

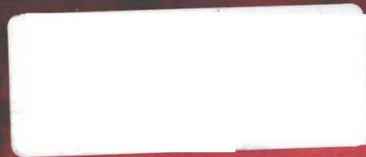


Jayne Ann  
Krentz

'First in her class' NEW YORK TIMES

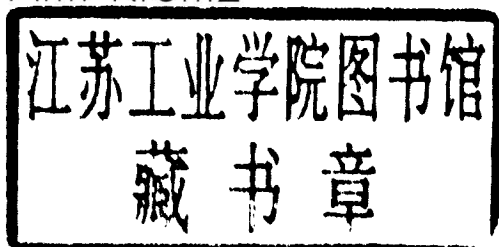
# TRUTH OR DARE

From the bestselling author  
of *Light in Shadow*



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Jayne Ann Krentz





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First published in Great Britain in 2003 by  
Judy Piatkus Publishers Ltd of  
5 Windmill Street, London W1T 2JA  
email: [info@piatkus.co.uk](mailto:info@piatkus.co.uk)

This edition published 2003

Reprinted 2004

First published in the United States in 2003 by  
G.P. Putnam's Sons, a member of Penguin Putnam Inc.

**The moral right of the author has been asserted**

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library*

ISBN 0 7499 3465 4

Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
Butler & Tanner Ltd, Frome and London

To my brother, James Castle, with much love.  
Thanks so much for the help with the GFI-PI!

Jayne Ann Krentz, who has also written under the names Amanda Quick and Jayne Castle, has thirty-two *New York Times* bestsellers to her credit. She lives in Seattle.

*Also by Jayne Ann Krentz*

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Light in Shadow

He hated cases that ended the way this one was going to end. Ethan Truax closed the file folder and placed his hands on the small round table. He regarded the man sitting in the under-sized hotel room chair across from him.

"You're sure these numbers are solid?" he asked neutrally.

"Absolutely." Dexter Morrow smiled his reassuring investment adviser's smile. It did nothing to conceal the calculating expression in his eyes. "I took them straight off Katherine's personal laptop last night after she went to sleep."

"You did say that you were close to the boss."

Morrow chuckled. It was the kind of man-to-man laugh that you heard in locker rooms and bars. "*Real* close. I can tell you from personal experience that she's almost as good in bed as she is at running her company."

Ethan managed to keep his face expressionless but it was not easy. He was here to get the job done for the client, not to defend her honor.

Outside the window the Arizona sun shone down on the hotel's blue-tiled pool and lounge area. It was warm and bright, the kind of day that made the state famous. But in here there was a chill in the air, and it was not coming from the air conditioner.

Morrow casually cocked one ankle on his knee. The collar of his pricey, cream-colored polo shirt was edged with a thin black stripe. The shirt complemented the designer-label trousers and Euro-leather loafers. A gold Swiss watch gleamed on his wrist.

Dexter Morrow had it made. He worked in a plush office, played golf in the middle of the week and entertained his clients in expensive places such as the Desert View Country Club. He was a winner here in Whispering Springs.

Ethan was about to take it all away from him.

"All right," Ethan said quietly, more than ready for the endgame. "We've got a deal."

Morrow glanced at the aluminum-sided suitcase that sat on the floor beside Ethan's chair. "You brought the cash?"

"Small bills, as agreed." Ethan reached down, grasped the handle of the suitcase and shoved it across the carpet toward Morrow.

In a world where money could be transferred around the globe in the blink of an eye with computers, hard cash in a suitcase was still the transfer method of choice for those who did not want to leave any electronic tracks for the Feds or the SEC to uncover.



Morrow picked up the suitcase and hoisted it onto the table. Ethan could tell that he was trying to appear cool but he was not doing a very good job of it. Morrow's fingers shook a little when he unsnapped the locks. The guy was excited.

Morrow raised the lid and looked at the stacks of neatly banded bills. Near-feverish anticipation radiated from him in heavy waves that in another man might have been mistaken for a sick lust.

"You want to count it?" Ethan asked softly.

"That would take too long. I've got to get back to the office. I don't want anyone to start asking questions." Morrow reached into the suitcase. "I'll just do a random check."

Ethan got to his feet and put some distance between himself and the table. You never knew how a man would react when he realized he'd been cornered.

Morrow riffled through a stack of crisply cut blank paper bundled beneath the single real twenty-dollar bill. For a couple of seconds he did not appear to understand what had happened. Then comprehension struck. His tanned face flushed a dark red. He swung around to face Ethan.

"What the hell is going on here?" he snarled.

