



RUNNING
HOT

Jayne Ann Krentz



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Publishers Since 1838

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario M4P 2Y3,

Canada (a division of Pearson Canada Inc.) • Penguin Books Ltd, 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL,
England • Penguin Ireland, 25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd)

Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia (a division

of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd) • Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd, 11 Community Centre,

Panchsheel Park, New Delhi-110 017, India • Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive,
Rosedale, North Shore 0632, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd, 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank,

Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices:

80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

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Published simultaneously in Canada

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Krentz, Jayne Ann.

Running hot / Jayne Ann Krentz.

p. cm.—(Arcane Society; bk. 5)

eISBN : 978-1-440-69724-1

1. Psychic ability—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3561.R44R

813'.54—dc22

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For Steve Castle, with love.

I am so lucky to have you for a brother.

Prologue

Martin was going to kill her.

She stepped off the gangway and onto the sleek, twin-engine cabin cruiser, wondering why the cold despair was hitting her so hard. If there was one thing you learned fast when you were raised by the state, it was that ultimately you could depend only on yourself. The foster home system and the streets were the ultimate universities, awarding harsh degrees in the most basic kind of entrepreneurship. When you were on your own in the world, the laws of survival were simple. She had learned them well.

She thought her past had prepared her for any eventuality, including the possibility that the only man she had ever trusted might someday turn on her. She had been mistaken. Nothing could blunt the pain of this betrayal.

Martin emerged from the cabin. The dazzling Caribbean sunlight glinted off his mirrored glasses. He saw her and gave her his familiar charismatic smile.

“There you are,” he said, coming forward to take the computer case from her. “You’re late.” He glanced at the man in the white shirt and dark blue trousers coming up the gangway with her suitcase. “Weather problems?”

“No, sir.” Eric Schafer set down the small suitcase. “We landed on time. But there’s some kind of local holiday going on. The streets were jammed. You know how it is here on the island. Only one road from the airport and it goes straight through town. No way to avoid the traffic.”

Eric straightened and wiped the sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand. His shirt, embroidered with the discreet logo of Crocker World, had been military-crisp that morning when he climbed into the cockpit of the small corporate jet in Miami. It was now badly wilted from the island heat.

“The Night and Day Festival,” Martin said. “I forgot about it. Big event down here. A combination of Mardi Gras and Halloween.”

He was lying, she thought. She watched the strange dark energy flash in his aura. It was all part of the plan to kill her. The festival would provide excellent cover for a murder. With so many strangers on the island, the local authorities would be too busy to notice if Mr. Crocker returned from his private island alone.

“Will there be anything else, sir?” Eric asked.

“Where’s Banner?”

“Left him back at the airport. He’s keeping an eye on the plane.”

“You two can take the jet back to Miami. No point both of you cooling your heels on this rock for an entire week. You’ve got wives and kids who will probably be very happy to see you. I’ve been keeping you guys busy these past few months.”

“Yes, sir. Thanks.”

Eric’s gratitude was real. Martin knew how to bind his people to him with a combination of generous salaries and benefits and his own natural charisma. She had often thought that he could have been a very successful cult leader. Instead, he had chosen a different career path.

He went up the short flight of teak steps to take the helm.

“Get the lines for me,” he called down to Eric.

“Sure thing, Mr. Crocker.” Eric crouched to uncoil the ropes that secured the powerful boat to the dock.

She wondered what he and the others on the staff would think when she disappeared. Martin had probably already prepared a convincing story for them. Something to do with falling overboard, perhaps. The currents around the island were notoriously tricky.

She felt the vibration beneath her feet as the boat’s engines started to churn. Eric gave her a friendly wave and dashed more sweat off his forehead.

There was no veiled look of masculine speculation in his expression, no sly wink or grin. When he got back to the airport he and his copilot, John Banner, would not make any comments about the boss going off with one of his girlfriends. No one on Martin’s staff had ever mistaken her for one of Martin’s many lovers. His women tended to be tall, willowy and blond. She was none of those things. She was just the hired help.

Officially she was Martin’s butler, the one person who traveled with him everywhere. She kept his life organized and oversaw the operation of his many residences. Most important, she supervised the entertaining of his friends, business associates and the occasional visiting politician, lobbyist or head of state.

