

NEW YORK TIMES
BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JAYNE
ANN
KRENTZ

THE SHOP
ON HIDDEN LANE

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The Night Island

Sleep No More

THE FOGG LAKE TRILOGY

Lightning in a Mirror

All the Colors of Night

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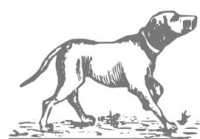
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(WITH JULIE BEARD, LORI FOSTER, AND EILEEN WILKS)

TITLES WRITTEN BY JAYNE ANN KRENTZ AND JAYNE CASTLE

No Going Back

THE SHOP ON HIDDEN LANE



Jayne Ann Krentz

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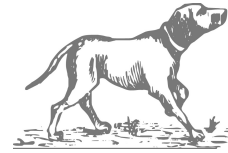
[*Author's Note*](#)

[*About the Author*](#)

*For Jim and Wendy
and Steve and Michele
and Don and Joan.*

*I am so grateful that we are family.
I love you all.*

PROLOGUE



SHE CAME OUT OF THE trance on a crashing wave of adrenaline that flooded her veins with a euphoric sense of relief. Once again, she had survived the treacherous crossing that separated the dreamstate from the waking state. For a wild, glorious moment she was a sorceress, a queen, a goddess. There would be a price to pay, but the ice fever would set in later. In this moment she could almost fly.

She took off her mirrored sunglasses and waited for the artist's reaction.

He screamed.

She winced. "Please don't do that. It's very unnerving."

It was midnight and the alley was heavily shadowed but in the light from his phone she could see the artist's face. His handsome, dramatically sculpted features had been transformed into a slack-jawed, wide-eyed mask of horror.

"No," he gasped. He stumbled back a few steps, both hands stretched out in front of him. "Stay away from me. I know what you are."

"You said I was your Muse."

"You're a succubus."

He whirled and fled to the mouth of the alley and disappeared into the foggy San Francisco night. She listened to his pounding footfalls until they faded away to nothing.

Another failed experiment. This serial dating project was becoming very depressing. She was starting to doubt Aunt Bea's assurance that sooner

or later the right man would come along.

She dropped the small set of chimes and the little mallet into one of the pockets of her long, puffy coat. The adrenaline would wear off soon. She needed to get back to her apartment and make herself a cup of Bea's special herbal tisane. It would ward off the worst of the ice fever.

Clapping a gloved hand over her nose and mouth, she willed herself to ignore the stench of urine-soaked bricks and made her way toward the entrance of the alley. She sidestepped the dark psychic stain that marked the spot where the murder had occurred.

She heard the scurrying of small rodent claws in the dense shadows and picked up her pace, careful to avoid the detritus of used needles, empty liquor bottles, and garbage. She always wore a pair of sturdy leather boots when she went out on dates in dark alleys.

Safely back on the sidewalk, she moved into the glow of a streetlamp, took out her phone, and used the app to call a car service. She confirmed the booking and glanced up. At the edge of her vision she glimpsed the dark silhouette of a man. He emerged from the fog and came toward her, moving too quickly. She did not need to see the glint of the knife in his hand to know that his intentions were not good.

Irritated, she waited until he was closer and then she turned, locked eyes with him, and smiled.

"I'm not in the mood," she said.

The would-be assailant froze. A heartbeat later he uttered a choked scream, turned, and ran.

At least he hadn't called her a demon. Maybe he didn't know fancy words like *succubus*.

At the intersection a car turned the corner and coasted slowly to a halt in front of her. She checked the license plate and confirmed that it was the vehicle she had booked. A woman on her own at midnight in the city could not be too careful.

She slipped on the mirrored sunglasses before she opened the door and got into the back seat. If the driver wondered why she was wearing shades in the middle of the night, he kept his curiosity to himself.

She fastened the seat belt, sat back, and concentrated on analyzing the disastrous evening. She was forced to admit that she had to take most of the responsibility for the failure. She had misread the artist. Live men were a lot harder to read than dead men.

Sometimes she was tempted to abandon the dating project altogether, but Bea insisted that she keep trying. "*Harpers don't give up.*"

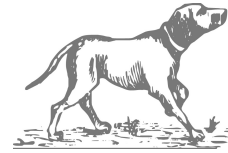
Bea had evidently given up, though. She was in her late forties now and, while she had plenty of friends in the small community of Mirror Lake, she had never found a life partner.

