



## Haven (Bishop/Special Crimes Unit)

By Kay Hooper

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Emma Rayburn was born and raised in Baron Hollow, North Carolina. It was a quiet life, then came the accident...and the nightmares—each filled with unshakable visions of darkness, blind panic, and desperate women chased toward inevitable death. With no reports of local women missing or found dead, Emma has written it off to troubled imaginings—night after dreaded night. Until her sister arrives.

Jessie Rayburn, a psychic investigator for a firm called Haven, has been estranged from Emma for years. Unresolved issues from Jessie's past have not only kept them apart but have been clouding Jessie's unique abilities. A return to her hometown to face a dark and violent incident from years gone by is her chance to regain them. But reconciliation with the past comes with a price. Few people in Baron Hollow are welcoming Jessie back. No one dares to breathe a word. And in this conspiracy of silence, Emma's nightmares are becoming more vivid than ever.

Even with the help of Noah Bishop, head of the FBI Special Crimes Unit and cofounder of Haven, Jessie and Emma soon find themselves outnumbered by the secrets buried in Baron Hollow—and outrunning an evil that has been festering for years, one that's targeting Jessie and Emma one last time.

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## Editorial Review

### Review

"Kay Hooper...provide[s] a welcome chill on a hot summer's day."

"Hooper's unerring story sense and ability to keep the pages flying cannot be denied."

### About the Author

Kay Hooper is the award-winning, New York Times bestselling author of the Bishop/Special Crimes Unit series, including *Blood Ties*, *Blood Dreams*, *Blood Sins*, and other novels. She lives in North Carolina.

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Emma Rayburn shot bolt upright in bed, at first conscious of nothing except her heart pounding and the suffocating sense of being unable to breathe. Then she sucked in a gasp and slumped, her gaze darting around the room. Her room. Her bedroom, lit only by the pale light of dawn.

Not a dark forest. Not running and pain and terror.

Not a soaring end off the edge of a cliff.

Emma heard a soft whine, and leaned forward to pet the dog lying on the foot of her bed. "It's okay, girl," she murmured. "Just a dream. Just another bad dream."

Her heartbeat was returning to normal, but the oppressive weight of dread she felt had hardly diminished at all. She looked at the clock on her nightstand, saw that her alarm would be going off in another hour anyway, and tossed back the covers to get out of bed.

She went to her dressing table across the room and turned on one of the small lamps. With cold hands, she removed a journal from the top drawer and looked through several pages before turning to a fresh page and reaching for a pen to make a simple entry.

*June 22*

Another nightmare, in the woods this time. Different: She was running. Trying to escape.

But the same ending. Always the same ending.

*Another dead girl.*

Emma stared at the entry for a long time, then slowly looked back through the earlier entries. They went back nearly two years, with casual entries of a day lived in uninteresting habit interspersed with stark dates and brief descriptions noting a nightmare of death.

The death of a girl or woman she never recognized, virtually all of them taking place in a dark, featureless room. Not a room she recognized, and yet she was absolutely certain it was somewhere in this area, in or near town. Near home. She didn't know why she was so sure, but the knowledge was as absolute as the awareness of her own heart beating.

In less than two years, she had dreamed about a dozen girls and women dying. Dying violently.

Emma didn't need the first diary entry to tell her when the nightmares had begun. They had begun after what had seemed a simple and fairly common accident.

Her family home, now a well-respected and popular inn known as Rayburn House, offered its visitors various means of exploring the Appalachian Mountains surrounding this little valley where the small town of Baron Hollow was situated, and one of those means was guided trail riding on horseback.

Emma didn't ride often; she seldom had the time. But that day she had decided on the spur of the moment to go along with a group from Rayburn House. The trail ride had gone fine, just the same as it always did. Until . . .

Afterward, she had never been able to remember what had spooked her horse, but he had shied violently, catching her off guard, and Emma had fallen. Which wouldn't have done much harm, probably, except that her head had struck a granite boulder.

That casual decision to go riding had cost her more than a week in the town's small hospital, an almost invisible scar above her right temple that was easily hidden by her dark hair, and something new in her life. The doctors had been concerned because she had been unconscious for hours. They had worried about bleeding into the brain, they'd told her. But that hadn't happened. The injury, they told her, had merely bruised a section of her frontal lobe.

Not like that had sounded scary or anything. Oh, no.

The list of symptoms she'd been warned to watch out for had been sobering, everything from difficulty concentrating or completing complex tasks she'd found easy to do before the accident, to changes in her personality or even loss of simple movement of body parts.

Paralysis.

None of that had happened, thank God, in the two years since the accident. Nothing had changed at all.

Except for the dreams. The nightmares.