She raised her hand in farewell to Eric and squeezed back tears. Regardless of what happened today, she knew that she would never see him again.

The boat slipped gracefully away from the dock, headed toward the entrance to the small harbor.

Like many who moved in the stratospheric circles inhabited by those of great wealth, Martin owned several houses and kept a number of apartments in various locales around the world. The Miami mansion was his main residence but the place he considered home was the small island he had purchased a few years ago. The only way to get to it was by boat. There was no landing strip, just a single dock.

Unlike his other residences, which were always maintained in a state of readiness, Martin kept no staff on the island. The house was much smaller and far more modest than his other dwellings. He considered the place his private retreat.

Once past the stone pillars that marked the harbor entrance, Martin revved the engines. The boat picked up speed, slicing eagerly through the turquoise blue water. He was busy at the wheel, not paying any attention to her as he concentrated on piloting the craft. She heightened her other senses and took another look at his aura. The dark energy was stronger now. He was getting jacked up.

The boat felt very small around her. There was nowhere to hide; nowhere to run.

She had known for days—weeks, if she was brutally honest with herself—that Martin was planning to get rid of her. She was even sure she knew why. Nevertheless, some small part of her had clung to the slender thread of denial, even as it unraveled. Maybe there was some logical explanation for the disturbing changes in his aura. Maybe the new darkness was the result of mental illness. As dreadful as that possibility would be, at least it would allow her the comfort of knowing that he was no longer in his right mind; that the real Martin would never plot her death.

But her own finely honed survival instincts had refused to let her deceive herself any longer. Martin might have had some affection for her at one time, but deep down she had always known that their relationship was rooted in her usefulness to him. Now he had concluded that she had become a liability so he was going to get rid of her. In his mind the situation was not complicated.

She stood at the stern and watched the harbor and the small town grow smaller and smaller. When they became tiny, indistinct blobs, she turned around. Martin’s private island was very close now. She could make out the house perched on the hillside.

Martin slowed the boat and brought it neatly alongside the wooden dock.

“Get the lines,” Martin said sharply, his attention on maneuvering the boat.

That did it. For some inexplicable reason the simple, routine order flipped the last switch somewhere in her head. The unholy brew of pain, sadness, disbelief and mind-numbing fear that had been swirling through her in alternating currents for days was suddenly swept away by icy-cold rage. Her other senses leaped violently in reaction to the adrenaline rush.

The son of a bitch was planning to murder her. Now. Today.

“Sure thing, Martin,” she said, amazed by how cool and controlled she sounded. But then, she’d had a lot of practice concealing her emotions and reactions behind a gracious, exquisitely polite façade. She could have given a geisha lessons. But she was no geisha.

She grabbed the stern line, stepped lightly out of the boat and onto the narrow dock. It didn’t take long to tie up. She had done it countless times in the past.

Martin left the wheel and came back down the steps.

“Here, take this,” he said, handing her the computer. “I’ll get your suitcase and the supplies.”

She took the computer from him and waited while he swung the suitcase and the two bags of groceries up onto the dock. He glanced around, making sure he had everything he wanted out of the boat. Then he stepped onto the dock.

“Ready?” he said.

Not waiting for a reply, he scooped up the bags of groceries with an easy motion and tucked one into the crook of each arm. His aura flashed with impatience and a really scary excitement. The pulse of dark energy were becoming increasingly agitated. This wasn’t just business, she realized. He was actually looking forward to murdering her. Her own fury flared higher.

“Of course.” She gave him her best professional smile, the one she used to greet his guests and business associates. She thought of it as her stage smile. “But just out of curiosity, when do you plan to do it?”

“Do what?” he said. He was already turning away from her, heading toward the small SUV parked at the end of the dock.

“Kill me.”

He froze in mid-stride. She watched the torrent of shock crash through his aura. The indescribable colors flashed across the spectrum. She really had taken him by surprise, she realized. Had he actually believed that he could plot her death without her sensing it? Evidently the answer to that question was a resounding yes. Then again, she had never told him all of her secrets.

When he turned to face her his expression was a mix of anger and impatience.

