



CRYSTAL
MAGIC
Series

SAPPHIRE NIGHTS

Dark secrets surround a lawman haunted by his
past and a scientist haunted by her future

New York Times Bestselling Author

PATRICIA RICE

SAPPHIRE NIGHTS - SAMPLE

CRYSTAL MAGIC, BOOK 1



PATRICIA RICE



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To Purchase Sapphire Nights

Sapphire Nights
Patricia Rice

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CHAPTER 1



DAWN, JUNE 16

THROUGH THE FOGGED WINDSHIELD, A MERE RIBBON OF GRAY PROVIDED THE only proof that a road existed where the GPS told her to turn. Would a machine lie? She didn't know. Her head was as foggy as the glass—she couldn't remember her own name. Fear applied her foot to the gas.

Clutching the steering wheel, she mindlessly followed the headlight beams through the thick early morning dreamscape. The robotic voice on her dash was her only guidance. Praying all would be clear soon, she turned at a nearly invisible county highway sign.

The windshield wipers swiped at heavy layers of moisture. The digital clock clicked to 5:30. She'd been driving for hours and had no idea where she was.

The headlight beams picked up an old wooden signpost that might be a welcome sign. She hit the brake, heart pounding, hoping she might recognize the town's name.

HILLVALE
SPIRITUAL HOME OF 325 LIVES AND COUNTLESS GHOSTS

Wisps of vapor drifted through the headlights and around the sign, blocking most of the letters except **COUNTLESS GHOSTS**. An owl hooted in the woods. She shivered.

To drive home the point that she was lost in the wilderness, the GPS went blank and flashed No Signal.

She almost wept. When she'd looked at the GPS in the last gas station, an address in Hillvale had been the destination programmed under HOME. She'd pinned all her hopes on that one indication that she wasn't lost.

The only other location programmed in had been the name of the restaurant near Monterey where she'd started out. Those were her only clues. And now she was here and there was nothing, and no means of finding Cemetery Road and what she hoped would be friends and family who could help her.

After a moment of panic, she got angry. Apparently weeping wasn't her style. There had to be answers at the end of the road. She clenched her jaw, let her foot off the brake, and continued the climb up the mountain. From the other road signs she'd passed, she knew she was in California. The names of the towns meant nothing to her.

She was praying that at the end of this nightmare, there would be people who could take her in and tell her she'd be all right.

She didn't feel in the least all right. She didn't even know if this was her car.

A deer leaped out of nowhere, and she slammed the brake again. The shock had her breathing hard and starting to shake. She could die out here in the wilderness. Would anyone know or care? She opened the windows, hoping fresh air might steady her nerves.

The breeze was almost warm. What month was this? The damp air fogged up the inside of the windows, and she had to

close them again.

She didn't see a sign of human habitation, but at this hour, everyone sensible was still asleep. The car chugged around tight uphill curves. If she could see past the mist, she feared she would find drop-offs to the sea, or maybe the center of the earth. She checked the gas gauge. She could make another thirty or forty miles before running out. All she had was the cash in her pocket. She prayed she'd reach her destination soon.

"I hope this car is mine, Emma," she told the cat in the back seat. As usual, Emma snored. The only way she knew the cat's name was from the tag on her cage. "It brakes and turns on a dime and doesn't eat gas. It's a smart car. Maybe that means I'm a smart person."

There was no radio reception up here. She had only her own voice to listen to. If she'd had music with her, it had disappeared along with her purse and phone. At least she had enough brains left to know what a phone was. And how to drive. So her memory wasn't completely gone.

Finally, the road leveled off. She thought she saw a mailbox and a driveway. A knot formed in her throat. A normal town, please, with normal people and a gas station and a place to buy coffee. A friendly voice would be nice. She desperately needed friendly and normal right now.

The Hillvale welcome sign hadn't inspired hope.

The road widened into what appeared to be a parking lot. A single pole lamp illuminated the shifting haze over painted parking spaces and a concrete walkway. Low buildings lined both sides of the road but no lights gleamed. She supposed the road went on, but she pulled into the lot to peer through the mist at what she assumed was the town. Thick moisture concealed signs telling her what the buildings might be.

