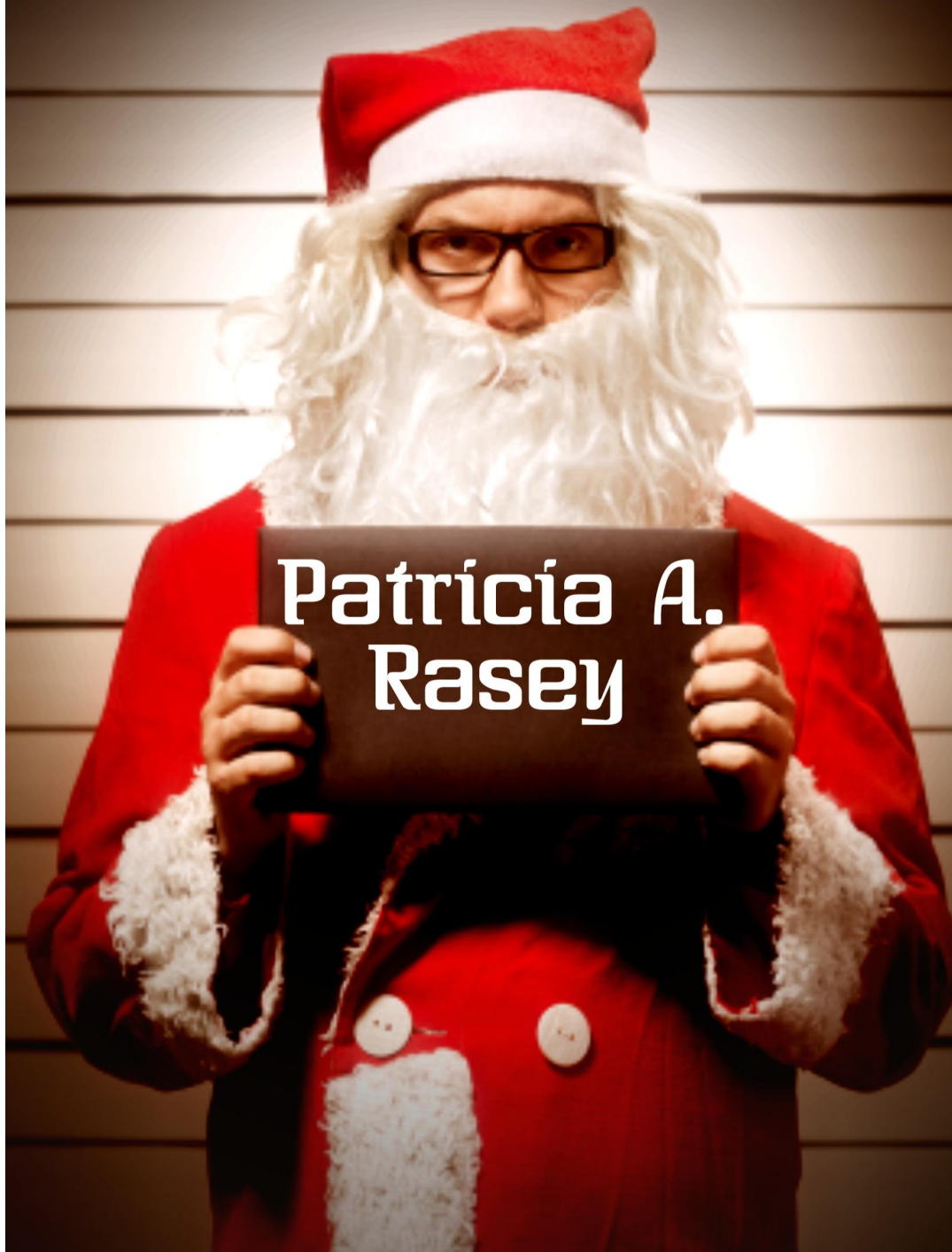


CATCHING A CHRISTMAS BREAK



Catching a Christmas Break

Patricia A. Rasey

Catching a Christmas Break

This book is a work of fiction. All names, characters, places and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, locales, or events is entirely coincidental.

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Dedication:

To Justin VanAusdale...bet you never thought you'd get a story dedicated to you. It was fun working with you. I hope all is well in your world...

What people are saying about Catching a Christmas Break:

Catching a Christmas Break is thoroughly entertaining and a tale of the miracle of the holidays at work for one Jerry VanWiggle. On the run from the mob, Jerry finds himself up to his ears in chaos as he runs headlong into the police, and soon finds himself arrested and sitting behind bars. Of course, as a blessing in disguise, it might just be the best thing for Jerry to hide—from the mob, and his wife!

Patricia A. Rasey writes a tale of second chances, learning one's lesson and finding a miracle when you least expect it. Written so intriguingly, Ms. Rasey keeps the reader hooked, to learn what becomes of Jerry and just to learn more about him. I felt myself connecting with his vulnerability the most, and rooting for him. He's an interesting character, along with a vast array of characters, that keep the entertainment going and the warm feelings moving along til the very end.

And in telling Rasey-style, the ending does leave one wondering if we'll see Jerry again...LOVE it!

Catching a Christmas Break

Kacey Hammell, Multi-Published Author

~*~

Reviews for other works:

THE HOUR BEFORE DAWN is a thrill-read, intense, fast and unpredictable. The reader will be tempted to "close your eyes and don't look" but from the first grisly murder to the last, the reader is glued to the pages waiting breathlessly for the killer to be unmasked and brought down.

For an adrenaline rushing read, I highly recommend THE HOUR BEFORE DAWN.

Terrie Figueroa for Romance Reviews Today. *for The Hour Before Dawn*

~*~

This was the first book by Patricia A. Rasey that I have read and I have already compiled a list of her previous and upcoming titles to get!! This is an author who blew me away with this tale and I am not sure I will ever read another romantic suspense/thriller, without comparing it to Ms. Rasey's writing. DEADLY OBSESSION is one hell of a gripping page-turner that has everything a reader desires in their murder mysteries. This book comes HIGHLY recommended from this reviewer.

Tracey West for The Road to Romance . *for Deadly Obsession*

~*~

With surgeon like precision, Rasey cuts to the heart of human motivation, revealing the striking similarities of seemingly totally disparate characters. Each scene springs vividly to life, living in the imagination long beyond when the last page is turned. Indeed, like the man she attributes to inspiring "Villain", author Rasey writes with style and class. Fans just cannot get enough of her bad boy heroes and will be eagerly awaiting her next novel. EYES OF BETRAYAL earns the WordWeaving Award for Excellence.

Cindy Penn, Senior Editor, Word Weaving, Amazon top 50 Reviewer, eBook Specialist, Midwest Book Review *for Eyes of Betrayal*

~*~

A fun, entertaining tale between a biker and a cop, KISS OF DECEIT whisks the reader along in a truly believable tale to hunt down the evidence in order to solve the mystery. But the fun doesn't stop there. Rasey sets out markers to alert readers to the true identity of the happy scarf killer. While LeAnne and Snake learn the true meaning of love, the tale ends in a twist any police officer would think twice about before realizing that criminals will go to any length to cover up their crime of passion.

