but I fear this is a private ceremony,” Keegan acknowledged. “Perhaps we could find a seat where we can view the area?”

“And see if anyone is hiding among the rocks? Good thought.” Harvey considered the dirt and boulders cascading down the bluff, apparently the result of an earlier avalanche. “We’ll have to watch out for rattlers, but that’s probably the best view up there.”

His intention had been to watch the women, not look for concealed enemies, but Keegan accepted any rationale that took him up the bluff.

Not noticing their departure, the women gathered outside the stone circle, hugging, crying, and one by one, following Cass’s strong alto in what would have been an uplifting hymn in any church Keegan knew. He just didn’t recognize the words.

“Why are you looking for potters’ clay?” Harvey wielded a carved walking stick to poke the rubble they climbed. “The kiln burned long ago.”

Keegan offered his prepared spiel. “The works of Hillvale’s famed potters are a fascination to those who study ceramic art. Despite their often crude eccentricity, their work is mysteriously compelling and has become highly collectible. Critics claim the colors are the cause of the allure to the masses, much as the illuminated mall art was for a while. But I have a theory that it’s the clay which enhances the glaze.”

Keeping an eye out for vipers, Keegan strode across the slippery rock rubble. He’d been accused of seeing only the ground instead of the people around him. He no longer had any reason to change.

“Or the crystals in the glaze,” Harvey said dryly. “You haven’t stayed here for nearly a week without hearing all the crystal theories. Have you been talking to Teddy?”

“Teddy?” Keegan glanced back down the mountain to the chanting circle of women. Mariah stood as tall as Cass, but she was like a powerful Friesian filly next to a delicate Arabian.

“Which one is Teddy?”

“She’s not here. She’s new to town and hasn’t learned to come when called. She’s the redhead who owns the crystal shop.” Harvey poked his stick around a wide, flat boulder half way up the cliff, then satisfied no snakes lurked, took a seat in the shadow of sagebrush.

“Ah, yes, we’ve had a few discussions on the source of the Ingersson crystals.” Keegan took a seat and forced himself to look away from Mariah and at the surrounding countryside.

He preferred not to mention that the crystals were one of the reasons he was here. He needed to study the situation before reaching any conclusions.

The rubble had once been a verdant, active hippie commune, he knew, one that had produced startling artwork forty or fifty years ago. Daisy lay inside the remains of the farmhouse. This now-barren bluff overlooked Hillvale. To his left, in an uncleared area of trees and brambles, would be the vortex, and above that, Cass’s landscaped yard and the cemetery. To his right was undeveloped, pine-studded mountainside, and below that, the famed resort for the wealthy that brought tourists up here in summer.

But the immediate area was scarred by boulders, dead trees, brush, and erosion deep enough to hide armies. A deer could run across it and not be noticed.

He had his work cut out for him. He didn’t have a lifetime to waste digging under boulders. He needed to talk with the people who’d lived here all their lives—not exactly his forte.

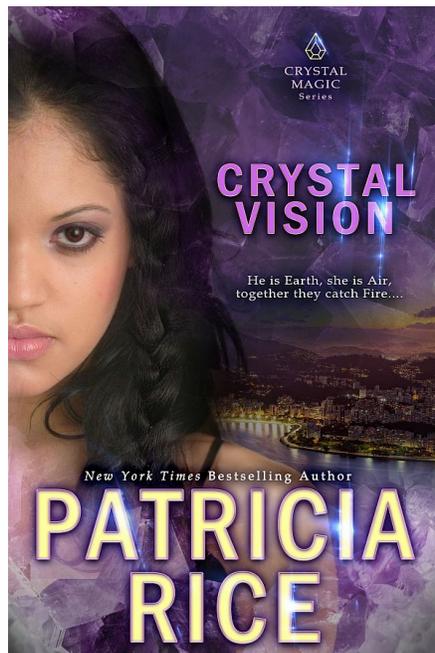
Not seeing any lurking killers, Keegan returned his attention to the gathering of women. “Could she not have harmed herself? Why are we assuming she was murdered?”

“She wore that cloak and built the guardian circle in fear of bullets,” Harvey said with a shrug. “Daisy saw her own death.”

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