She shook the little GPS but No Signal was all it displayed.

Now was the time to cry. “Emma, we aren’t in Kansas anymore,” she said, trying for a laugh but not achieving it.

She thought she was quoting an old movie. Was that a sign that her mind was returning?

She could ask directions to the address she’d seen in the GPS, but she’d have to wait until the town opened. Now that she’d arrived, she was trembling badly. Maybe whoever she was didn’t cry but went straight to hysterics.

Fog swirled under the one street light. If she wanted to believe in ghosts, she’d see them in the gaping dark holes between the wisps of moisture. A howling dog had her hair standing on end.

She needed coffee. She needed something concrete to pin her to reality. Cats needed to be fed sometime. Did she have cat food in here?

Realizing that in her fugue state, she hadn’t looked in the suitcases in the back seat or in the trunk, she climbed out. She must have been drugged. Nothing else made sense. Why wouldn’t she have looked before this?

The car was an older model Subaru wagon. Had she known that? The back end popped open to reveal a canvas cover over the cargo area. She unlatched it and studied stacks of unmarked boxes in dismay. She didn’t know whether to hope or fear that they were stuffed with cash. Pulling out the first one, she realized it wasn’t even taped. Opening the flap revealed a disorderly collection of books—mostly college texts and nothing useful.

She opened a healthy-sized volume on botany, and in the halogen glare of the parking lot light, read Samantha Moon and a phone number.

Before she could flip open the others, an ethereal figure emerged from the dark mist into the lamplight. Wearing what

appeared to be a Smoky Bear hat—how could she recall that image?—a checked flannel shirt, jeans, and run-down suede boots topped with grubby faux fur, the figure appeared androgynous but not dangerous.

“A bit early for the café,” the stranger said in a feminine voice. “But I’ve got keys. Looking for coffee?”

“I would kill for coffee,” she said, then wondered if she might have killed someone. How would she know? She had been hoping someone here could tell her if she had parents, a significant other. . . kids? She didn’t think she had kids, but she didn’t know why.

“Long drive, huh? I’m Mariah.” The stranger approached from across the lot. “I open up for Dinah most days because I’d kill for coffee too.”

How did she respond? The polite thing to do was give a name, but all she had was the one in the textbook. “I’m Sam.” That felt right enough to continue. “I’ve been driving all night. Then my GPS died, and now I’m lost. I figured I’d feed Emma first.”

One of the boxes contained pet supplies, she discovered in relief. She popped open a can, retrieved a water bottle and bowl, and opened the back door. The cat was an over-large, well-furred marmalade.

Mariah peered in the backseat. “You have Emma? I’ve been wondering where she’d got to. You saw Cass then?”

How did she respond to that? Admit she had no memory? The first thing a normal person would do was call the police or a doctor, but what if she was a criminal? Who was Cass and why would she give her a cat?

“Last night,” was all she—Sam—could think to say. She set the food and water on the floor, then let the cat out. Apparently there was already a litter box behind the passenger seat. Someone had thought of everything. It hadn’t been her.

“Now you’re really interesting me,” Mariah said as Sam shut and locked the car door. “And just as a side note, cell phones don’t work here either. The Nulls will tell you that it’s because we’re a valley surrounded by mountains with no cell tower, and the population is too thin to justify satellites.” She led the way across the parking lot to a long, low building with big plate glass windows.

“Nulls?”

Mariah plugged a key into a bolt. “Techies, geeks, the unevolved.” She flipped a switch inside the door, illuminating a small café with a long counter and half a dozen booths.

It was good to see clearly again. Sam studied the chipped Formica tables and counter, the red cracked vinyl stools, and wondered if she’d traveled back in time.

At least she had a sense of time, that had to be good, right?

Over the counter she caught glimpses of a mural painted between cabinets and behind machinery depicting this same diner in an earlier era—if the clothing on the people was any indication. She studied the faces, hoping to recognize them, but that was foolish. She hadn’t been born at a time when women wore leather vests over lacy maxi dresses and tied their long hair back in beaded headbands. For whatever reason, the mural made her feel vaguely uneasy. The painting was faded and covered with decades of grease, as blurred as if concealed by fog.