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Reviewed by Brenda Ramsbacher for Scribblers. *for Kiss of Deceit*

~*~

FACADE is a well-written thriller that moves at a fast pace and has lots of graphic scenes. K.C. Tanner and Sharalee MacArthur add romance to a tale of betrayal, revenge and murder. Nothing is, as it seems. The secondary character of Mike MacArthur is a man I didn't know whether to feel sorry for or dislike. If you have read any of Patricia Rasey's other books, you know she does not wrap them up in a pretty package and this one is no different. This is a keeper.

Hattie Boyd, from Scribes World Reviews *for Facade*

~*~

I absolutely love the way Ms. Rasey can have two completely different story lines going on at the same time, in one book. She interweaves them so well, that you don't realize that there are two. You can follow both story's with no confusion, and never skip a beat. She is absolutely amazing with this technique. And she has done it again with FEAR THE DARK. The only beat you will miss is the skipping of your heartbeat when you "feel" the snakes slither across the floor, ready to strike.

I totally recommend you get a copy of FEAR THE DARK, and set yourself up in a brightly lit place, with your feet up where they will be safe. Sit back and be ready to be terrorized. Loving every minute of it.

Reviewed by Sue Hartigan for All About Murder Reviews. *for Fear the Dark*

Other Books by Patricia A. Rasey:

Deadly Obsession
The Hour Before Dawn
Kiss of Deceit
Eyes of Betrayal
Facade
Fear the Dark
Sanitarium

Historical Romances:

Lawfully Yours
Eternally Yours

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Dark Savior

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“JESUS H. CHRIST!”

He skidded to a halt, the steel door slamming shut behind him. *Think*. Damn it, he didn't have time to think. With two big guys in hot pursuit of him, it didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out those two buffoons would soon be coming through that door like two pit bulls chasing a pound of fresh meat...and he was the fresh meat.

There, lying at his feet, was a three-hundred-pound Santa with a bullet hole in his chest. Well, what looked like a bullet hole. The thing was round and blood oozed all over the red of the suit. Poor guy still held the damn ringer in his right hand.

Without another thought, he yanked off the white fur-trimmed hat. Thank the good Lord the beard hadn't been real, as it would definitely help him in his own getaway. In record breaking time, he sauntered off down the empty, litter-scattered alley in the red blood-smeared Santa suit, ringing the bell, leaving the poor schmuck in the pile of garbage he had likely died in, gaping whole in his chest aiming toward the heavens. Sorry, but he didn't have time to contemplate what had happened to Santa, he had to get the hell out of dodge or wind up sharing the mattress of rubbish.

And none too soon.

Just as he rounded the corner, he heard the back door clamor open and two sets of foot falls hit the asphalt. Jerry quickened his pace and melded into the holiday crowd, not daring to look back. The slightest wrong move on his part could mean his demise. These guys didn't play fair.

“Damn that horse anyway,” he mumbled, giving the bell an extra firm shake. It had been a sure bet. The money was as good as in his hand. He could have paid off the fat bastard who had sent those two goons after him and more. But, no, the thoroughbred had to get entangled with the horse running in second. Who hired those jockeys anyway? They both went down in a pile of horseflesh and men, thus losing the race and his damn winnings. Money that hadn't been his in the first place. Jesus! He was as dead as Santa. Fitting how he now wore the suit.

“Hey, you okay?” a portly gentleman asked, grasping his elbow. He obviously noted the dark red marring his otherwise perfect disguise.

Shaking off the man's grip, Jerry assured him it wasn't anything worse than a flesh wound caused by his own clumsiness. He needed to ditch the cursed suit before it caused him any more trouble. Like he needed more. He could successfully retire knowing he had already experienced more than his fair share of dire straits. God must surely hate him.

Jerry heaved a sigh. This was to be his last bet, the money he would have raked in solving all his problems and hopefully gain him access back into his own home. His wife had tossed him out months ago. He still sported a scar from where his ass skidded across the blacktop. His dreams of a festive Christmas tripped up by a damn careless jockey. And he had to be the one to suffer for it. “Merry fuc—“

“Merry Christmas, Santa,” came from a short little runt, snot running down his face, which the kid had to catch with his tongue. Jerry's stomach turned. Here he wore a blood-coated, stolen Santa suit and it was the licked snot that had caused his stomach's upheaval. He needed to get a grip.

“Screw you,” tumbled from his lips without much thought, followed by the swat of the mother's heavy black bag hitting him upside the head. He stumbled forward, trying to regain his balance. *Santa murdered by black handbag*. What the hell did she keep in that thing?

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“He’s not really Santa, honey, he’s just a mean little man in a poorly fitting Santa suit,” she told the kid as they hurried down the road. He supposed it wasn’t the runt’s fault his life had hit the shitter. He had no one to blame but himself.

Two more blocks and Jerry would reach his car. If he could just keep his head down and stay unnoticed...right, he wore a goddamned Santa suit for crissake. He pushed forward, head low, trying hard not to look anyone in the eye...that is until he ran smack dab into a blue uniform. Just fucking great. He couldn’t catch a break if his life depended on it and right now his did.

“Excuse me,” Jerry said, stepping a wide arc around the police officer, who looked none-to-friendly. Just a few more steps....

The officer grasped the fur at his nape and brought him back around to face him, his feet barely toe-tapping the cement. Did he have to run into Andre the Giant today? Judging by how the rest of the day had gone, he already knew the answer to that. “You okay?” he asked, indicating the dark brownish-red stain.

“Yeah, I...uh,” A quick look behind him brought the two thugs into view, eyes directly on him. *Took them long enough to catch up, not that he was in any hurry to die.* He straightened his shoulders and shrugged off the big hand holding him immobile. Jerry needed a plan and quick. He took one more look into officer friendly’s face and devised a scheme, albeit a stupid one. “I just killed Santa.”

One caterpillar eyebrow shot upward. “You don’t say.”

Okay, so he didn’t believe him. The man probably thought he was some sort of nut job. A few bricks shy of a full load. After all, Christmas brought out all kinds. “Really! If you’ll just follow me that way.” His hand waved madly in the opposite direction. Yep, the cop was sure to believe him now as the red sleeve fell over his pointing finger and he looked more like an overly excited kid telling a very tall tale. So, Jerry grabbed a hold of the beefy cop’s bicep, which had to be thick as one of Jerry’s thighs. Pissing him off would not be a good thing. “Come on, I’ll show you.”

Andre let out a grumble, something Jerry couldn’t quite catch but sounded suspiciously like stupid son of a bitch. Ordinarily, he might have gotten a bit pissed over the comment, but after the day he just had, Jerry couldn’t say as he blamed the big guy. And right now he needed Andre’s cooperation. The two walked past the goons, both eyeing him carefully, letting Jerry know as soon as the cop left he was a dead man. No shit?

Turning the corner into the alley on Jerry’s direction, Andre waltzed right up to...the empty pile of garbage. Jerry’s jaw hung slack. Where the hell had the three-hundred-pound naked Santa go? Not likely he had gotten up and walked away. Another couple of hours and rigor would have set in. Jerry’s gaze did a quick sweep of the alley, his eyes locking on the buffoons now peeking around the brick corner. Were they actually smiling at him? Jesus, they enjoyed watching his tribulation.

