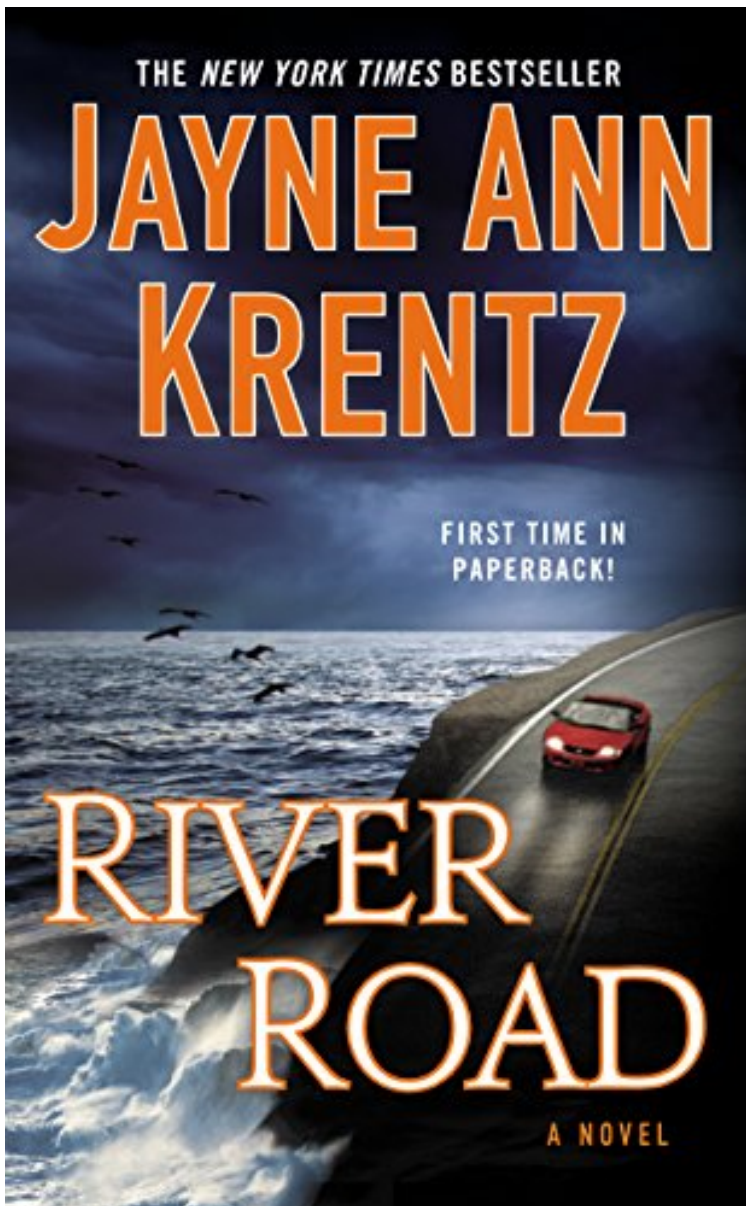


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# River Road



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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurA quintessential Jayne Ann Krentz romancethe latest from the New York Times bestselling author of Dream Eyes and Copper Beach.Thirteen years ago, Lucy Sheridan was dragged out of a wild party by the older guy she had a crush on. Now, returning to Summer River in Californias wine country after her aunts fatal car accident, Lucy is learning there was more to the story than she realized. Mason Fletcher saved her from a very nasty crime that nightand soon afterward, Tristan, the cold-blooded rich kid whod targeted her, mysteriously disappearedA lot has changed since that long-ago summer. Lucy is now a forensic genealogist, while Mason runs a successful security firm with his brother. And when he and Lucy

make a shocking discovery inside her aunts house, and some of Tristans old friends start acting suspicious, Masons quietly fierce instincts kick into gear. He saved Lucy once, and hell save her again. But this time, she insists on playing a role in her own rescue. Extrait\*\*\*This excerpt is from an advance uncorrected proof.\*\*\*Copyright 2014 by Jayne Ann Krentz4