The bathroom door opened. Katherine Compton walked out.

"I was just about to ask you the same question, Dex," she said. Her voice was flat with controlled anger. Her handsome features were tight and drawn. "But that would be a waste of time, wouldn't it? I already know the answer. You just tried to sell those confidential bid figures to Mr. Truax."

Something that might have been panic flickered across Morrow's face. "He said his name was Williams."

"It's Truax," Ethan said. "Ethan Truax of Truax Investigations."

Morrow's hands clenched and unclenched at his sides. He appeared to be having difficulty connecting the dots. "You're a private investigator?"

"Yes," Ethan said.

He was a little surprised by Morrow's stunned expression. The guy had a history of scams like this one. You'd think he'd be accustomed to having things go wrong once in a while. It wasn't like he was in any real jeopardy here, and he had to know that. Employers almost never prosecuted in these situations. They didn't want the negative publicity.

"I hired Ethan last week when I started to get suspicious of you, Dex," Katherine said.

Morrow spread his hands in a pleading gesture. "Darling, you don't understand."

"Unfortunately, I do," she said. "I understand everything. You certainly made a fool out of me for a while, but it's over."

Morrow glanced briefly at Ethan. Rage darkened his face. He turned back to Katherine. "You've got it all wrong. You're making a huge mistake here."

"No," Katherine said.

"Listen to me. I knew there was a leak and I knew that it was very close to you. I was trying to identify the bastard who was screwing you."

"You were the bastard who was screwing me," Katherine said.

"That's not true. I love you. I was trying to protect you. When Truax put out feelers letting me know that he was in the market

for those bid figures, I thought I'd finally gotten a lead on who was behind the inside leaks. I'm here because I wanted to set him up so that I could get him to spill some information. I was playing him."

"Don't worry," Katherine said. "I'm not going to file charges. A court case would hurt the company. We're all about trust and long-term business relationships at Compton Investments." She smiled thinly. "But then, you already know that, don't you, Dex? After all, you've worked for me for nearly a year."

"Katherine, you've got this all wrong."

"You can go now," she said. "A security guard will meet you at the office. He'll stay with you while you clean out your desk, and then he'll take your keys and escort you out of the building. You know the drill. Standard procedure in situations like this. No one will be told why you were let go. I'm sure that everyone in the firm is aware that you and I were involved. The assumption will be made that we ended our personal relationship. Whenever that sort of thing happens, it is always the lower-ranking executive who leaves the firm, isn't it?"

"Katherine, you can't do this to us."

"I'm not doing it to *us*. I'm doing it to *you*. Speaking of keys, I'll take back the one to my front door that I gave you a few months ago. You won't be needing it anymore." She held out her hand, palm up.

"I'm telling you, you're making a mistake." Morrow sounded hoarse now.

"No, I'm correcting the one I made when I got involved with you. My key, please." Her tone sharpened without warning. "Now."

Morrow actually flinched. Ethan was impressed by the speed with which he got the gold key chain out of his pocket.

Morrow fumbled the key off the ring and tossed it to Katherine.

"I'll have the locks changed, just to be on the safe side, of course." Katherine dropped the key into her purse. "This morning after you left I packed up the things you've been keeping at my place for the past few months. The spare shirts and the razor and such. I dropped them off at your condo."

Morrow's face worked furiously. He looked at Ethan. "This is your fault, you son of a bitch. You'll regret it, I promise you that much."

Ethan took the tiny digital recorder out of his pocket. They all looked at it. Without a word he switched it off.

Morrow's jaw locked when he understood that the threat had been recorded. Without saying another word, he picked up his briefcase, his grip so fierce it squeezed the blood out of his knuckles.

He went to the door, opened it and let himself out of the hotel room.

There was a short silence. The room seemed to exhale deeply on a long sigh.

Katherine did not take her gaze off the door. "Do you think he meant that threat he made to you, Ethan?"

"Don't worry about it." Ethan went to the table, picked up the packet of phony twenties and tossed it back into the suitcase. "Guys like Morrow prefer not to take the risk of getting physical. When they get caught, they disappear as fast as possible. He'll be out of town by this time tomorrow. Day after at

the latest. In a couple of weeks he'll be set up somewhere else, working on his next scam."

She grimaced. "I'm not doing the world any favors by letting him go without bringing charges, am I?"

"Not your job to do the world a favor," he said without inflection. "You've got a responsibility to your company and your clients. It's a tough call."

"No," she said without hesitation, "it's not. The company comes first. We're in the middle of some extremely delicate negotiations. Between the three branches of Compton Investments here in Whispering Springs and in the Phoenix area, I've got over fifty employees and hundreds of clients who will be directly affected by this deal. I've got an obligation to all of them."