The cop grunted, stuck his fists on his hips and sent him a glare meant to cower. Jerry gulped. “Look, I left Santa here. I don’t know what happened to him. I swear he was dead.”

“Do you know what happens to people who make false reports?”

Jerry stuck out his wrists. “You’re right. Arrest me.”

Andre shook his head. “What has you in such a hurry to go to jail tonight? You been drinking?”

“No, sir.”

“Then take your sorry ass home and piss off somebody else.”

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“Look—“

“No, you look. It’s Christmas Eve and my shift is about to end. I’ve had a long day and you’re making it even longer. Go home, Santa.”

One look toward the mouth of the alley and the two brutes waiting there had Jerry acting on impulse, which probably wasn’t all that smart since a whim had gotten him here in the first place. Drawing back a fist, he punched Andre square in the nose, snapping the giant’s head back. The next thing Jerry remembered after eating blacktop and chipping a tooth was waking up in the back of a squad car heading for downtown.

His glasses sat crooked on his face, but he’d be damned if he could do anything about it. His hands had been secured behind his back. Like he could harm Andre. Okay, so he had punched him in the nose. “You mind telling me where you’re taking me?”

“You did say you wanted to go downtown, twinkle toes.”

Ouch, that hurt. “On what charge?”

“Assaulting a police officer.”

Jerry hung his head. “Sorry about that. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

A deep rumbling reverberated through the car. Jerry leaned over and looked toward the sky with his good eye, the other still blurred from the lens sitting more evenly with his cheek. The sun had begun its decent but the day appeared to be clear, no thunder clouds in sight. The noise grew in intensity before becoming an out and out guffaw from the front seat. Officer friendly tilted his head and rolled in laughter, swiping the tears that fell from his eyes. Jerry was certainly glad Andre found humor in his attempt to harm him. Good thing for Andre a steel black grid separated them or he might just be tempted to strangle him with the cuffs, that is had they not been securing his wrists behind his back.

“So what’s your name, twinkle toes?”

“Jerry,” he grumbled.

“You got a last name, Jerry?”

This ought to humor the big oaf. “VanWiggle.”

“Van—“ The rumble started again, and pretty soon Jerry had to wonder if Andre could see enough to drive through all the tears he conjured up in his merriment. He could very well be placing both their lives in peril. And best not to tempt fate today. “Van what?”

“VanWiggle and I don’t see how you can find so much humor in a man’s name.”

“You ever think about changing your name legally?”

“What? And offend the other VanWiggles?”

Andre’s chuckles subsided. “You got a point there, VanWiggle.”

“No more twinkle toes?”

He looked back over his shoulder, a lopsided grin turning up his cheek. “What? And offend the other VanWiggles?”

Jerry opted to spend the rest of the ride in silence. Nothing he had to offer would make this day get any better. Letting out a sigh, he leaned his head against the back seat and closed his eyes. He doubted his one phone call would even be of any help. Annie, his wife, wouldn’t likely be too eager to bail out his ass. She’d be more apt to laugh at his expense. Another chuckle came from the front seat. Jerry groaned. She and Andre would make a good pair.

A loud explosion echoed through his head about the time he face-planted the mesh separating him from the giant. Jerry crumbled to the floor between the seats, unable to right himself due to his hands stuck securely behind his back. Andre threw the car into park and jumped

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from the vehicle. Jerry could hear him arguing with someone but couldn't see anything besides gravel, carpet fuzz, and a lens that had popped out of his frames. Something hit the trunk of the car...and by the way the car dipped, it was a big something. Jerry's heart raced as the door opened and Andre fisted the collar of the Santa suit and righted him. Before he could get settled, another body, a very big body, slid in next to him. Wrinkling his nose, trying to seat his glasses, the big man beside him came into focus. The big goon actually winked at him, his smile reaching from ear to ear. What was the saying? Life sucks and then you die. Apparently, he wasn't too far off from hitting the second part of that phrase.

* * *

Jerry stood in front of the measuring tape on the wall. Straightening his shoulders, he tried for the extra half inch. When you're five-foot-five, each fraction counted. But without even seeing the photo, Jerry knew he likely qualified for the worst mug shot in history, height or no height. His glasses still sat crooked across the bridge of his nose, with one lens still residing on the floor of the cruiser. Maybe it would be better he lacked good vision at the moment. He wouldn't be able to see the stupid grin on the pit bull next time they came face to face. He hated it when people found humor at his expense. And today it seemed everyone did.

His finger tips were rolled across a touch screen and his prints entered into the system. Since he hadn't ever seen the inside of a police station before, they'd not likely find anything on him except for bad decision making. Jerry wondered briefly if that could be considered a crime. If so, he'd be on the top ten most wanted list.

Andre led him down a yellow paint-chipped hallway, stopping in front of a small cell surrounded by old iron bars. Boy, this place had to be historic. A thin mattress sat on a steel frame bolted in one corner, while a toilet and sink sat opposite. All the necessities with none of the privacy. The cell next to him sat empty. He wondered about the goon from the alley. At least luck finally stood on his side. They wouldn't be sharing space and unless the big guy had sported arms of rubber, Jerry would be safe for the time being. Until his one phone call, that is, and Annie got a hold of him. He grimaced. Maybe he'd be better off taking his chances with the pit bull.

"You need anything, VanWiggle?" Andre's voice startled him from his reverie, earning him another chuckle from the big guy as he nearly jumped from his Santa suit. Jerry wrinkled his nose. Now that he was alone, the smell of the suit permeated the air. Damn, he stunk to high heaven. Hadn't Santa ever taken a shower?

"Can I get some clean clothes?" he asked, knowing his own threads had likely absorbed Santa's BO. He had used them to drape across Santa's nakedness. "These sort of smell."

Andre chuckled again. "You don't have to tell me that. I rode in the car over with you. You'll get issued a uniform once we get you over to the regional jail. For now, you'll have to live with it."

Jerry slumped to the dirty mattress as he heard the heavy door close behind the officer. *Is this what rock bottom feels like?* If he ever got out of this mess, Jerry swore he'd win back Annie's heart and never gamble again. Jeff, his non-identical twin brother, came to mind. Truth of it, they looked very little alike. Maybe he ought to call him instead of Annie. He knew without a doubt Jeff would come to the rescue. Too bad the same couldn't be said for Annie, although he couldn't blame her. He deserved her scorn and so much more. The officers did have to offer him one phone call, didn't they? Or was that just on television? The walls closed in on him and he tried not to think of his claustrophobia. Of course they had to offer him a phone call. Not like they could let him rot in here for assaulting poor Andre.

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The door down the hall reopened, the big goon likely being led to the empty cell next to him. His heart picked up its pace, rattling his ribcage. Anxiety mixed with fear of closed in spaces. He was minutes from a full blown panic attack.

“No need to push, honey,” a raspy but very feminine voice spat. “I’ve been down these halls before. I already know the way.”

Jerry gripped the front of his suit as he gasped. Shit! He didn’t suppose the officer would lead this new addition to his cell, which meant the big goon had nowhere else to go. He tried hard to catch his breath.