“What the hell are you talking about?” he said. “Is this your idea of a bad joke?”

She folded her arms, hugging herself a little.

“We both know it isn’t a joke,” she said quietly. “You brought me here with the intention of murdering me.”

“I haven’t got time for this. I’ve got work to do.”

“I assume I’m going to be the victim of a tragic drowning accident?” She smiled bleakly. “So sad. The butler went swimming and went under. Happens all the time.”

He searched her face as though wondering if she had a high fever and then shook his head. “I don’t believe this.”

“I didn’t, either. But in hindsight I saw it coming weeks ago.”

“All right, let’s play this out,” he said with the air of a man who has begun to suspect that he is dealing with a crazy person. “You and I have been a team for a long time. Twelve years. Why would

want to kill you now?"

"I think there are a couple of reasons. The first one, of course, is that I recently discovered that for the past few months you've been allowing some very nasty people to use the resources of Crocker World as a cover for illegal arms dealing. All that agricultural equipment you so generously donated to various developing countries? Turns out those tractors and plows fire real bullets. Imagine my surprise."

For an instant she thought he was going to continue the charade a little longer. But this was Martin. He could get to the bottom line faster than anyone else she had ever met. That was part of his talent.

He smiled with just the right touch of genuine regret and put down the grocery bags. "I knew you would have problems with my little sideline. That's why I didn't bring you on board at the start of the project."

"It isn't just what you're dealing, although that's bad enough. It's the people you're working for."

Fury sparked in his eyes and in his aura.

"I don't work for anyone else," he said through his teeth. "Crocker World is mine. I built the company, damn it. I am Crocker World."

"You *were* Crocker World. But you've handed the company you built, that I *helped* you build, to some sort of criminal organization."

"You had nothing to do with my success. You should be down on your knees thanking me for what I did for you. If I hadn't come along, you'd still be working in that low-rent flower shop, living all by yourself with a couple of cats because you scare off every man you meet. Hell, sometimes you even scare me."

That shook her. "What?"

"The way you take one look at a person and figure out what makes him tick. What he'd kill for. What scares the shit out of him. His strengths and weaknesses. It's damned spooky. Why do you think I'm getting rid of you?"

"You're forgetting something, Martin. If you hadn't offered me a job twelve years ago, you'd still be operating a cheap way-off-the-strip casino in Binge, Nevada. I'm the one who identified the cheats who were robbing you blind. I'm the one who helped you pay off that mob boss. If it hadn't been for me, you'd have been buried in some shallow grave out in the desert by now."

"That's a lie."

"And I'm the one who identified those first investors for you, the venture capitalists who backed you when you decided to sell the casino and start building condo towers."

Martin's aura was an inferno now.

"I would have found the investors on my own," he shouted.

"That's not true. You're a mid-range strategy talent, Martin. You can sense opportunities and put together a plan with a skill few can match because you're psychic in that way. But you're no good when it comes to reading people."

"Shut your stupid mouth."

"Without that talent, all the business insight in the world is useless. Building a financial empire isn't just about numbers and the bottom line. It's about identifying and exploiting your opponent's strengths and weaknesses."

He gave her a sharklike smile. "You think I need a lecture on the art of the deal from you?"

"For twelve years I've been your personal profiler. I'm the one who tells you when a business associate is in trouble, either financially or in his personal life. I warn you when someone is trying to con you. I identify the strengths and weaknesses of your opponents and your partners. I tell you

exactly what you need to offer to someone in order to close the deal, and I'm the one who tells you when your best option is to walk away from the table."

"You had your uses, I'll grant you that. But I don't need you anymore. Before we finish this, though, I'd really like to know how you tumbled on to my little arms-dealing sideline."

"As far as your guests and business associates are concerned, I'm just a trusted member of the staff. No one looks twice at me. No one notices me. But I take a good look at them. That's what you pay me to do, after all. Sometimes I see things and sometimes I hear things. And I am very, very good when it comes to research, remember?"

"How much do you know?"

"About the people you're involved with?" She raised one shoulder slightly. "Not a lot. Just that it's some sort of cartel run by very powerful sensitives and that they've seduced you into doing their dirty work."