Perhaps the venue had been the problem tonight. Murder scenes were not particularly romantic. But there was no other way to run the test on potential lovers.

She would ponder that issue later. All she wanted to do now was get back to her snug little apartment and brew the tisane. Once she was sure the fever was under control she would enter the artist into her log of failed experiments. The list was growing uncomfortably long.

The first image of a demonic female figure wearing mirrored sunglasses and holding a set of chimes arrived by encrypted text three days later. The words *YOU ARE MINE* accompanied the sketch.

ONE



"I CAN'T BELIEVE MY AUNT is having an affair with your uncle." Sophy Harper stared at the rumpled bed, shocked to the core. "He's a *Wells*."

"So am I," Luke Wells said. "We can discuss the feud between our families some other time. In case you haven't noticed, we've got a situation here. There is every reason to think your aunt and my uncle are in serious trouble. Someone died out there in the front room of this cabin."

He was right. She pulled herself together.

"It wasn't Bea or your uncle," she said. "I'm sure of that. The energy of the stain is quite different from the energy in this room." She shuddered and tried to ignore the evidence in front of her eyes. *What on earth were you thinking, Aunt Bea? Seriously? You've been sleeping with a Wells?*

The offending couple had disappeared, but the evidence of their intimate relationship was unmistakable. Sophy recognized the fluffy pink robe dangling from a wall hook as the one she had given Bea on her last birthday. The book on the nightstand was the novel Bea had raved about in a recent email. And the toothpaste tube next to the second toothbrush on the vanity in the small bathroom was neatly rolled up from the bottom—the way Bea always rolled toothpaste tubes. Sophy refused to open any drawers for fear of finding a vibrator or sex toys.

She pushed her black-and-crystal cat-eye glasses higher on her nose and gestured toward the tumbled sheets. "How long has this been going on?"

“I have no idea,” Luke said. An ominous impatience infused his dark voice. “Furthermore, I don’t give a damn. I thought I made it clear we need to move fast. I hired you to read and clean the murder scene in the front room, not take to your fainting couch because you’ve been scandalized by your aunt’s behavior.”

She turned away from the bed. “Don’t try to tell me you’re not more than a little stunned yourself. Aunt Bea is a Harper. I can’t believe she would allow herself to be seduced by a Wells.”

“Maybe you’ve got it backward. Maybe your aunt seduced my uncle.”

Sophy stared at him, momentarily too flabbergasted to respond.

“You said your aunt texted you that she had been called away on a psychic consultation?” Luke said.

She was sure she heard a sarcastic edge on the words *psychic consultation*, but under the circumstances she told herself she would rise above it.

“That’s right.” She composed herself. “It’s not the first time she’s traveled on short notice. She asked me if I would come up here to Mirror Lake to look after the shop while she was out of town.”

“So, you packed a suitcase, left San Francisco, and drove two hours into the northern California mountains to look after a shop that does very little business at this time of year?”

“If you’re implying that I know more about what happened here than I’m telling you, you can go jump in the lake. Yes, I agreed to keep an eye on the shop. As it happens, it was good timing. I needed a break.”

“From your library work?” he asked a little too smoothly.

“No, from the crime scene reading.” She winced. “I enjoy the library work, but the readings get to you after a while.”

And so did the failed experiments. She was still recovering from the succubus incident. A woman could only take so much.

“I understand,” Luke said quietly.

Startled because he sounded as if he did understand, she shot him a wary look. But his expression gave nothing away.

“Never mind,” Luke said. “You can wring your hands later.” He went through the doorway into the small front room. “We need to figure out what happened here. You confirmed we’ve got a murder scene. The Boss says you’re a housekeeper. You can read ’em and clean ’em. Time to go to work.”

She disliked the nickname. Not only was it an insult to real housekeepers everywhere, it did not begin to describe her psychic talent. But once again she reminded herself that she had to focus.

The Boss, she knew, was Harry Wells, Luke’s paternal grandfather. Harry was currently CEO of Wells, Inc., a sophisticated technology firm that specialized in cutting-edge security devices.

The alarming evidence in the bedroom aside, the Harpers and the Wellses hadn’t been known to socialize for four generations. They did, however, keep an eye on each other from a distance. Given the pact that bound the families and the decades of distrust between them, they did not have any choice. As a result, she was aware that the Wells family had settled on Luke as the heir to his grandfather’s position at the company. Evidently no one else in the clan wanted the job, including Luke’s father and his uncle, Deke.