The door to the other cell clanged open as an overly-red haired prostitute stumbled in. Her hair lay in wild disarray as if she had been dragged straight from bed. She eyed Jerry as the iron door clamored close. “What are you looking at, sweetheart? Ain’t ever seen a whore before?” She winked and blew him a kiss before staggering over to the bed and flopping down on the mattress, the springs squeaking their protest.

He was so screwed.

Red flipped her hair over her shoulder and eyed Jerry queerly. Had she been looking at him like her next meal, he might have been flattered. Instead, she said, “Sweetheart, you look like you’ve had a worse day than me.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“You two get cozy,” the officer said as he walked away.

“Normally I might agree to do just that, but you look like you need a lot more than getting laid, sweetheart.”

“You could say that again,” Jerry mumbled.

“You want to talk about it? I’m a pretty good listener.”

A smile turned up his cheeks. “I bet you are.”

“That’s better. See, I already cheered you up. It really can’t be so bad, can it?”

Jerry nodded and looked to his clasped hands between his knees. “I’m about to be cellmates with a big goon who wants me dead. How much worse could it get?”

“Who? Danny? The guy out there being printed?” One long red-painted nail pointed toward the intake. “He’s nothing but a big pussycat.”

“Pardon me if I disagree with you.” He harrumphed. “The man wants to kill me and he’s about to get the opportunity.”

Red looked at him for a bit and seemed to contemplate Jerry’s predicament. No disputing Danny was about to descend on them and be his cellmate. “You owe Big Sal a lot of dough, huh?”

Jerry nodded, his shoulders slumping. Dead meat. Any second and his only witness a street-walker. “A gambling debt gone wrong. It was supposed to pay off big time.”

“It always is.” She smiled, albeit a patronizing one. “But your first mistake was accepting money from Sal. He’s not the forgiving kind.”

“And what about the pussycat?”

“Danny takes orders from Sal. If Sal wants you dead—“

Jerry’s Adam’s apple bobbed. A lump the size of a potato formed in his throat. She didn’t have to finish her sentence. He knew he had minutes to live and that one damned phone call wouldn’t matter. He just hoped Annie had some fond memories of their time together to remember him. He’d hate going to his grave knowing that Annie thought of him as a loser.

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The door opened to the holding area and Jerry scampered to the corner of the mattress. The officer who had escorted Red used his key to open the ancient barred-door, Andre nowhere to be found. Jerry supposed he had been quick about ending his shift. After all, why would he care about a little guy that had punched him in the nose?

Danny stepped in, rubbing his hands as though getting ready to devour his next meal.

“You boys play nice,” the officer said, then slammed the door shut, the rusty hinges squawking their disapproval. “The bus should be here in about an hour to transport you three.”

Danny stayed put, all the while his beady black eyes holding Jerry’s hostage. Fear snaked up his spine and shook his shoulders. Christ, he looked like a coward. He ought to stand up, all five-foot-five of him, and look the bastard in the chest. He’d teach the goon a lesson. Okay, so he was dreaming. But at least Danny would make quick of his death. Jerry couldn’t stand the thought of pain.

“The question is, how long do you want to prolong this?” Danny asked. At least the smile on his lips didn’t match his eyes. That meant the goon no longer found the situation hilarious. Time to get down to business.

“I’d rather you be quick,” Jerry said, panic cracking his voice. “And could you be painless about it? I’d rather not feel it if you wouldn’t mind.”

Okay, the now the buffoon laughed. Jerry sighed and stood from the soiled bed. “You may want to turn your head Red. I’m sure Danny wouldn’t want any witnesses.”

She approached the bars and wrapped her long fingers around them. “You going to hurt this poor little guy, Danny?”

Danny shrugged, looking as if Jerry’s life hanging in the balance was all in a day’s work. “Sal says I have to kill him.”

Red smiled and winked at the big guy. “You always were one of Sal’s lackeys, Danny.”

Danny’s complexion mottled red. Angering him bordered on being just plain stupid, and he meant to say so when Red cut him off. “I sure hope Sal’s paying you well.”

“And exactly why would that matter to you?”

It was Red’s turn to shrug. “Doesn’t matter to me one iota. You’re the one who will be sitting the next twenty-five years in a cell no bigger than this. It won’t take a brain surgeon to figure out who killed the little guy.”

“I’ll make it look like a hanging.”

“You see bed sheets anywhere handy, genius? All I see is a moth eaten mattress. Looks like you’ll have to use brute force. I say strangling is the least painful way.”

“Hey,” Jerry began to object as Danny’s large hands stroked his square jaw. His pensive look silenced him. Maybe Red had made sense and Jerry had a few more hours to live. Could he finally be catching a break?

“Maybe you got a point, Bunny.”

Bunny? She sure as hell didn’t look like a Bunny. Red seemed much more fitting.

“I best wait until we get to regional. No one would pay any attention if I stuck him in the yard. I’d be long gone before the guards caught on.”

Great, he had a few more hours to think about his upcoming death. But for now, he was relatively safe. Maybe he could talk his way out of getting on that bus. He needed to talk to Andre.

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Jerry winked at Red in a way of thanks. She smiled in return. He walked to the door, side-stepping the goon, and began hollering down the hall. His words echoed off the ancient walls. He gave the bars a shake for good measure. “Anyone out there?”

Finally the door opened and the officer escorting Red waltzed up to his cell. “You wanting something, VanWiggle?”

Jerry heard Danny’s answering chuckles in the background. *Ha ha, very funny.* “Yeah, I want to speak to the officer who brought me in. He wouldn’t happen to still be here filling out paperwork or something, would he?”

“Officer Johnson left. He said something about following up on some loose ends. When he comes back, I’ll let him know you want to speak with him.”

“Thanks,” Jerry called to his already retreating back.

“You better not be trying anything funny, VanWiggle,” Danny said, a chuckle curling around the pronunciation of his last name.

“I want my one phone call is all,” Jerry grumbled, then returned to the corner and plopped down on the dusty, stained mattress. While Jerry settled into the far corner, Danny sat on the end. Red took to her own mattress and the holding cell lapsed into silence. After all, what did one say to his would be assailant?

What had to be an hour passed rather slowly with Jerry’s nodding off to sleep here and there. The door to the room finally opened and footsteps sounded off the cement flooring. Either Andre had returned or the bus had arrived to take them to Jerry’s final destination.

“Well, VanWiggle, today’s your lucky day,” Andre said as he approached the cell door. Hope rose in his chest for the first time since his jockey and horse ate dirt. “Looks like you’re out of here.”

Jerry sprung from the bed, leaving the big goon glaring in his wake, mumbling something along the lines of when he got out. *Yeah, he was dead meat.* “I didn’t even get my phone call.”

“You didn’t need it. We called your wife.”

“Annie’s here?” He didn’t know whom to be more afraid of: his wife or the pit bull.

“She doesn’t look real happy, but your brother seems to be arguing your case.”

“Jeff’s here?”

“He drove her.” Officer Johnson stuck the key into the iron cell door and opened it. Jerry smelled freedom. He didn’t waste any time getting to the other side of the iron bars.

“What about me?” Danny asked. “When the hell am I getting out of here? Sal McCullough will pay my bail.”