"They're likely simple manifestations of the violence of your injury, Emma. That's all," Dr. Benfield had told her when she had finally found the nerve to ask him about it. "It's not uncommon after a head injury to experience in some sense a reliving of the pain and fear."

"But it seems so real," she protested. "I feel the terror, the pain. The panic." *It doesn't just seem real. It is real. I know it.*

"Because it's what you felt when you had the accident."

"Yeah, but—" *I also feel them die.*

"Have you talked to Chief Maitland? Are there missing women being reported, bodies being discovered?"

Deaths corresponding with the nights when you dream?" His tone had been professional, but she had fancied a note in there somewhere of a doctor humoring his patient.

"No, nothing like that," Emma answered reluctantly. "I mentioned it to Dan after that girl went missing last summer, even checked on the Internet *and* back issues of the newspaper at the library, and other than her, there really hasn't been anything in the county. No reports of other missing girls or women who didn't turn up later somewhere. Anyway, I don't think I dreamed about that particular girl; there was a picture supplied by her boyfriend for the search parties. And he was probably right that she just hiked out of the mountains and caught a ride with someone after they argued. I heard later that was the case."

"Then your dreams aren't about real girls and women being horribly tortured and killed. Right?"

"Right. Right."

"They'll probably go away on their own, Emma. But if they don't, or if you start having real trouble sleeping, let me know. There are meds that can help."

That had been a few months before, when she had talked to Dr. Benfield. She hadn't returned.

Even though the dreams hadn't stopped.

Emma stared down at the journal for a long time, then closed it, her hand absently smoothing the leather surface. She wasn't sure which frightened her more—the possibility that her nightmares were just her still-injured brain on some kind of memory loop, replaying a potentially life-threatening accident again and again but giving the women in that terrifying little play different faces and torments, or that they were warnings to her that awful things really were happening in this small, tight-knit town nestled in the mountains of Western North Carolina.

Bad things.

Things nobody else seemed to be aware of.

Haven

June 25

"You know I usually don't ask," John Garrett said to his wife, Maggie, "but are you sure this is a good idea?"

"I'm sure Jessie needs something we can't give her, and whatever it is, it's interfering with her ability to work. Even her ability to live normally; the nightmares are hitting her harder each time, probably worse because she can't remember them."

They were standing in what the resident operatives referred to as Command Central: a large open space at the center of the sprawling house, and one of the common areas open to all. It contained plenty of casual seating, numerous worktables and computer stations, and a huge rock fireplace surrounded by the sort of sofa you could curl up on for a discussion, to read a book, or just to take an afternoon nap. There was an entire wall of reference books, and various cabinetry and furniture pieces hid office necessities such as printers, fax machines, and files.

It was a work space, yet it managed to feel comfortable and welcoming for all its clearly utilitarian purposes.

This was Haven, a privately owned and operated organization that provided trained operatives for various types of investigative work—operatives who were also psychics. They worked sometimes in tandem with law enforcement and sometimes entirely on their own, for clients. Haven was the name of the organization, and it was the name given by its operatives to this house and compound, which sat on a rather remote and highly secure five-hundred-acre spread just outside Sante Fe, New Mexico.

John and Maggie Garrett had founded and now operated Haven, and this was their home as well as their work space, a home they shared with resident operatives who occupied their own suites of rooms here in the main house or in cottages that were part of the compound. For some it was most certainly, between assignments, a family atmosphere, and even those not yet quite sure where they belonged admitted to feeling a comforting sense of community here at Haven.

For most of them, it was the first time in their lives they weren't made to feel like freaks, and were able to relax living and working with others who also coped with both the highs and the lows of being "blessed" with special abilities.

At any given time, Haven could house as many as two dozen of their operatives. At the moment, there were twelve longtime residents, and four others spending a few months here in training.

Jessie Rayburn was one of the longtime residents.

"Do you know what the nightmares are about?" John asked his wife, whose psychic ability was an extraordinary empathy with the emotions of others and the unique ability to in some cases absorb and even heal their emotional and physical traumas.

Maggie shook her head. "Whatever the block is, it's solid. And I do mean solid. I can read more from her face about what she's feeling than anything empathically. She consented to having one of the telepaths try to get through again yesterday. He got nothing but a nosebleed for his trouble."

John frowned. "Maybe she didn't want him to get through."

"If so, either it's totally unconscious or else she's a hell of an actress, because she fooled me." Maggie shook her head. "Look, we knew from the beginning there was a trauma somewhere in her past, something buried deep. At first, she was so shut down there was no sense even in trying to get at it. And she could function, as a telepath and as a medium, so there was time to let her settle in, find her footing. Get used to the work. There was always a chance that would help. We both know it does sometimes."