She had first met Luke Wells about twenty minutes ago when he had arrived on the doorstep of the Shop on Hidden Lane. But in addition to his future role as the head of Wells, Inc., she knew a couple of other things about him. According to the rumor mill in the psychic community, insiders called him No-Talent Wells. It was said that every generation or so the family produced a member with no measurable psychic abilities. Evidently that individual got stuck with the job of running the highly profitable company.

No-Talent Wells. Talk about unpleasant nicknames. She could almost feel sorry for Luke. Almost.

Focus, woman. Like it or not, Wells is right. Bea might be in real trouble.

She followed Luke back out into the other room, where his hellhound companion, Bruce, was busy exploring various scents. Man and dog went

together, she thought. They both looked dangerous.

Dark-haired, with a lean, sleekly muscled build, an austere profile, and amber eyes that gave new meaning to the term *old soul*, Luke had the vibe of a CIA assassin—cold-blooded, stern, and judgy.

Admittedly, she had never met an assassin. She had stumbled over the tracks of a few serial killers in her crime scene reading work, but no actual assassins, at least not that she was aware of. She didn't know if the CIA employed professional assassins, but she had a good imagination, and she was pretty sure that if they did, Luke would fit the profile. The fact that he was wearing a lot of black—black leather bomber jacket, black pullover, black trousers, and black boots—enhanced the impression.

Bruce suited the part of an assassin's dog. He was a dark-furred, lean, sleekly muscled beast of indeterminate breed. His amber-gold eyes were disturbingly similar to Luke's—sharp, smart, and a little feral. He should have been named Anubis or Cerberus. Who called a dog like this one Bruce?

Yep, Luke and Bruce made a good pair. A couple of hellhounds. Luckily, she was good with dogs. Unfortunately she could not say the same about men.

"Give me a minute," she snapped. "I need to get a sense of the atmosphere in this space before I can begin the reading."

Walking with ghosts was always a grim business, and murder scenes were the worst, especially at night. She dreaded the work but she was stuck with a psychic talent for it. In addition, she felt a moral obligation to use her abilities when called upon to do so. It was, however, a hard way to make a living, because business was not brisk. Few police investigators took psychics seriously. Most cops assumed she and others like her were frauds. Investigators who did believe she was the real deal rarely had a budget that allowed for hiring psychic consultants.

She had vowed to cut back on the pro bono work but that was proving difficult. Turning down the handful of clients who trusted her to help solve horrible crimes sent her on a very unpleasant guilt trip.

She paid the rent with a real job, one she loved. She was a librarian who had found her niche consulting for private libraries and collectors who specialized in books and materials that dealt with the paranormal. Granted, that meant she often did business with what most people would call eccentric clients. But she and her sister, Chloe—also a librarian—had been raised by their aunt. Bea was a librarian and a professional psychic consultant who operated the Shop on Hidden Lane. Sophy and Chloe had grown up in a business that thrived on eccentric customers. They knew how to deal with them.

“The sooner you get started, the sooner you can go back to selling crystals, wind chimes, tarot cards, and the rest of that tourist junk in your aunt’s shop,” Luke prompted.

Sophy shoved her hands into the pockets of the ankle-length puffer coat and glared. “Pro tip, Wells. Insulting my aunt’s business is not a smart way to establish a professional working relationship based on mutual respect.”

“I’m not here to establish a relationship of any kind.”

“Oddly enough, I got that impression.”

“I want answers. I have one priority, and that is to find my uncle. My grandmother told me that you agreed to take the job. I’m paying you what I suspect is double the going rate for this kind of work.”

“Triple, actually. Special price for a Wells.”

“Figures. I expect results.”

“As if I had a choice,” Sophy grumbled. “Your grandmother said she thinks your uncle’s disappearance has something to do with that stupid pact between the families.”

“My grandmother has very, very good intuition,” Luke warned softly. “Psychic-grade intuition.”

“I’ve heard that.”

She kept her tone neutral this time because she really did not have any option. It had been annoying to get the phone call from Angela Wells, the matriarch of the clan, informing her that Luke was on his way to see her, but she knew her duty as a Harper. The pact had to be honored. Angela had made it clear she was convinced Deke’s disappearance was connected to the

events of the past. So yes, there had been no choice but to agree to take the job.