A wry grin turned up Johnson’s cheek. “That’s going to be a problem, Danny. You see, Sal and your buddy—their on their way to the regional jail. Looks like VanWiggle wasn’t completely lying about the dead Santa. Something nagged me to go back to the scene where VanWiggle claimed to have left Santa. When I did, I discovered your pal and Sal stuffing his three-hundred pound corpse into the back of a Chrysler 300. I’ve been dying to nail you guys on something. Looks like I just got my chance thanks to Jerry.” He slapped Jerry on the back for emphasis, sending Jerry stumbling a few steps. The guy just didn’t know his strength. “I’m sure forensics will match the bullet in his chest to one of your guns. Looks like you’re all going away for a long time to come.”

“You ready, VanWiggle? Looks like you just caught yourself a Christmas break.”

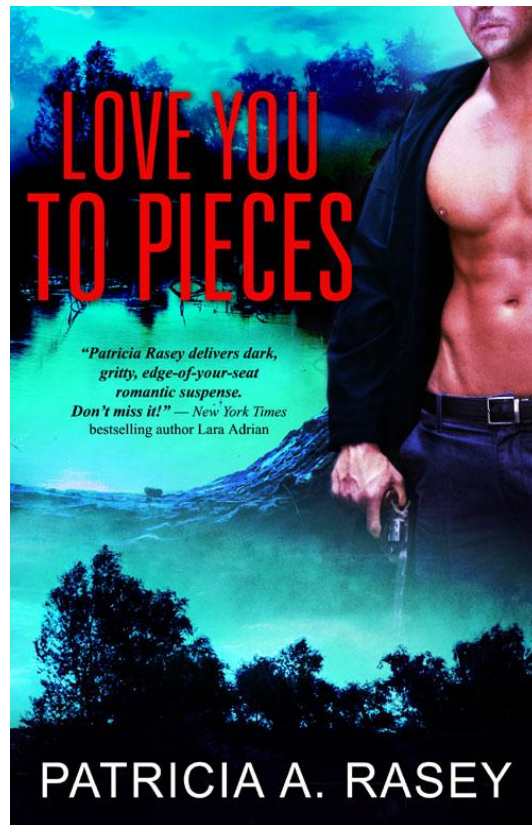
Jerry looked back to Red and mouthed a word of thanks.

“You stay away from that gambling, you hear?”

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Jerry winked at her and promised himself he'd never bet on another horse as long as the good Lord allowed him to live. Now if Annie would only be forgiving....

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**Read a preview of Patricia A. Rasey's LOVE YOU TO PIECES.
Available from Amazon.com and BN.com December 27, 2011!**

Blurb: It's been a few months since *Jaycen McCain's* troubled wife fell victim to a sadistic killer. Losing Kelly Jo has haunted him deeply, and his failure to keep her safe has driven Jay to the brink of a bleak, self-destructive despair. But the small-town police detective has bigger problems to deal with when a string of serial murders crop up on his home turf--murders with eerie similarities to the violence perpetrated on his wife.

Compelled to stop the killer and find much-needed answers about Kelly Jo's final hours, Jay is forced to enlist the help of a woman too tempting for his own peace of mind: Kelly Jo's pretty cousin, *Sara St. James*. Together, Jay and Sara embark on a pursuit for justice that will take them into an underground world of dark places and dangerous, irresistible desires. As an unwanted passion kindles and combusts between them, the killer closes in, pulling Jay and Sara into the web of an evil that will rock them to their core.

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Chapter 1

THE COLD-HAMMERED barrel of his Glock 10mm pressed flat against Jaycen McCain's temple as his finger tightened on the trigger. He took a final look around the floral bedroom, the room they had shared.

His finger shook.

His brow beaded with sweat.

Gritting his teeth, a tear of anger and frustration rolled down his cheek. Bitter bile filled his mouth. When the bullet entered his skull and pulverized his brains, it would all end. Blessed nothingness. Oblivion would be better than his fucked-up existence.

The phone jangled, causing him to fumble the gun. Cursing, he tossed it onto the bed and grasped the receiver. He knew the identity of the caller without waiting for the acknowledgement. "What the fuck do you want, Sara?"

"I called to see if you're okay."

"Stay the hell out of my life."

"Dammit, Jaycen, how can I help you if you won't let me?"

He laughed, knowingly cruel. "I don't want your concern, Sara. Save it for someone who does."

"Jaycen—"

He slammed down the receiver. His gaze traveled back to the gun. Sliding from the bed to the floor, he hugged his knees and shook his head. He didn't have the courage to pull the trigger.

Jaycen glanced up and saw the five-by-seven wedding picture on the dresser across the room. So damn much had happened in the few months since Kelly Jo stormed out of the house. If he could only go back and change his parting words. Tell her how much he loved her. But truth be told, they hadn't gotten along for much of the past year. Ever since Alexis passed away, Kelly Jo swore he'd crawled inside himself to an unreachable place. Neither of them had been good at handling grief. They took it out on each other after ten-year-old Alexis succumbed to leukemia.

He was supposed to be there for her first date, take pictures of her prom, teach her to drive... walk her down the isle, for crissake. Not stand over her casket as his tears washed her lifeless face. Kelly Jo handled her grief differently and wanted what they had before Alexis died. Didn't she realize they could never go back?

Jaycen rocked back on his heels, trying his damndest to keep the images at bay, his gaze fixed on the floral wallpaper. Paper Kelly Jo had picked out, the matching quilt on the bed. The whole damned room was stamped with her presence.

Other, more disturbing images from three months past flooded his thoughts. *A cardboard box, attention Jaycen McCain. No return address. Standard packing tape sealed all edges.*

Hardening his jaw, Jaycen stood, picked up his Glock and whipped it across the room, smashing the picture on the dresser, sending glass shards scattering and tinkering about.

The phone rang again.

Jaycen grasped it from the stand and pulled the cord from the wall, ending its trill. Just as he was about to let it sail across the room, the fight drained from him, leaving him numb. The phone dropped to his feet.

Running both hands down his whiskered jaw, he slumped to the mattress, fighting off the signs of an oncoming panic attack that had begun plaguing him since about the time his wife left

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and never returned. He lay back across the bed, dangling one arm over his eyes, and concentrated on steadying his breathing. He recalled the day he opened the box.

Using a utility knife, he'd hastily slit the tape and jerked open the flaps.

His stomach turned. He dashed for the bathroom, leaping over the broken glass. Grasping both sides of the basin, he dry-heaved.

Inside the box, preserved in a vacuum-sealed food storage bag, had lain a severed left hand, complete with wedding ring and mole, Kelly Jo's latest manicure bloodied and tattered.

A single piece of white computer paper had held the typed phrase: Ding Dong! Your wife is dead. Which old Wife? The Wicked Wife!

Sara St. James replaced the receiver in the cradle. Jaycen needed her. Sure, he had thrown her concern back at her, told her he didn't want it, but she'd be damned if she'd allow him to self-destruct. She owed it to her cousin, Kelly Jo, to stick by him even though most of his friends hadn't. Kelly Jo had been like a sister, and Sara, an only child, had treasured their relationship above all else.