Martin's aura flared higher. "No one has seduced me."

"Until recently I would never have believed that anyone could buy you," she said. "I mean, what could a bunch of gangsters offer one of the most successful men on the planet that would make it worth his while to risk his freedom, his reputation and his life?"

Martin's rage showed in his eyes now. "You don't know what the hell you're talking about. The organization isn't some mob."

"Yes, it is, Martin. The first time you brought those two men to the Miami residence, I told you they were very, very dangerous."

"So am I," Martin hissed. He reached up and slowly removed his mirrored glasses. "More dangerous than you can imagine, thanks to my new business associates. And thanks to them, I no longer need you."

"What are you talking about?"

"The organization those two men represent is about much more than money. It's all about power, real power; the kind that world leaders and warlords and billionaires can only dream about."

Suddenly she understood. She had not thought that she could be any more appalled than she already was but she had been wrong.

"I guess this explains the changes in your aura in the past couple of months," she said.

Martin looked startled.

"What changes?" he demanded.

"I thought perhaps you had become the victim of some kind of mental illness that affected your parasenses."

"I am not sick, damn you."

"Yes, you are, but not because of some natural disease process. You did this to yourself. With a little help from your new friends, of course."

Martin took a step closer. He didn't look horrified. He looked eager. Excited. "You can see the effects of the drug in my aura?"

"A drug," she repeated. "Yes, that's the only logical explanation. Those two men supplied you with some sort of drug that affects your parasenses."

"There's an excellent likelihood that it will also increase my natural life span, maybe by as much as a couple of decades. What's more, they'll be good decades. I won't be weak and frail. I'll maintain my powers."

"I can't believe I'm hearing this. Martin, you're a brilliant businessman. Don't you know when you've been sold a bill of goods? The promise of longevity is the oldest scam in the world."

“The reason the researchers aren’t certain about the extended life span is because the new drug hasn’t been around long enough to test the theory. Those at the top have been using the stuff for only a few years. But the lab data look very promising.”

“You’re a fool, Martin.”

“It’s true,” he insisted. “Even if they’re wrong about the drug’s ability to lengthen my life, that doesn’t alter the fact that the formula *works*. It can kick a level-seven strategy talent like me all the way up to a nine or a ten.”

“You’re not a nine or a ten. I’d know. Something has changed in your aura, though. Whatever it is, it isn’t—” She broke off, groping for the right word. “It isn’t wholesome.”

“Wholesome?” He laughed. “Now there’s a silly, old-fashioned word. Do you think I care how *wholesome* I am? For your information, you’re right, though. The drug they gave me didn’t elevate the level of my talent. It wasn’t intended to have that effect.”

“I don’t understand.”

“The drug can be genetically altered in a variety of ways to suit an individual’s psychic profile. The version I’m taking has provided me with an entirely new talent.”

“If you believe that, you really have gone off the deep end.”

“I am not insane,” Martin shouted.

The words seemed to echo around them. A few seconds of terrifying stillness followed. Then Martin’s aura flared with a sickening heat.

She knew, then, that the moment had come. He was going to try to kill her now. The only question was whether he intended to use a gun or his bare hands. One thing was certain, standing there at the end of the dock left her nowhere to run.

The mind-searing blast of energy came out of nowhere. It roared over her, bringing disorienting pain and the promise of an endless plunge into the abyss.

Not a gun. She fell to her knees under the force of the lightning that slashed at her senses. *Not his bare hands, either.* A slight miscalculation on her part.

Martin stared down at her, enthralled with his own power.

“They were right,” he breathed. “They told me the truth about the drug. Congratulations. You are about to become the first person to witness what I can do with my new talent.”

“Don’t touch me.”

“I’m not going to touch you. It isn’t necessary. I’m going to incinerate your psychic senses. You will go into a coma and then you will die.”

“Martin, no, don’t do this.” Her voice was steadier now. So were her senses. She had recovered somewhat from the initial traumatizing shock. She was getting a handle on the pain, which meant that she was pushing back the invading waves of energy. “Maybe it’s not too late. Maybe some of the experts in the Society can help you.”

“You’re pleading with me. I like that.”