Mariah set to filling coffee pots with the ease of experience. “Have a seat. The machinery is slow but the coffee is good.”

“And there is another theory about the lack of cell phone signals?” Sam had picked up on the nuance, so she wasn’t exactly stupid, always good to know. Could she hope that textbooks meant she was educated?

“You don’t know about Hillvale?” With the coffee perking, Mariah flung her hat under the counter. The gesture let down

lustrous black hair that she expertly braided as she talked. Sam admired her high cheekbones and brown coloring—and glanced at her own hand to verify she was a pathetic white.

Afraid to admit that she didn't even know her own name, Sam shook her head. "I was just given an address on Cemetery Road and told to head north. The town welcome sign was a little spooky on top of that address."

Mariah laughed and took down two plain white mugs. "Since you have her cat, Cassandra must have sent you. She's the only one who lives out by the cemetery."

"You know her?" Sam asked, partially in relief and partially in distraction since she had utterly no clue who had sent her.

"Cassandra is a fixture around here. I don't know why she didn't tell you the Hillvale story. She knows it better than anyone. But last I looked, she wasn't home, so I'll give you a short synopsis. Cream? Sugar?"

Sam didn't know. "Both," she decided, figuring she could try it black, then add what seemed best. So, she knew what went into coffee but didn't know what she put into it. Interesting. "Synopsis, please." She hid her dismay that the only person on Cemetery Road wasn't home. Worse yet, this Cass had apparently given her a cat, which indicated she might not be going home anytime soon.

Had she no family? No friends? She really was ready to weep—in disappointment as much as fear. Hope that she was coming home had carried her this far. Now, she had nothing. She swallowed hard on incipient panic.

Mariah filled a sugar container and pulled a box of artificial cream packets from under the counter. "Way back before the highways went in, the late 1800s, I think, there was a ranch and lumber mill up here. But they couldn't keep any help because the place was haunted. That was back in the days when the ladies

back East played at spiritualism. Ever heard of Lily Dale?”

If she had, Sam couldn't say. She shrugged.

“Well, the ranch owner's wife was originally from New York, and she had a sister still back there who was one of the Lily Dale spiritualists. The sister got all excited about the ghosts and caught the next train, so to speak.”

“I like this story.” Sam drew in the rich aroma of the coffee Mariah handed her. “I like it even better with caffeine. Did the sister find ghosts?”

“Oh yeah.” Mariah nodded toward the ceiling. “That's my job around here, to catch the ghosts.” Without looking the least bit insane, she sipped her coffee.

Sam swung the stool around and studied the ceiling behind her. In each corner was an intricate web of yarn and string decorated with what appeared to be beads and crystals. “Aren't those called dreamcatchers? I don't see any ghosts.” She almost felt disappointed as she swung back to Mariah.

The ghostcatcher beamed in approval. “Ghosts are like bad dreams. My nets are modified, of course, and they're empty because they're working. Hasn't been a haunt in here since I hung them.”

There was a scam wide enough to swallow a town. “So the sister found ghosts and learned to make ghostcatchers?” she asked, trying to hide her doubt.

“Nothing is that simple. She claimed to channel an old Indian, Native American, Ohlone, however you want to categorize him since this tale was written well over a century ago in practically a different language. The spirit told her the ranch house was built over sacred land and the ghosts of his people were rising in protest.”

“I'm guessing we've run roads over more graves than anyone can count, but I don't think it's spirits causing wrecks,” Sam

said, deciding she liked her coffee with sugar but not fake cream.

“Hard to say, but Hillvale is different. I’m sure you’ve heard about the vortex energy in Sedona. We have that here, only it’s opposite. In Sedona, it spirals outward, purportedly providing healing energy, spiritual uplifting, whatever. Have you ever been?”

Sam didn’t have a clue. She shook her head negatively anyway. “What would the opposite be? Sucking energy?”

“You need Cass or one of the local psychics to explain. But it apparently gives power to those below, like ghosts. And to those who can channel it, like the various spiritualists who eventually migrated here.”

“After the rancher’s wife’s sister spread the word?” Sam couldn’t hide her amusement.