Now that she knew Bea was involved with Deke and might be in danger, however, she could not simply read the scene for Luke and walk away. She had to make sure Bea was safe.

“Just to be clear,” she said, leaning into her most assured tones, “reading the scene is one thing. The kind of cleaning you have requested is...complicated.”

No one in the underworld of the psychic community had any serious objections to crime scene consultations. True, there were not that many talents who could do it for real. A lot of frauds worked these gigs. But whether or not the practitioner could be trusted was the client’s problem. There was nothing inherently unethical about the practice.

Cleaning up the paranormal evidence of a crime, however, while not technically illegal—after all, that kind of evidence could not be presented in a court of law—was severely frowned upon in a certain quarter of the paranormal community—namely the Agency for the Investigation of Atypical Phenomena, otherwise known as the Foundation.

The organization assumed it had the right to police the members of the psychic community. And, okay, maybe some entity had to take on the responsibility, because regular law enforcement could not be expected to deal with the bad guys who were amped up with paranormal talents—for the most part regular law enforcement didn’t even believe psychic criminals existed. The Foundation had a role to play, but it was a well-known fact that its agents were inclined to be extremely judgmental.

The Harpers, like many others who made their livings with their psychic talents, preferred to keep a low profile.

Wells, Inc., on the other hand, was said to take contracts with the Foundation. No surprise. It was just like the Wells family to work both sides of the street and get away with it, Sophy thought. The clan was powerful. It had nothing to fear from the Foundation.

“Let me worry about the complications of a housekeeping job,” Luke said.

“All right.” She took a deep breath. “I’m ready.”

She paced to the far end of the room and took off her black-and-crystal-framed glasses. She slipped them into a soft case and dropped the case into the depths of a coat pocket. Reaching into another pocket she took out the oversized mirrored sunglasses and put them on.

“Please turn off the light,” she said.

She could tell from his expression that Luke had some questions about the glasses, but he was smart enough not to ask them. Instead, he went to the wall switch and flipped it. The weak bulb in the overhead fixture winked out, plunging the room into the sort of absolute darkness that can only be found in an isolated mountain cabin—a cabin like this one.

She was braced for the familiar flash of acute claustrophobia—had trained herself to breathe through it—but that didn’t stop the panicky sparks that snapped across her senses. She wondered if Luke was experiencing a similar sensation. She hoped so. It would serve him right.

She reached into a third pocket and took out the small set of metal chimes and the little wooden mallet.

With the claustrophobia under control, she steeled herself and kicked up her talent. The darkness was slowly infused with an eerie gray radiance. The temperature in the already cold room seemed to drop a few more degrees.

In the gray fog, she could see Luke standing near the light switch. He did not look the least bit nervous, let alone claustrophobic, just very, very focused. That was irritating. It would have been satisfying to know that he had a shred of vulnerability. Instead, there was a hint of energy in his eyes.

She suddenly realized he was watching her intently. That answered one question. He might be a no-talent compared to the other members of his family, but he was not without a psychic vibe. He had some paranormal-grade night vision. A useful ability for an assassin.

Bruce the hellhound was watching her, too. But that was not surprising. Dogs have pretty good night vision.

She turned slowly, examining the room. There were no bloodstains, no body, and no obvious physical evidence, but the energy laid down by

violent death had soaked into the well-worn wooden floorboards and permeated the walls. The currents of dark light came in a range of colors that her second sight had learned to interpret, at least to some extent.

“How does this work?” Luke asked.

“I’m going to go into a self-induced trance,” she said. “I will narrate what I see. I’ll do my best to observe details but don’t try to ask questions or direct me in any way. You’ll shatter the trance.”

Before he could say anything else, she gripped the handle of the chimes in one hand and lightly tapped a metal bar with the mallet. A crystalline note echoed in the room, sharp and clear. It seemed to linger endlessly. She rode it into her other vision, across the borderlands that separated the waking state from the dreaming state. As usual, the journey was surreal and disturbing. For a heartbeat or two the panic threatened to overwhelm her. No matter how many times she went into the trance she never overcame the fear of being trapped in the in-between world.

And just like that she was inside.

The first ghost materialized near the window, a dark, shadowy figure in the luminous gray light. He was smoking a cigarette.