Mason Fletcher lounged against the sales counter, a gleaming wrench gripped loosely in one hand. He regarded Lucy with a lot of interest infused with a dash of cool disapproval. She found the combination both annoying and unnerving. But the real problem was that Mason looked even better now than he had thirteen years ago when he had figured so powerfully in her fevered teenage imagination. Her first reaction upon walking through the door of Fletcher Hardware had been primal and flat-out breathtaking. Ive been looking for you. The wolf-sized dog that padded out from behind the counter to inspect her regarded her with an expression remarkably similar to Masons. The animal wasnt just the size of a wolf it looked like one, as well. An aging wolf, she concluded. There was some gray around the muzzle. The beasts eyes were not the standard dark brown associated with most breeds. Instead, they were a disconcerting shade of hazel gold that was a little too close to the color of Masons eyes. Thats Joe, Mason said, nodding toward the dog. She looked down at Joe and held out her hand. Hello, Joe. Joe stared at her for a moment longer, his gaze unflinching. Evidently concluding that she was neither a threat nor prey, he sniffed her fingers. Satisfied, he sat back. Gingerly, she scratched him behind his ears. Joe chuffed a bit and licked her hand. He likes you, Mason said. Mostly he ignores people. Im thrilled, of course, that he doesnt intend to rip out my throat, Lucy said. He hasnt gone for anyones throat for at least a week.

Mason tossed the gleaming wrench into the air and caught it with a barely noticeable twist of his wrist, making it look easy. Heard you were in town to clean out your aunts place and put it on the market. Thats the plan. She stopped rubbing Joes ears and straightened. She was determined to remain as cool as Mason. It wasnt easy. She was still struggling to get past the shock of coming face-to-face with him. She had expected to see his uncle behind the counter when she walked into the hardware store. The possibility that she might run into Mason while she was in Summer River had occurred to her, but she had dismissed it as extremely remote. According to the last update from Sara some six months ago, Mason was in Washington, D.C., where he and his brother ran a very expensive, very low-profile, very sophisticated private security consulting business. How long will you be around? Mason asked. She smiled. She couldnt help it. She made a show of glancing at her watch. Less than three minutes into this conversation and already it sounds like an interrogation. In hindsight I may have made a mistake when I advised you to go into law enforcement all those years ago. You made the suggestion. Im the one who made the decision. What in the world was that supposed to mean? she wondered. Suddenly she got that faint, tiny little inner ping of knowing, the same sensation she experienced when she was closing in on a missing heir. Something bad had happened to Mason Fletcher. She would have bet good money that it was linked to his career path. And, being Mason Fletcher, he was taking full responsibility for the decision that had sent him down that road. Mason hadnt changed, she thought. He was the kind of man who would always take full responsibility even for stuff that, technically speaking, wasnt his responsibility. She sought a neutral topic of conversation. Im glad to see that the hardware store survived, she said. When did your uncle buy it? A few months after he retired. Its the last store on the block that was here when I used to visit Aunt Sara. This town has really changed. Most of the old, traditional stores on Main Street had been replaced with upscale shops and trendy eateries. Fletcher Hardware bordered on one side by a wine shop and on the other side by an art gallery was a stubborn anachronism. Mason surprised her with a wry smile. Welcome to the new, improved wine-country boutique town of Summer River. But in case youre wondering, the old Summer River is still here, just beneath the surface. Meaning? Meaning its still a small town. News travels fast. Lucy nodded. Which is how you knew that I was here. A lot of people know youre here, Lucy, he said. She raised her brows in polite inquiry. Is that a warning? Maybe. The fact that you are Saras sole heir has stirred up some deep waters. Yes, I know. She had been ignoring phone calls from lawyers and realtors for more than a month while she considered how to deal with her inheritance. Thats why I asked you how long you plan to stay, Mason said. The answer to your question is that I dont know how long Ill be in town. She was determined not to let him intimidate her. A couple of weeks, I think. I need to make arrangements to pack and move my aunts belongings, and then I have to get the house ready to put on the market. The place should sell fast, Mason said. Its a real nice little example of the Craftsman style, and one thing that has come out of Summer River going upscale is that property values have skyrocketed. Folks looking for a weekend house in wine country love that kind of architecture. But the real value is in the property. The old orchard? Its prime vineyard land. Worth a bundle in this market. Every new Silicon Valley billionaire wants to open his very own winery and put his name on