She grabbed her car keys from the hook by the back door and headed for the red '02 Honda Accord. She hoped Jaycen wouldn't do anything stupid before she got there. After losing Alexis he had been shaky at best. And Kelly Jo's death had been hard enough on her that she couldn't fathom how deeply the wounds cut Jaycen.

Sara rounded the first curve down State Route 34, just past Stryker. Keith Urban's "Raining on Sunday" filtered through the airwaves. Reaching over, she increased the volume. Country music soothed her, and right now, she needed the tranquility. The fifteen-minute trip to Jaycen's house had taken entirely too long. She easily caught up to a slow moving green Ford Taurus. Why was it, whenever in a hurry, she met up with every Sunday driver on the road? Downshifting, she flipped on her left turn signal, then hit the gas and pushed the gear into fourth. Sara easily passed the white-haired gentleman driving as though he had days to reach his destination.

Taking the second curve at an accelerated speed, she caught sight of Jaycen's driveway. His onyx Dodge Ram sat at the far end of the long drive, near the garage. Relief washed over her as she let off the gas. The gravel crunched beneath the tires as she pulled behind it. Sara leapt from the car, jogging to the entrance of the brick house. She knocked several times and waited. Nothing. The knob held fast as she tried to turn it. Reaching above to the rim of the awning, she pulled out the spare key Jaycen kept hidden. She quickly unlocked the door and slipped into the dim, cool interior. The Mr. Coffee light glowed from the breakfast nook and the half-full pot was hot.

"Jaycen?" Sara glanced down the hallway leading to the bedrooms.

Tiptoeing along the carpeted corridor, she peeked into the dark bathroom and past the closed door on her right. Alexis's room. Jaycen hadn't entered it since his daughter passed away. The room had been left intact, a mausoleum.

"Jaycen?" Silence continued to greet her. As she grasped the doorknob to his bedroom, the door swung inward, taking her with it. She was jerked rudely against his naked chest. Thank the good Lord he'd had enough sense to wear pants.

"What are you doing here, Sara?" He released her.

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She noted the broken glass and busted frame. “What happened?”

“Shit happens.”

“You want to talk about it?”

His eyes were wide and crazed. “Do I look like I want a fucking shrink? I told you I didn’t want you here.”

“I want to help. I’m worried.”

“Don’t. Go back to your little apartment and forget about me. I’m fine.”

She answered with a mocking laugh. “You’re not fine, Jaycen. I lost her, too, you know.”

His hands fisted. “And I suppose now you’ll tell me you know how I feel.”

“You think you’re the only one suffering from Kelly Jo and Alexis’s loss? Dammit, Jaycen...I hurt, too.” She placed a hand on his whisker-roughened cheek. “I can help you get through this. Kelly Jo wouldn’t—”

Jaycen batted her hand away and backed out of reach. “I don’t need you, Sara. I can get through this on my own.” His jaw hardened.

She swallowed the lump in her throat, not allowing the tears to form. “She was my cousin. I lost her, too. I care about you, Jaycen, and I’ll be damned if I’ll allow you to ruin your life. I know Kelly Jo would want me here, helping you.”

“You don’t know shit, Sara. It’s my life to ruin. Now get the fuck out of my house.”

Sara wiped away the tears that she could no longer hold back. “You know what? Maybe I am wasting my breath. Screw you, Jaycen McCain. Self-destruct for all I care.”

She spun on her heel and stomped down the hall. She’d had enough of his hatred and self-loathing for one lifetime. Maybe everyone had been right and Jaycen couldn’t be helped. Let him wallow in self-pity and disgust.

Just as she reached the entrance, he gripped her shoulder, and spun her about. The clip from her hair flew against the foyer wall and clattered to the ground. Her auburn hair fell around her face in wild disarray. Sara raised her hand but paused in mid-strike as she took in his haunted gaze.

“Go ahead and hit me,” he said. “It’s nothing I don’t deserve.”

“Why do you hate me?”

“I don’t.”

“You could’ve fooled me.”

His hand left her shoulder and grasped the turquoise cross, that Kelly Jo had given him on their honeymoon in Cancun, dangling his neck.

“All I’m asking is that you allow me to help you.”

Jaycen chuckled, dropped his hold on the necklace and ran his hand through his unkempt hair. “The only thing you can do for me right now is help me figure out who this sick piece of shit is so I can put a bullet in his head.”

The sandy blond, ex-marine slid open the drawer to his red toolbox and extracted a steel hacksaw, holding the black handle at eye level as he inspected the jagged edge. The teeth could slice through bone and flesh with ease.

Granite eyes focused on the petite figure lying bound behind him on the sofa. She watched him pace about the room, her panic evident in her wide eyes and shallow breathing. He could

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smell her fear in the perspiration dotting her lined brow and dampening the armpits of her cropped tee. He'd have to be quick about this. Just her presence had begun to get beneath his skin. She reminded him too damn much of his mother: the fake black hair, the gross kohl eyeliner. And that squeaky voice, which had grated on his every nerve. Duct tape had securely ended the annoyance or he'd have cut her tongue out before they ever arrived.

He placed the cold steel on the Formica tabletop, then turned his back on the woman once more. She repulsed him...made his skin crawl. At the club, when he'd spotted her weaving through the crowd as if she owned the place, and later gyrating on the floor like a porn queen, he had known she was the one. Being blessed with boy-next-door looks, he'd found it quite easy to entice her. How readily she had slipped into his arms when he had slithered up behind her and offered to buy her a drink. They'd moved together on the dance floor effortlessly while her backside brushed intimately against his penis. She had wanted him. As if!

After supplying her with plenty of liquor, she had been a breeze to get into his van. The two-and-a-half-hour trip home with her, bound and gagged behind the front seat, had left him highly anticipating the evening's festivities.

He whistled a little ditty as he finished readying the table. Damn, he enjoyed this part of the job, knowing she lay behind him, scared to high hell. He'd definitely send her there.

In good time.

After pulling a couple thirty-six gallon trash bags from the kitchen drawer—*Don't get mad, get Glad*—he covered the floor with them. A third plastic bag draped the table. Can't have blood spattering his linoleum. No Luminol and black lights proving wrongdoing here. He was far too intelligent to be caught by the backwoods idiots of this town.

He glanced out the sliding door off his kitchen to the cement deck and the Maumee River that lay beyond. His personal burial ground. He loved standing on his deck on a bright sunny day, knowing the corpses lay beneath the soles of his shoes and eight inches of concrete. Though with each body, his patio increased in size. Something he'd need to consider in the future.

He had only a few hours before the sun crested, limiting his playtime, he thought. He'd best get to work and leave the reminiscing for another day. Opening his pantry, he extracted his vacuum sealing system and bags. The finishing touch.

Shoulders back and spine straight, he stalked over to the sofa and knelt beside the woman. She flinched when he ran his hand down her arm. His nostrils flared. The scent of her sweat meant she feared him. He dropped his hand and seized her purse lying on the floor by the sofa, rummaging through it. After pulling out the wallet, he flipped it open to her driver's license.

"Anybody missing you, Anita Campbell? A lover? A mother? Or perhaps a husband?"

A tear leaked from the corner of her eye. He swiped it with his pinky and licked the salty droplet. "You know this won't be half as fun if there's no one home to receive your package."

Her gaze widened.