John rested a hip on the corner of a desk and watched his wife sit down in the chair. They were, in this rare moment, alone in the room. "Well, you handle the operatives, but my impression was that you were being very careful with her in the work. Partnering her with operatives who had a lot more experience and who're a lot more . . . grounded."

With a slight grimace, her golden eyes amused, Maggie said, "You noticed that, huh?"

"Yeah. And I'm guessing she did too."

"Unfortunately. Jessie is . . . stubborn. And proud. And she doesn't like to feel she's being coddled or in any way treated differently from the other operatives. So she came to me a few weeks ago and said she wanted to break through whatever was causing her abilities to be increasingly erratic. Causing the nightmares she could never remember."



“Wanted to, or was ready to?” John wasn’t psychic himself, but he had worked with psychics long enough to understand them better than most.

“Wanted to. I’m not at all sure she was or is ready to, subconsciously. But . . .”

“But you tried. And none of the usual tools worked.”

Maggie shook her head. “Once you rule out hypnosis, there really aren’t that many quick ways to get at something in the human mind when the mind resists. A cognitive interview didn’t work, because I didn’t know where to start. Starting from when Jessie left Baron Hollow fifteen years ago was useless; she only remembered getting in her car and leaving, with the overwhelming sense that she had to go as soon as possible. And, like I said, another telepath didn’t work. None of the psychological tests have given us anything.”

“Did you call Bishop?”

Unit Chief and Special Agent Noah Bishop was the third person responsible for the creation of Haven; his own Special Crimes Unit of the FBI was a team made up of psychics, and his idea that such abilities could be useful as investigative tools had proven over recent years to be successful beyond even his hopes.

“I did.”

“And?”

“And . . . he was typically Bishop. He said Jessie would know if it was time to go back to the beginning.”

“Meaning back to Baron Hollow.”

Maggie nodded. “Interestingly enough, Jessie walked in not ten minutes later asking if she could take her accumulated leave time and go back home for a visit.”

John sighed. “So . . . did he just know she’d ask? Or does he know what fate has in store for her there?” One of Bishop’s several psychic abilities was precognition.

“I don’t know.” Maggie paused, then added, “But she’s packing to go back home. And even though I can’t read her, I know damned well she’s scared.”

“I guess she wouldn’t stand for it if we sent someone with her.” It wasn’t really a question.

It was Maggie’s turn to sigh. “No. Her guard’s always up with a partner, and there’s no good way for me to send another operative otherwise.”

John eyed his wife of several years. “Uh–huh. What is it you *aren’t* telling me?”

“It’s just . . . a bad feeling.”

Having learned through hard experience to respect his wife’s emotions and intuitions, John’s only question was, “About Jessie? About her going home?”

Maggie hesitated, frowning, then said, “We have half a dozen operatives out in the field right now and three here who’re going through difficult times emotionally and psychically; any of that could be responsible. I don’t know what it is I’m picking up on. Or who it’s coming from.”

“So maybe not Jessie and her demons.”

“Maybe not.”

“Then all you can do,” her husband reminded her, “is warn Jessie to be careful and to check in while she’s gone.”

“Yes,” Maggie said. “I just hope that’s enough.”

June 27

“This is such a bad idea.”

Jessie Rayburn pulled her car over to the side of the road and put it into park just at the top of the hill in front of the First Baptist Church. It was a spot always considered to be the start of downtown, a spot where most of downtown was visible.

She rested her forearms on the steering wheel, gazing down on Main Street, Baron Hollow, North Carolina. Almost picture–postcard perfect, a small town nestled in a valley of the Appalachian Mountains, a place where just about everybody knew everybody else. The locals, at least. Tourists were another matter entirely, passing through pretty much year–round with their cameras and curiosity, leaving no mark of their visit behind.

Jessie had done a quick Web check before setting out, curious to find out if there had been any important changes in the town she’d left behind.

With no major industry to support its work force, Baron Hollow’s economic strength was its beautiful scenery and the charm of a small town where numerous shops and galleries offered locally created art and textiles and crafts, much of it renowned throughout the Southeast for its beauty and value. Mountain craftsmanship.

Well, all that and the reputed hauntings in various local areas, since ghost “hunting” had become so very popular in recent years. Baron Hollow had a long history of violence and odd events despite its peaceful, pretty appearance, which made it a prime location for paranormal researchers. Especially since so many of its buildings, commercial and residential, had been standing for a couple of centuries.

Once, the town had boasted giant textile mills, and a paper mill out on the river, and even a few plastics plants, and nobody had cared very much about ghosts or old legends, except to scare kids into behaving themselves. But the mills and plants had been dwindling even when Jessie had left. They were gone now, the paper mill abandoned and useless, and the textile mill buildings “repurposed” into pricy lofts or quaint arts centers where visitors could watch sculptures and pots and rugs and jewelry being made.