a label. Its a major status symbol. I noticed that most of the orchards and farms are gone. Theyve been disappearing for years. Im surprised you didnt know that. But then, you never came back to visit Sara after you left thirteen years ago, did you? The comment, freighted as it was with stern disapproval, hit her like a bucket of cold water. Anger flashed through her. Okay, that answers one question, she said. What? I knew the town had changed, but when I walked in here I wondered if you had changed. Clearly the answer is no.

You are still in the habit of jumping to conclusions, assuming the worst and giving lectures. He thought about that for a moment and then inclined his head half an inch. You know what? Youre right. Maybe I did jump to conclusions. So why didnt you come to visit your aunt for the past thirteen years? What makes you so sure I havent been back here? Deke mentioned that you never returned. Your uncle implied that I ignored my aunt all these years? He just commented that you hadnt come back, thats all. Once again Mason tossed the steel wrench casually into the air and caught it with fluid ease. He said you never returned after that summer when I pissed you off by yanking you out of the party at Harper Ranch Park. That stopped her. The old Harper Ranch is now a park? The town took it over a couple of years ago. Grass, picnic tables, a ball field, playground, dog-walking areas, the works. You wouldnt recognize the place. I see. Well, as it happens, your uncle is right. This is the first time Ive returned to Summer River since that night. Why? She gave him a serene go-to-hell smile. Its really none of your business, is it? Nope, just curious. Thirteen years ago everyone said you didnt want to mess with Mason Fletcher. Nothing had changed except that he was now the man she had known that he would become and then some. It was as if he had been tempered in fire like the steel blade of some ancient sword. Everything about him had gotten harder, stronger, more relentless. The sharp planes and angles of his face had become fierce. Time had added some sleek, solid muscle and endowed him with the confident air of a man who knows what he wants, what he will tolerate and where he draws the line. The years had given him something else as wellthe rare, invisible aura of quiet, inner power that was the hallmark of a man in full control of himself. He did, however, look considerably the worse for wear around the edges. She had a feeling hed learned the hard way what every professional guardian angel probably had to learnthat you couldnt save everyone. For a man as determined and unyielding as Mason, that would have been one very tough lesson. In spite of her irritation, she felt herself softening. It was hard to stay mad at a man who was born to do the right thing when the chips were down. He really couldnt help it, she thought. He was what he was, and there was probably no force on the face of the planet that could change that. Oh, for Petes sake, she said. Just to clarify, Aunt Sara did not want me to come back here after that last summer. In fact, she didnt want anyone in the family to visit her in Summer River. We respected her wishes. And while I certainly dont owe you any explanations, I can assure you that I saw a lot of her. She and Mary stayed with me several times each year. Sara knew that I find the holidays stressful, so she made sure to spend them with me. After she and Mary sold the antiques shop, I joined them on some of their cruises. I can assure you that Sara was not neglected in any way. Lucy took a breath. I loved her. And I loved Mary, too, because she loved Sara and Sara loved her. There. Satisfied? Mason had the grace to look apologetic. Didnt mean to imply you had neglected your aunt. She gave him her best fake bright smile. Of course you did. His jaw hardened. I understand that family dynamics can be complicated. No kidding. Especially when viewed from the outside. Mason exhaled slowly. Okay, youve made your point. I liked Sara. Mary, too. I was sorry to hear that they had been killed. Thank you, Lucy said. She hesitated, wondering if it was too soon to probe for answers. I suppose you heard it was a car accident? she said. Yes. Its always a shock. Aaron and I lost our parents in a car accident. I know. Im sorry. Its been a long time, he said. Doesnt mean it didnt happen and that it didnt leave some major wounds. You heal from wounds, if youre lucky, but there are always scars. He looked as if the simple observation had caught him off guard. She got the feeling he was unsure how to respond. No, he agreed finally. Doesnt mean there arent scars. She tightened her grip on the straps of the black tote she had slung over her shoulder. Were you here in town when my aunt and Mary . . . ? No, I arrived a couple of weeks ago. Im taking some time off from work. He eyed her with sudden, sharp curiosity. Why? Nothing. Just wondered. She felt a little deflated. If Mason had been in town at the time of the accident, he probably would have asked any questions that needed to be asked. He had been a cop, after all. But he had not been in Summer River when Sara and Mary died. He didnt know any more than she did. Sara told me that you and your brother run a security consulting firm back in D.C. He looked first surprised and then amused. Sara kept you informed of my whereabouts? I gather that from time to time your uncle told her what was going on with you and your brother. Lucy smiled. Sara said he is very proud of both of you. Deke and I always knew that Aaron would do something to change the world, Mason said. He wound up with degrees in math and computer science. Impressive. What, exactly,