"Ah, yes. You see, someone will be the lucky recipient of something that belongs to you. A memento. Do you live alone, sweetheart?"

She shook her head.

"Parents?"

Again, a quick shake of her head.

"A boyfriend perhaps?"

She nodded. More tears filling her eyes.

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He pursed his lips. "You mean, while I was dancing with you, there was a man at home waiting for you in your bed? Shame on you. You're a naughty little girl, Anita. You know what happens to naughty little girls?"

Her head shook more violently.

"They must be punished."

He stood quickly, grabbed her around the waist and slung her over his shoulder. She tried to resist, shifting and kicking, but his strength and her bound limbs stymied her efforts. He tossed her on the plastic-covered table, her head thumping against the Formica. The tape deadened her moan.

"Scared, Anita?"

She lay frozen, her nose now running along with her eyes.

"Good, because you see...as long as you're feeling something, you're still alive. Remember that. Because just as quickly...you could be feeling nothing."

Smiling, he grasped the steel hacksaw and circled the table, passing the jagged edge gently across her flesh as she wiggled and squirmed.

"Which part of you do you want to send home to your loved one, Anita?"

Her brow creased.

"Your hand?" He lightly sliced the wrist, leaving a trickle of blood, as the tape muffled her cry. "Your foot with its cute little toe ring?" He left another stinging hairline cut.

She struggled vainly to sidle away from his touch and nearly managed to roll from the table, but his free hand pinned her to the surface. "Or how about those earrings?"

Her ear boasted several small hoops running from the lobe up the cartilage. It might make a nice trophy to send back to her lover and certainly would make an attractive display all vacuumed-sealed in an airtight bag.

Decision made, he placed the blade above the left ear and cleanly sawed through the flesh. Her screams barely penetrated the tape and her eyes rolled back in their sockets. Blood ran freely from the side of her head. He slapped her cheek a few times to keep her awake for the rest of the activities.

"Remember what I said, Anita...as long as you are feeling something, you're still alive."

He chuckled as her eyes slowly opened again. "Let the fun begin."

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Chapter 2

“DETECTIVE MCCAIN?”

Jaycen swiveled his chair to find Dispatcher Tony Henderson standing in the doorway, hand on the knob. Being a rookie, his face had yet to be hardened by the job.

“There’s a Detective Kyle Miller in the lobby from the 18th Precinct of the Columbus PD. He asked to speak with Detective Johnson, who’s not here. I know you weren’t the detective handling the case...but...well, I thought—”

“What are you stammering about, Henderson? If there’s someone here wanting to speak with Johnson, send him back.”

“Are you sure? I mean...you don’t even know what it pertains to.”

Jaycen’s patience slipped. “Send him back, for chrissake, Henderson. I know most of Johnson’s cases. Besides, I’m sure Al will be back any minute.”

Al Johnson had been his partner for three years. There wasn’t much they didn’t share when it came to the job. The only case he hadn’t helped with...ah, hell!

“Detective McCain?” A short, balding man walked into his office, extending his hand. “I’m here about a case. I was hoping to see Detective Johnson.”

“I imagine so.” His gaze held compassion, and Jaycen hated being pitied. “You’ve guessed the case I’m referring to, I take it.”

“You know something about my late wife’s case?”

“I think we have a similar one.” He scratched the morning stubble on his cheek. The man’s five o’clock shadow indicated he might have been putting in some long hours. “A package sent via the mail containing an ear and a typed message.”

Bile crawled up the back of Jaycen’s throat. “What did it say?”

“*Ding Dong! The Wicked Witch is dead. Wake up—sleepy head, rub your eyes and get out of bed.*”

“It appears we have a fan of *The Wizard of Oz*.”

“Excuse me?”

“The message in the box containing my wife’s hand said: *Ding Dong! Your wife is dead. Which old Wife? The Wicked Wife!* Certainly, you know the song, Detective.”

He nodded, his balding pate gleaming in the fluorescent lighting. “Why change the lyrics on your message to wife and not refer to your wife, excuse my reference, as a witch as well?”

Jaycen leaned back in his chair, crossed his arms behind his head and stared at the ceiling. He had no idea. But then again, what fucked up person would kill someone and refer to a munchkin song?

He glanced back at the detective. “Maybe that’s something we can ask him.”

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Detective Miller seemed unfazed by Jaycen's sarcasm. "I want to compare evidence in the cases. This piece of shit isn't leaving us much to go on, other than he uses FoodSaver brand vacuum sealer bags, which can be purchased at any Wal-Mart."

"You have a body?" Jaycen thought of his own wife's body, never found. All they had to suggest her death was her hand, preserved in an airtight bag, and the note stating as much.

He shook his head. "Just the ear...and her tongue, Detective."

Jaycen drew in a deep breath, feeling the signs of an oncoming panic attack sucking him into the blackness. Grasping his bottle of water from his desk, he took a long pull. He couldn't let it affect his job, nor could he allow anyone to see his weakness and pull him from the force. The job was all he had. His doctor thought maybe he should see a psychiatrist. He didn't need a fucking shrink...all he needed was time.

His heart-beat slowing, he asked, "Anything proving they belonged to the vic? Something distinctive?"

"The bar piercing the tongue Mr. Perez, that's the boyfriend, recognized, though not unique. The ear, however, held several rings clear up the lobe, matching all those of his girlfriend's. Standard DNA tests can prove the identity, but you know how backed up the labs can be. Could take a few months before we get results."

Jaycen thought of Kelly Jo's own DNA tests. It wasn't on the list of high priorities since they had no suspect when the Bureau of Criminal Investigations, BCI, lab had hundreds of backlogged cases that did. Fingerprints could have proven her identity as well, but they had nothing to compare them to. Kelly Jo had never been printed. Besides, Jaycen already knew without a doubt who that hand belonged to. No question about it. "The last time he saw her?"

"She disappeared over the weekend. Supposedly went out dancing on Saturday night. Never came home. Seems the two have been having problems as of late, but he knew she wouldn't just up and leave. She had a two-year-old son. Perez said there was no way she'd leave him behind. So on Monday he reported her as missing when she still hadn't come home or called. Tuesday the box arrived in the mail."

"The postmark?"

"Columbus. How about on the box you received?"

"Toledo."

"Sounds like we might be looking for the same perp, though maybe not exclusive to one area."

Jaycen nodded. "Possibly."

"Your wife? Any idea what she was doing the night she disappeared?"

He shook his head. "We had an argument, and she left. No amount of research done on the case turned up her whereabouts. She just disappeared." He gritted his teeth and rubbed his aching jaw. "It was the last time I saw her. Any idea where this..."

"Anita Campbell," Miller supplied. "No, her boyfriend had no more information other than the fact she went clubbing. Do you know how many clubs there are in Columbus and the surrounding area?"

"I could only guess."

"We have some of our officers, and those of neighboring precincts, combing the bars. So far, nothing has turned up. No one saw Ms. Campbell that night. For the most part, we're concentrating on the darker or Goth-style clubs."

Jaycen's brow furrowed. "Why?"

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“Ms. Campbell’s boyfriend said she was into Gothic styles and bondage. Wore lots of dark clothes, fishnet, leather, dog collars, dyed her hair black, black polish. That kind of thing. How about your wife?”