“Why would Cassandra send us another Null?” Mariah cried in exasperation, raising her cup in mockery. “We’re in desperate need of fewer doubters and more believers. Don’t let anyone know you’re a Null! People have been stoned for less.”

Casting aside the commentary as non-serious, Sam insisted, “No, really, what happened after she talked to the Indian ghost?” She’d wanted normal. She’d hoped for family. And what she got was a missing witch who believed in ghosts and a town of psychos? It might be time to find a head doctor. She wondered if she had insurance.

“The ranch house burned down over the sacred land. The rancher wisely rebuilt where the town now sits. The sisters started a church of healers. More spiritualists gravitated to the area. We became quite a tourist attraction back in the day when rich city people retreated to the mountains in summer. Then the highway went in, people left, the population dwindled, until the late 60s, when a bunch of hippies formed a commune in the hills you see to the east.”

Sam turned to look out the window and could just make out a pink haze rising over those hills.

“We’re gradually making it back on the map again,” Mariah continued, “but we’re still so far off the beaten path that we only make money in summer. So if you’re looking for work, I wish you well but minimum wage is about it. Some of the psychics do well, but it takes time to establish a clientele.”

“No internet to spread the word?”

Mariah refilled her mug. “Oh yeah, we have cable. Stay here long enough and you’ll meet our mayor, Monty Kennedy. His family owns half the mountain north of here. He and his brother had cable run in for the lodge. So far, they haven’t actually bought a satellite or cell tower. Give them time.”

“I detect a faint sour note,” Sam said with amusement as Mariah filled her own cup and opened a pie case with yesterday’s leftovers.

“Monty and Kurt are the Null to end all Nulls. Men are so. . . damned logical. To most women, TV waves and internet clouds are magic. To most men, they’re easily explainable technology. But give men a whiff of weird they can’t account for without cords and wires, and they go bug-eyed.”

“That’s sexist.” Sam’s taste buds watered as Mariah slapped a piece of apple pie in front of her. “I’m down to my last few dollars,” she admitted. “I can’t contribute much to the economy. How much does pie cost up here?”

“It’s leftover. It’s free. Coffee’s on me, a welcome-to-town gift. If Cassandra sent you here, then there has to be a good reason, and I’m eager to hear your story.”

Sam tasted the pie and let it melt in her mouth. This was normal. She considered her answer as she chewed. “I don’t think I’m free to tell my story yet,” she said. Not until she knew what it was anyway.

Mariah nodded just as a cheery voice rang out from the back. “Pour me some of that java, dear. I feel a good wind in the air. It’s time to fix my beignets.”

“Dinah, we’ve got company. Come meet Sam.”

“You finally got a man, Mariah girl?” A tiny African-American cook swaddled in a white cotton apron popped through the swinging doors. Short Afro hair, ruby lips, rings in her ears—and an Adam’s apple and no breasts under a flannel shirt much like Mariah’s.

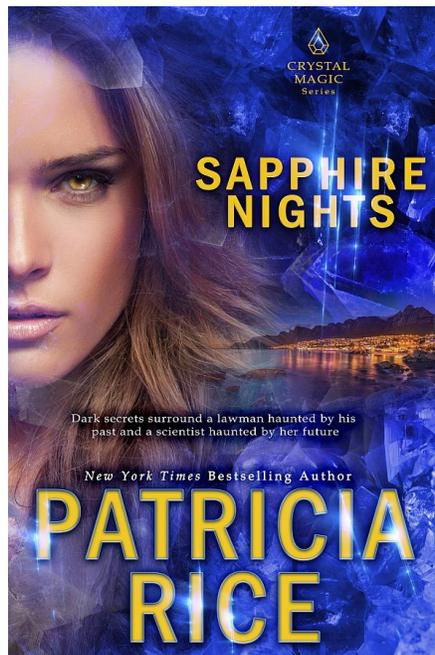
Dinah took one look at Sam, cocked a hip, and pouted. “You ain’t no Sam. You’re as straight as our ghostcatcher here.”

That’s when the wind blew open the front door and a uniformed officer strode in—limping.

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Crystal Magic #1



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