do you and Aaron do as consultants? He gave her what was no doubt meant to be a charming consultants smile. We consult. Yeah, I get that. And for the record, the Im-a-consultant-and-Imhere-to-help smile needs an upgrade. Mason stopped smiling. Ill work on it. Im serious, she said. Who do you consult for? We specialize in closing cold cases. Our clients are mostly small-town police departments that lack the expertise, the technology and the manpower to handle major crimes that have gone stone cold. Do you go out into the field to investigate? Sometimes. But our primary asset is a proprietary computer program we named Alice. Aaron created it to help identify patterns in an old case. If we can find a pattern, weve got a shot at helping the cops track down the perps. Sounds exciting. Im not a cop anymore, Im a consultant, he said coolly. I dont see much action. He probably wasnt lying, she decided. But he wasnt telling her the whole truth, either. What can I do for you today? Mason continued. I assume you came in here to pick up some of the things you need to get your aunts house ready for the market? Whoa. Talk about hitting a stone wall, Lucy thought.

Mason wanted to change the topic of conversation. Actually, I stopped in to get some advice about local contractors from your uncle. I wasnt sure who else to ask. I know Sara trusted Deke when it came to that sort of thing. I can ask him for some names when he gets back. What kind of work are you thinking of doing?

The big-ticket item is the kitchen. Its badly outdated. Dad says that bringing it up to date will add a few thousand to the value of the house. Hes right, Mason said. Is your dad still a professor? Yes. Hes head of the sociology department at the college where he teaches. And your mother? Shes still teaching psychology.

Mason put the wrench down on the counter. Both your folks remarried, didnt they? Yes, she said, making the word very crisp. About that contractor. Ive got a limited budget. Right. Mason reached for a pad of paper. He pulled it close and picked up a pen. Okay, you want someone who can update the kitchen without spending a fortune. Anything else? The outside needs painting. Thats another major job. Mason wrote a note on the pad of paper and then looked up. Youre starting to talk big bucks here. Im not sure its worth it, to tell you the truth. But everyone says those are the sorts of upgrades that add value to the house. Thats true, but around here, its the land itself that has the real value. Still, those old Craftsman houses go for a nice chunk of change, and there are always people looking for weekend places. Im just suggesting that you dont pour a lot

of cash into upgrades. There is one project Id like to do inside that I think will make a big cosmetic difference in the living room. Whats that? I want to restore the fireplace to its original condition. It really was beautiful. I remember it, Mason said. There was a lot of nice stonework around it. You dont see good craftsmanship like that anymore. Unfortunately, Aunt Sara covered the entire front of the fireplace with tile.