“I’m not going to beg for my life. But there is one thing you should know before you do this.”

“What?”

“If you hadn’t come along, I would have owned that florist shop by now, a whole chain of flower shops.”

“That was always your greatest flaw,” Martin said. “Your dreams and ambitions were so much smaller than mine.”

He heightened the psychic heat of the dark energy he was generating, his face tightening with effort. She pushed back harder, pulling energy from her own aura. The pain lessened some more.

“Die, damn you,” he hissed. He took another step closer. “Why don’t you *die*?”

~~Her strength was coming back. She was able to focus clearly on maintaining the energy shield that~~
her aura had become.

Martin staggered but he did not seem to notice that she was fighting him. Instead, he appeared disoriented.

Angrily, he pulled himself together and took another step toward her, almost touching her. He forced more energy through the murky bands of dark lightning he was generating.

“You’re supposed to die,” he shouted.

He reached down to seize her by the throat. She raised her arms in a reflexive, defensive gesture. He grabbed her hands. She gripped his wrists.

Her palms burned. The world exploded, sending jolt after jolt of shock waves through her senses.

Martin Crocker convulsed once. He looked at her with the eyes of a man who is peering into hell.

“No,” he screamed.

He reeled, lost his balance and went over the side of the dock into the water. His aura winked out with terrifying suddenness.

She rose, heart pounding. For the second time in her life, she had killed a man. Not just any man this time—a very powerful, influential multibillionaire who just happened to be involved in a dangerous criminal enterprise.

And her hands still burned.

ONE

WAIKIKI . . .

The big man in the short-sleeved, orange and purple flowered shirt was going to be a problem in about five minutes. It didn't take a psychic to sense the angry, volatile energy stirring the atmosphere around table five. Any experienced bartender would have picked up on it. For a bartender who just happened to be psychic and who was also an ex-cop, the invisible warning signs had started blazing neon-bright when Mr. Orange and Purple Flowers walked into the Dark Rainbow half an hour earlier.

Luther Malone gave the mai tai a quick stir with a swizzle stick and set it on Julie's tray next to the beer and the Blue Hawaii. Julie leaned over the bar to pluck a cherry and a slice of pineapple out of the chilled containers.

"Got trouble on five," she said quietly. "The idiot is picking on Crazy Ray. Fortunately for the big fool, Ray hasn't noticed yet."

"I'll take care of it," Luther said.

Although the hole-in-the-wall establishment was located in Waikiki, they didn't get much tourist trade. Tucked away in a small courtyard half a block off busy Kuhio Avenue, the Rainbow catered to an eccentric group of regulars. Some of the customers, Crazy Ray among them, were more eccentric than others. Ray had long ago dedicated himself to the gods of surfing. When Ray was not surfing, he went into a Zen-like state. Everyone who knew him acknowledged that he was best left in that otherworldly zone.

"Be careful," Julie said. She garnished the mai tai with the pineapple and the cherry. "A lot of that bulk is muscle, not fat."

"Yeah, I can see that. I appreciate the tip."

Julie flashed him a quick smile. "I'd really hate to have anything happen to you, boss. The hours of this job mesh perfectly with my work at the hotel."

Like so many others employed in the tourist trade throughout Hawaii, Julie held down two jobs. Life in the islands had its benefits but it was expensive. Friday and Saturday nights she showed up at the Dark Rainbow to help with the dinner rush. Her regular day job was working the front desk at one of the countless small, faded, budget hotels that somehow managed to survive in the shadows of the big beachfront resorts and high-rise condos.

In addition to Julie two nights a week, the Rainbow usually employed a dishwasher. That position, however, was currently open. Again. Dishwashers came and went with such relentless frequency that the proprietors, Petra and Wayne Groves, no longer bothered to remember names. They called each one Bud and let it go at that. The most recent Bud had quit the previous night. Evidently the job had interfered with his regular appointments with his meth dealer.

The door to the kitchen swung open. Wayne Groves, half owner of the Rainbow, emerged with a tray of platters, each laden with mounds of deep-fried food. Pretty much everything that came out of the Dark Rainbow's kitchen was fried.

Wayne came to an abrupt halt, his attention riveted on the man in the orange and purple shirt.