And any building or area that could claim even the hint of a ghost or some kind of paranormal energy had a sign out front now, advertising the fact.

There were even walking ghost tours.

Still, the appearance of downtown Baron Hollow hadn’t changed all that much, Jessie thought. Quite a few of the buildings appeared to have undergone face–lifts of fresh paint or stucco or stone, and there were bright awnings and signs beckoning visitors, but otherwise it looked much the same. On the outside, at least.

Home. *Well, once. Not now.*

Fifteen years was a long time. A lifetime, really. She wasn't the seventeen-year-old girl who had fled Baron Hollow with all her worldly possessions stuffed in the trunk of her beat-up Mustang, a riot of wild emotions driving her, nothing in her mind except the need to escape.

Get away. Run away.

Escape something she couldn't remember except in fuzzy flashes that made no sense to her. Loud music. Voices and laughter. The smell of whiskey. The smell of sweat. Overwhelming shame. Guilt. The feeling of—

And it was gone. As quickly as that. Leaving behind it nothing except an urge to turn her car around and get as far away from this place as she possibly could.

It was an urge she could fight now. But not one she could ignore, as she had ignored the fear behind it for so many years. She couldn't pretend whatever had happened was only a dream. Or a nightmare. She couldn't block it out. Not now, not anymore. Fifteen years of blocking it out had left problems and scars she had to face if she had any hope of moving on with a normal life.

She wasn't even sure if she had consciously known, then, what she'd been running from. Because all she clearly remembered was the need to escape, to run away.

"Damn. What the hell am I doing back here?" Her own voice startled her, but the question didn't. She'd been asking herself that all during the drive east.

It wasn't her inheritance; Emma could have that, and was welcome to it. God knew she'd earned it, staying here.

Jessie drew a breath and let it out slowly. Soon enough to talk about all that, if Emma wanted to talk. And that was a big *if*, since they hadn't been at all close as kids and Emma had been only fifteen when Jessie had left. Without saying good-bye.

To anyone.

But this whole trip was about . . . closing the door on the past. Letting go of baggage so Jessie could move on with her life. So she could sleep without nightmares and do her damned job.

Whatever she had to do in order to accomplish that, she would do. Had to do. Because she was happy in her life now, her job; it was work she loved and which had, finally, given her an identity and a place in the world she was proud of.

That was worth risking a lot for. It was certainly worth risking a trip back to the town where she'd spent the first seventeen years of her life.

She pulled in a deep breath, then closed her eyes and let it out slowly, concentrating. Doing her best to drop her guards so she could *feel* this place instead of just seeing it.

But . . . nothing. And she knew why.

She didn't want to feel what she knew she would feel here. Remember what she knew she had to remember.

Which meant she was buttoned up tight and sensing nothing.

For now, at least.

She gazed down on the busy scene that was Baron Hollow on a Saturday morning and drew another breath in an attempt to steady her nerve. No choice now. She was here. And she'd driven a long way.

And what was there to be afraid of, after all? She was hardly that frightened, defenseless seventeen-year-old girl now.

Far from it.

Whatever had driven her away from this place, she was certain she could handle it now. Certain.

She reached into her bag and found her cell phone, protected in its specially designed case from the sometimes erratic energy of a psychic. Not that Jessie had to worry about that at the moment, because she was all buttoned up. So tightly, in fact, that she was rather grimly certain she didn't even display an aura.

She hit a speed-dial button, and the call was almost immediately answered. "There so soon?"

"I didn't stop for much," Jessie told her boss. "Maggie, are you sure this is necessary? The checking-in shit? I'm not on a case, after all, just a vacation. It's a little Southern town with almost no crime rate. Hell, I don't think there's ever been a mugging in Baron Hollow. Ever."

"Humor me, okay? Just a quick call every day to let me know you're all right. Going home is sometimes the hardest thing we ever have to do, especially when we're in search of memories. And you know me. I worry."

"Okay, okay." Jessie thought of her nightmares, the ones she could never remember, and her mind shied away. Determinedly keeping her voice light, she said, "I'll call. I promise."

"That's all I ask."

Jessie ended the call and dropped her phone back into her bag. She reached to put the car in gear, then froze, staring at her hand. For just an instant, so briefly she was . . . almost . . . certain she had imagined it, there seemed to be the outline and faint color of a flower on the back of her hand.

A rose.

She stared at her hand, lifting it away from the gearshift to study what was now only smooth flesh.

But she was sure she had seen something. Almost sure.

"A rose," she murmured.

And she had no idea what that meant.

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

**Deborah Rinehart:**

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