Huh. Wonder why? Im not sure. She never mentioned it, so when I walked into the house yesterday I was surprised to see what she had done. I do remember that she complained from time to time. She said the fireplace sucked up almost as much heat as it put out. But she loved to sit in front of the fire in the evenings and read. She probably just got tired of hauling firewood, Mason said. Cant blame her. No, but I wish she hadnt done such a poor job of putting in the tiles. The original fireplace would have been a huge selling point. Now its a giant negative. Its the first thing you see when you walk into the house, and its ugly. She must have done the job herself. Typical DIY disaster, huh? Yes, and whats more, it feels unstable. I could take it down with a hammer and chisel, but Im afraid of damaging the original stonework behind the bricks. Lets hope she didnt ruin the original. Tell you what, why dont I drop by after work and take a look at it? Ill

bring some tools with me. Maybe I can take care of those tiles for you this evening and save you a few bucks. The offer left her openmouthed for a beat, and then, for some inexplicable reason, her pulse kicked up. It took her a few seconds to pull herself together. Thats very nice of you, she said, suddenly cautious. No trouble. Its not like Ive got anything else to do this evening. I see. She gave him a chilly smile. It was always good to know where one fit into a mans list of priorities. Mason did not notice the ice in her smile. Why dont

I drop by around five-thirty? Does that work for you? Cocktail hour. Interesting. She tried and failed to suppress the whisper of anticipation that sparkled through her. That will be fine, she said smoothly. Its not like Ive got anything else to do tonight, either. Ouch. Guess I didnt phrase my offer in the most diplomatic way. As I recall, you always had a very direct style when it came to communicating, she said. Yeah, my ex-wife used to complain about that a lot. Lucy felt the heat rise in her cheeks. Sara mentioned that your marriage did not work out. No. Another wound, she decided. Not a giant blow, but he had definitely taken a hit. He probably blamed himself for the failure of his marriage. Typical Mason. At least he had been brave enough to give it a whirl. She was still hanging back, afraid to make the leap. Im sorry, she said again. Heard you called off your engagement a while back. Yes. Sorry about that. She smiled. We seem to be saying sorry a lot to each other. Look on the positive sidemy screwed-up marriage and your screwed-up engagement give us something in common. Two screwed-up relationships is supposed to be a positive? You know me, I was

always a glass-half-full kind of guy. Gee. Thats not how I remember you at all. I always saw you as a worst-case-scenario kind of guy. An unreadable expression lit his eyes. And I always thought of you as a dreamer.

She wrinkled her nose. Dont remind me. You were convinced that I needed someone to look after me and make sure I didnt get into trouble. He hesitated, evidently sensing a trap. Not exactly. Yes, exactly. Well, damn, I knew we would get back to the night that I pulled you out of the party at the ranch. You really know how to hang on to a grudge, lady. Nonsense. She sniffed. I dont hold grudges. Yeah, right. Youre never going to thank me for what I did that night, are you? Probably not. She turned on her heel and started toward the door. Ill be going now. Im staying at the house, so Ive got some grocery shopping to do. See you at five-thirty, he called after her. She stopped short at the door. I almost forgot, I need lightbulbs. A lot of them. Half the lamps and wall fixtures at Saras place are burned out. Weve got a fine selection of bulbs. You want the energy savers? What I want are really, really bright bulbs. I swear that old house is as dark as a cave. Sounds like you need halogen for at least some of the fixtures. He came out from behind the counter and led the way to a display of lightbulbs. Ill bring takeout with me tonight. He intended to arrive at the cocktail hour, and now he was telling her he would bring dinner with him. Somehow her little home-improvement project had just been transformed into a date with Mason Fletcher. A deer-in-the-headlights sensation made her go very still. They had been together for all of fifteen minutes and Mason was already taking charge. On the other hand, she had to admit that she liked the idea of having company for a few hours that evening. Last nighther first night back in Saras houseshe had discovered that she did not like being alone in the place.