Wayne had a lean, rangy build and hard, sharp features that would have suited an old school gunslinger. His eyes went with the image. They were ice cold. He was sixty-five but could still read

the last line on the chart at the eye doctor's. The truth was he could have read a few more lines below that but they didn't design eye tests for people with preternatural vision.

Wayne was covered from head to foot in tattoos, the most distinctive one being the red-eyed snake coiled around his gleaming bald scalp. The head of the snake was positioned high on his forehead, a dark jewel in an ominous crown.

Wayne was a very focused person. Most of the time the full force of his concentration was directed at taking orders for fish and chips and hamburgers or polishing glassware. But at the moment he was locked on another target. Flower Shirt didn't know it but he was now squarely in the sights of a man who had once made his living working as a sniper for a clandestine government agency.

Luther grabbed the cane that was hooked over the counter. Time to get moving. The last thing they needed at the Rainbow was an incident that would result in a visit from the Honolulu PD. The neighboring business establishments would not appreciate it. Around here, everyone liked to keep a low profile. That went double for the Rainbow's regulars, most of whom were badly damaged sensitives like Crazy Ray.

He maneuvered his way out from behind the bar. He paused briefly near the still and silent Wayne. "It's okay," he said. "I'll handle it."

Wayne blinked and snapped out of his lethal stillness.

"Whatever," he growled. He turned and glided toward a nearby table.

The kitchen door opened again on a wave of grease-scented heat. Petra Groves, the chef and co-owner of the restaurant, appeared. She raked the room with an assessing expression while she wiped her hands on her badly stained apron.

"Had a feelin'," she said. She hadn't lived in Texas since childhood but the laid-back accent still clung to every word she spoke.

Petra's intuition, like Wayne's ability to take down a target with an impossibly long-range rifle shot, was well above normal. Actually, it could only be described as paranormal.

Both Wayne and Petra were mid-range sensitives; both had retired from the same no-name agency. Petra had been Wayne's spotter in the days when Wayne had worked as a sniper. Together they had formed a lethal team. They had also become another kind of team—partners for life.

Petra was a sturdily built woman in her early sixties. She wore her long gray hair in a braid down her back. A badly yellowed chef's toque sat squarely atop her head. A gold ring glinted in one ear. While Wayne carried a concealed gun in an ankle holster, Petra favored a knife; a big one. She kept it in a sheath beneath her long apron.

"I've got it handled," Luther said.

"Right." Petra nodded once and stalked back into the hot kitchen.

Luther tapped his way across the tiled floor. The overall level of tension in the room was rising fast. The crowd was getting restless. The study of parapsychology had been thoroughly discredited by the modern scientific establishment. Because of that, a lot of folks went through their entire lives ignoring, suppressing or remaining willfully oblivious to the psychic side of their natures. But in situations like this, even those with normal sensitivity found themselves looking around for the nearest exit well before they had registered exactly what was wrong. The crowd at the Rainbow was anything but normal.

Flower Shirt didn't seem to be aware of Luther or the restless energy of the regulars. He was too busy poking at Crazy Ray with a sharp, verbal stick.

"Hey, Surfer Bum," he said loudly. "You make a good living screwing female tourists? How much do you charge the ladies for a peek at your little surfboard?"

Ray ignored him. He continued to sit hunched over his beer, munching steadily on his deep-fried fish and fries. He had the broad-shouldered build and the burned-in tan of a man who spends his days riding the waves. His lanky brown hair had been bleached by the sun. Couldn't blame Flower Shirt for picking the wrong target, Luther thought. Ray didn't look crazy, not unless you could see his aura.

"What's the matter?" Flower Shirt said. "Got a problem answering a simple question? Where's that aloha spirit I'm always hearing so much about?"

Ray put down his beer and started to turn. Luther jacked up his senses until he could see the auras of those around him. Light and dark reversed but not in the way they did in a photographic negative. When he was running hot like this the colors he viewed were anything but black and white. The hues came from various points along the paranormal spectrum. There were no words to describe them. Energy pulsed and flared and spiked around every person in the vicinity.

The growing tension had been palpable to his normal senses, but perceived through his parasenses, it had already escalated into a flood tide of dangerously swirling currents.