Spoken like the real CEO she is, he thought.

Katherine shook her head, looking weary now that it was all over. "I never thought I'd ever get taken in like that by a man, you know. I was always so sure of myself and my instincts. So sure that I could spot a phony."

"You did spot Morrow." He closed the lid of the case and snapped it shut. "That's why you picked up the phone and called me, remember?"

She was startled by that observation. After contemplating it for a moment, she nodded once, acknowledging the truth of the statement.

"Yes, I did call you, didn't I?" She walked resolutely toward the door. "Thank you for reminding me of that salient fact, Mr. Truax. In all the excitement, I had forgotten that I was the one who finally realized that there was something a little too good to be true about Dexter Morrow."

Ethan followed her out into the hall and closed the door. "Your instincts were working just fine."

"I was actually thinking of marrying him, you know."

Ethan nodded.

"It would have been my second marriage," she added.

Ethan nodded again. He stopped in front of the elevators and pressed the call button.

"My first husband married me because he wanted to get his hands on my father's company," Katherine continued. "When he realized that I was the heir apparent and that I intended to run Compton myself, he filed for divorce."

Ethan prayed to the hotel gods in the vain hope that the elevator doors would open quickly. He understood the client's need to talk after it was all over. He usually made it a point to listen patiently. He considered the debriefing part of the job. But today he just wanted to be done. A bone-deep weariness was creeping through him.

The adrenaline rush that generally accompanied the satisfactory resolution of a case had not hit him back there in the hotel room. Maybe that was because he had not been sleeping well lately.

He knew the reason for the insomnia. It was November. November was a bad time. If the past two years were anything to go by, he would not sleep well again until December.

Mercifully, the elevator doors opened. Katherine moved inside ahead of him.

"Have you ever been married?" she asked.

"Oh, yeah," Ethan said.

Her brow climbed. "Divorced?"

"Three times."

She frowned. He was not surprised. One or two divorces were acceptable in this sophisticated day and age. There were excuses that could be made. Three, however, raised questions concerning possible innate character flaws.

"Are you married now?" Katherine asked.

He thought about Zoe waiting for him at home. He summoned up the image of her sitting across from him at breakfast that morning, vibrant and vivid in an amethyst-colored pantsuit. He remembered how the morning sun streaming through the window had touched off sparks in her dark auburn hair and how she had looked at him with her mysterious, smoky eyes. His woman; his wife.

The mental picture was a talisman that he carried against the dark forces of November that swirled around him. But part of him dreaded the future because he was pretty sure that sooner or later those forces would triumph and drive Zoe away from him.

He punched the lobby button.

"Sort of," he said.

It had been a good day. She had not encountered any screaming walls.

For the vast majority of interior designers, “screaming walls” implied an unfortunate choice of paint color or a really bad window treatment. But for a *psychic* designer who happened to be acutely sensitive to the invisible aura left in rooms that had been scenes of violence or strong passions, the term “screaming walls” could be interpreted quite literally.

She had not set out in life with the intent of becoming an interior designer, Zoe reflected as she poured two glasses of wine. Her original plan had been to pursue a career as an art curator. But the murder of her first husband had changed everything.

She was the first to admit that she had lost control for a time



following Preston's death. What could she say? She had been a desperate woman. The cops had concluded that Preston had been shot by a transient burglar. The instant she had stepped into the cottage where the murder occurred she knew that was not what had happened. The walls had screamed bloody murder.

In her passion to see justice done, she had made the near-fatal mistake of telling everyone who would listen that Preston had been killed by someone close to him. In a desperate attempt to convince her scheming in-laws that one of them was to blame, she had told them that she could sense the terrible rage that the murderer had felt clinging to the walls of the cottage.

Big mistake.

Her wild claims of psychic talents had given her in-laws the excuse they needed to have her committed against her will to a very private, very exclusive psychiatric hospital. She knew that she was not insane when she had entered the place, but the ordeal of her stay there had very nearly turned the phony diagnosis into a reality. To this day, she still had nightmares in which she walked the halls of Candle Lake Manor.

Zoe put the two glasses of wine on a tray together with a plate of cheese and crackers. She picked up the tray and carried it out into the living room of her small apartment.

Ethan was on the sofa, leaning forward slightly, legs apart, elbows resting on his thighs. He wore a black crew-neck tee shirt and khaki pants. He held the remote loosely in one hand, absently clicking through the early evening news programs.

She remembered her first impression of him that memorable day six weeks before in October when she had walked into