Something about the atmosphere bothered her in ways she could not explain. Maybe it was because it held too many memories of Sara, or perhaps it was simply because the place was so dark, due to the lack of bulbs. Nevertheless, she could not let Mason take full control of the situation. He meant well, but he needed some pushback. For his own good, of course. Forget the takeout, she said. Ive already got plans for dinner. Yeah? His eyes darkened a little. Yeah. She smiled. Im dining in, and since you are going to be kind enough to take out those tiles for me, I will buy enough salmon for two. That works, he said instantly. Thanks. He looked pleased, she decided. Really pleased. Like hed just won the lottery. She was feeling oddly energized herself.

What had she just done? Okay, she said. Ill see you at five-thirty. Bring your tools. I never leave home without them. She hesitated and then made herself do the right thing. He was doing her a favor. The least she could do was be gracious. Thanks, she said. He surprised her with a wicked smile. For offering to deal with the fireplace or for rescuing you from that party out at the Harper Ranch thirteen years ago? She gave him polite bewilderment. For the offer to help with the fireplace, of course. I dont recall being rescued from a party. What I remember is being humiliated beyond redemption. But, hey, thats all water under the bridge now. I forgave you a long time ago because I knew even then you just couldnt help yourself. In your own heavy-handed way, you were trying to protect me. Heavy-handed, huh? Is that by any chance your way of telling me that Im a bad communicator? No, its my way of telling you that you obviously havent shaken the take-charge attitude. But its okay because I have been known to take charge once in a while myself. Now, if you dont mind, Id like to get my bulbs and leave. There is a lot of stuff to do at the house. What sizes do you need? She took out the list she had made and went through it. When she was finished, Mason collected the various bulbs and headed back to the counter. She followed. Mason rang up the sale, swiped her credit card and gave her the sack full of bulbs. Thanks, she said again. Ill see you later. Once again she started toward the door. Dont change any bulbs that require getting on a ladder, Mason said behind her. Not until I get there. Its too dangerous. People fall off ladders all the time. Ill take care of the ceiling and wall fixtures tonight. She smiled, shook her head and kept walking. Really, the man did not know when to quit. She paused with her hand on the doorknob and looked back. I suppose you know that Saras house and land werent the only things I inherited. I heard. By some quirk in Saras and Marys wills, you got Marys shares in her brothers company. Its all over town. I thought that might be the case, she said. Hard not to notice the curious stares. Im no financial guru, but even I can tell you that it would probably be in your best interests to sell those shares back to the Colfax family as soon as possible. Thats what my parents told me. Turns out its not going to be that easy. Two different lawyers representing various members of the Col-fax family have been emailing me and leaving messages on my phone for the past month. Colfax Inc. is one of the few things that hasnt changed in the past thirteen years, Mason said. Its still a tightly held, family-owned company, and according to Uncle Deke, there is one hell of a squabble going on at the moment. Something to do with a merger proposal. Yes, I got that much from the lawyers messages. You dont want to get in the middle of that situation, Lucy. You know what they say about family quarrels. Yes, Lucy said. They are always the worst.

Revue de pressePraise forRiver Road:"Best-selling Krentz returns to her classic romantic-suspense roots

with a spine-tingling tale of a small town harboring deadly secrets. With its irresistible mix of scintillating humor, stunning suspense, and sexy romance, River Road is a complete page-turner. "Booklist" "Wonderfully appealing protagonists, a clever, skillfully crafted plot, soul-stirring sensuality, and delicious flashes of humor." "Library Journal (starred review)" "An intricate and engrossing plot. Another Krentz winner." "Kirkus" "The excitement of a thriller with the sweetness of new passion." "Publishers Weekly"