The brief moment of vertigo that always accompanied the shift in perception evaporated between one step and the next. He was accustomed to the short flash of acute disorientation. He had been living with his talent since he had come into it in his early teens.

He concentrated on Ray first. Flower Shirt was the most obnoxious person within range but Ray was the most unpredictable. The seething, barely controlled craziness showed clearly in the murky hues and erratic pulses of his aura. The most alarming stuff took the shape of sickly, greenish-yellow filaments that flashed and disappeared in no discernible pattern. The tendrils gathered strength rapidly as Ray's frail grasp on reality started to weaken. He slid rapidly into his uniquely paranoid universe.

"Keep away from me," Ray said softly.

A smart man, hearing that voice, would have backed off immediately, but Flower Shirt grinned, unaware that he was about to let a very unstable, unpredictable genie out of its bottle.

"Don't worry, Surfer Bum," he said. "The last thing I want to do is get too close to you. Might catch whatever diseases you picked up from those tourists you service."

Ray started to rise, muscled shoulders bunching beneath his ripped T-shirt. Luther was less than two feet away now. He concentrated on the unwholesome greenish-yellow spikes of energy that snapped and cracked in Ray's aura. With exquisite precision—mistakes often had extremely unpleasant consequences—he generated a wave of suppressing energy from his own aura. The pulses resonated with Ray's in a counterpoint pattern. The green-yellow tendrils of energy weakened visibly.

Ray blinked a few times and frowned in confusion. Luther tweaked his aura a little more. With a sigh, Ray lost interest in Aloha Shirt. Suddenly exhausted, he sank back down into his chair.

"Why don't you finish your beer?" Luther said to him. "I'll take care of this."

"Yeah, sure." Ray looked at the bottle on the table. "My beer."

Grateful for direction in the midst of the overwhelming ennui, he picked up the bottle and took a long swallow.

Deprived of his prey, Flower Shirt reacted with spiraling rage. His face scrunched up into a snarl. He leaned to one side and peered around Luther.

"Hey, I'm talking to you, Surfer Asshole," he yelled at Ray.

"No," Luther said, using the same low voice he had employed with Ray. "You're talking to me. We're discussing the fact that you would like to leave now."

Flower Shirt's aura was a lot more stable than Ray's. That was the good news. The bad news was that the colors were those of frustration and fury.

The politically correct view of bullies was that they suffered from low self-esteem and tried to

compensate by making other people their victims. As far as Luther was concerned, that was pure bull. Guys like Flower Shirt felt superior to others and lacked all traces of empathy. Bullies bullied not out of some unconscious desire to try to compensate for their low self-esteem. They did it because they could and because they enjoyed it.

The only way to stop a bully was to scare him. The species had a strong sense of self-preservation.

There was nothing tricky or mysterious about the wavelengths of energy in Flower Shirt's pattern. The hot rush of the man's unchecked lust for verbal abuse spiked and pulsed very clearly. Luther generated the suppressing patterns. The compelling urge to hurt and dominate Ray died instantly beneath the heavy, crushing weight of exhaustion but Flower Shirt was already on his feet, turning his attention to Luther.

"Get out of my way, bartender, unless you want a fist in your face."

He grabbed Luther's arm, intending to shove him aside. That was a mistake. Physical contact intensified the force of the energy that Luther was using.

Flower Shirt swayed a little and nearly lost his balance. He grabbed the edge of the table to keep himself upright.

"What?" he got out. "I think I'm sick or something."

"Don't worry about the bill," Luther said. He took hold of Flower Shirt's arm and steered him toward the door. "The drinks are on the house."

"Huh?" Flower Shirt shook his head, unable to focus. "Wh-what's goin' on?"

"You're leaving now."

"Oh." Flower Shirt's brow creased. "Okay. I guess. Kinda tired all of a sudden."

He made no attempt to resist. A hush fell over the crowd. The other diners watched in silence as Luther guided Flower Shirt outside into the night.

When the door closed behind them the noise level inside the Dark Rainbow went back to normal.

"What's going on?" Flower Shirt rubbed his eyes. "Where are we going?"

"You're going back to your hotel."

"Yeah?" There was no defiance in the word, just dazed confusion.

Luther guided Flower Shirt through the small courtyard, steering him around the sickly-looking potted palms that Wayne had set out in a misbegotten effort to add a little authentic island atmosphere.

It was going on ten o'clock. The proprietor of the gun club on the second floor had taken in the sign that promised tourists a *Safe Shooting Environment, Real Guns, Factory Ammo and Excellent Customer Service*. For reasons Luther had never fully comprehended, businesses that allowed visitors to the island the opportunity to shoot in indoor ranges thrived in Waikiki.

The Red Skull Tattoo and Body Piercing Parlor and Zen Comics were also closed for the night but the rusty window air conditioners of the adult video arcade were grinding away as usual. It was the only way to know if the place was open. No light ever showed through the grimy, blacked-out windows of the arcade. The customers slipped in and out like so many wraiths, preferring the cover of darkness.

Luther prodded his zombie-like companion beneath the antique wooden surfboard that marked the entrance to the courtyard and walked him along the narrow lane to Kuhio Avenue. At this hour there was plenty of traffic and the open-air restaurants and taverns were crowded.

He debated taking Flower Shirt another block to Kalakaua, where the brilliantly lit windows of the high-end designer boutiques and the more upscale restaurants lured herds of visitors out into the balmy night. No need to go to the trouble, he decided. He could do what needed to be done right here

Unfortunately, it would do little good to merely dump Flower Shirt on the street. The effects of the suppression energy were short-lived. Luther knew that once he released Flower Shirt from the extreme ennui, the guy would bounce right back to whatever state was normal for him.

When he came out of the fugue he would remember that his attempt to bait Ray had somehow stalled and that the bartender had gotten in his way. He would also recall that he had been escorted off the premises in an ignominious fashion by a gimp on a cane. Those memories would be more than enough incentive to bring him back to the Rainbow in search of revenge.

Fear was one of the most primitive emotions, a core survival instinct that, like all such instincts, was hardwired into the brain. That meant it was experienced across the spectrum of the senses from the normal straight into the paranormal. It was also one of the easiest emotions to trigger, if you had the knack. And once triggered, it tended to hang around for a while.

Bullies comprehended fear well because they spent so much time instilling it in others.

Luther took a breath and let it out slowly. He wasn't looking forward to this part but a bartender does what a bartender's got to do.

He went hotter, revving up his senses. Then he turned his unresisting zombie so that Flower Shirt faced the entrance to the lane that led to the Rainbow.

"You don't ever want to go down there," he said. "Folks in that little restaurant are all crazy. No telling what they'll do. Like walking into a room full of nitroglycerin. You're way too smart to go back."

He accompanied the words with little pulses of energy aimed at the latent fear points on Flower Shirt's paranormal spectrum, deliberately stirring and arousing as many as he could identify. There was a reason for the term "panic button." He tweaked and fiddled until Flower Shirt was sweating and shaking and staring into the dark lane as though it were the gate to hell.

With luck, when he recovered from the experience, the memory of the lane and the Dark Rainbow would be inextricably linked to a subliminal sense of deep unease. Flower Shirt would never be able to explain it; probably wouldn't even try. But if he happened to pass this way again, he would instinctively avoid the lane. That was how fear worked on the psychic level. Usually.

The problem with trying to establish a fear response was that there was always the possibility that it would backfire on you. Some people felt compelled to confront their fears. But in Luther's experience that wasn't true of the bully mentality.

He eased off the psychic pressure. Flower Shirt calmed.

"You want to go back to your hotel room," Luther said. "Had a little too much to drink tonight. Go to sleep it off."

"Yeah, right," Flower Shirt whispered, anxious now. "Too much booze."

He hurried toward the intersection and crossed the street. He disappeared around the corner, heading toward Kalakaua and the safety of the bright lights of the beachfront hotels.

Luther leaned heavily on his cane, feeling the dark weight of what he had done. He hated this part. There was always a price to pay when he used his talent on someone like Flower Shirt.

The bastard may have deserved what he got but the reality was that the battle had been unequal from the get-go. He never stood a chance; never even knew what hit him.

Yeah, that part sucked.

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