“Meaning?”

“She dress in black clothes...wear dark makeup?”

Jaycen ran a hand through his hair, mussing it further. “I can’t frickin’ believe this.”

“Believe what?” Johnson walked into the office, extending his hand to Detective Miller. “Henderson told me you’re here to see me about a case.”

Detective Miller quickly caught Johnson up. “So you see I’m trying to establish any patterns. I thought if Detective McCain’s wife was possibly—”

“Please. It’s Jaycen.” He turned to Johnson. “Kyle was trying to ascertain if my wife was Goth.”

“Kelly Jo?” Johnson smiled and took a seat next to the Columbus detective. “I’d say no. Was she into something you weren’t aware of, Jay?”

Images of Kelly Jo came to mind. She had begun wearing darker makeup and more provocative clothes after Alexis passed away, but that had been nothing more than a fashion change or a way to gain his attention. “Why would Kelly be getting into kid games? She was thirty years old, for crying out loud.”

Miller nodded, rubbing his right temple with an index finger. “Could be nothing and not a tie-in at all. But if we could narrow down the types of clubs this guy frequents—”

“How do you know he frequents clubs? I’m not even aware that’s what my wife was up to when she disappeared.” Jaycen’s ire rose. “And I certainly don’t appreciate the implication that my wife had been out partying.”

“True,” Miller agreed. “And I apologize.”

“Can you even say for sure that this Campbell disappeared from a night club? Hell, for all we know, she could’ve been walking down the street when she vanished.”

“What we have is the boyfriend’s testimony stating Ms. Campbell told him she was going clubbing.”

“Did he say where she normally went?”

“Yes, and no one saw her there that night.”

Jaycen tapped the desk with his forefinger. “Then you have no proof she disappeared from a club. What about a vehicle?”

“Apparently, she left on foot. We checked the area taxis. None of them had a call from her that night or in the immediate area where she lived. We questioned several neighbors and a few saw her walking, but no one saw her getting into a car. Perez said she was prone to hitchhiking.”

“Then someone had to have picked her up. Columbus is a busy city...someone had to have witnessed it.”

“So far, no one has come forth.” He shrugged. “She didn’t just disappear into thin air, but we haven’t found anyone who saw her get into a vehicle. What about your wife?”

“Her car was found at the Spring Meadows Shopping Center, near Toledo. The only thing we can assume is either she was forcibly taken or she met someone and rode with them from that point.”

“Prints?”

“None, other than hers and mine.”

“Were you ever a suspect?”

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Jaycen smiled, knowing full well the first person a detective looked at in a homicide investigation was the spouse. “I suppose I sent myself her hand?”

Miller’s brow rose. “Could have.”

“Well, I didn’t.” He grumbled. “Besides, I had an alibi for the night. I was pretty livid when she walked out. I called Al and we went out for a few beers. I was piss drunk by the time Al dropped me off at home.”

Kyle looked at Al, who confirmed with a brief nod. “So where does that leave your investigation? Any suspects?”

Al cleared his throat. “We don’t have a whole lot to go on. Kelly Jo disappeared and we have no evidence of foul play, except for the box sent to Jay’s home containing her hand and note. The box, letter, and bag bore no latent; we found no foreign fibers, no DNA other than that of the victim. Blood typing matched the victim, but we’re still waiting on the DNA results. We have no body, no crime scene. What about you, Kyle?”

He shifted in his seat. “Apparently, no more than you. That’s why I’m here. I was hoping you could help shed light on my case.”

“You mentioned the bags this guy is using. You think we can get anywhere with that?” Johnson asked.

Kyle chuckled. “Not likely. As I said, you can get a roll of that stuff just about anywhere. FoodSaver is a popular brand, but nothing distinctive. We tried getting a usable print off the bag with ninhydrin, but we didn’t get anything there either. The box, tape, notepaper—all latent free. The note is off a standard HP inkjet printer, again sold at lots of Wal-Marts. Either this guy is one of us or he’s watching way too much *CSI*. Our best bet is stopping this before it happens again.”

What a ridiculous notion, Jaycen thought. As if they hadn’t been trying to catch this son of a bitch since Kelly Jo disappeared. “And how do we do that if we have no idea who this guy is or where he’s operating from?”

The Columbus detective shrugged. “We have more man-power and a better evidence team than you guys have access to here. I’ll make sure we share all the evidence we get on this case. I do hope you’ll do the same.”

“Of course,” Johnson agreed. “We’d definitely welcome any light you could shed on our case. And if we do find something, we’ll contact you.”

Kyle glanced at the clock. “I should be heading back. You guys want to catch some lunch before I hit the road? Some place quick. I’d like to hit Columbus before rush hour.”

Jaycen’s stomach growled at the mention of food. He glanced at the round white and black clock on the wall. *Twelve-fifteen*. He hadn’t eaten anything since his McDonald’s on the way into work. “Sounds good to me. You can follow Al and I, then we can get you back on the highway heading south.”

Just his luck. The only restaurant in town that didn’t have a waiting line for lunch had to be Sara’s. Jaycen leaned back and scanned the room, hoping like hell she had the day off. After the way he had treated her, he wouldn’t be surprised if she dumped his entree in his lap.

The hostess seated them toward the back and rattled off the day’s specials. Jaycen paid her little attention as he gave the menu a cursory glance.

“Jay?” Al cleared his throat. “What do you think?”

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Jaycen glanced up from his menu. "I'm sorry."

"I was saying there isn't much to go on where these cases are concerned." Fortunately, Al didn't comment on his inattention. "Unless we can find concrete evidence, this guy is going to strike again. I fed the information on the case through VICAP a few months ago and nothing turned up. I suspect these two cases are unique to each other. You think he started with Kelly Jo?"

"As far as the killing...possibly," Jaycen said. "His MO is pretty distinctive. But I'd bet he didn't start with Kelly's murder, due to the nature of the crime. Chances are he's been brought up on sexual charges before. We should check the sexual predators and offenders in the Toledo and Columbus areas since nothing turned up in Henry County. See if anyone was recently paroled. Someone who might have odd fetishes."

Miller's brow crinkled. "Fetishes?"

"He's cutting off body parts of his victims and sending them to their loved ones. That doesn't tell you he's getting off on what he's doing?" Damn, he didn't even want to think of what this sick piece of shit did to Kelly Jo. Or the fact he hadn't been there for her. He had relived the scenario in his head too many times to count. "He's a sadist and that didn't start over night. He gets off on inflicting pain."

"Sounds like someone I know." Sara drew their attention, the gentle curl of her lips raising her cheeks. "What can I get for you, guys? The sweet and sour shrimp is especially good today."

Jaycen stifled a groan. Running a hand through his hair, he sat back. "Hello, Sara."

"Jaycen." She barely acknowledged him as she turned to Al and Kyle, her smile widening. He supposed he deserved that. "What will it be?"

Moments later, orders taken, Sara sauntered away from the table. Damn if she didn't have a way of making him feel like a heel. Didn't she get it? His life ended with Kelly Jo's, and Sara's self-appointment as savior wasn't going to work.

Al whistled his approval.

Jaycen grumbled. "Knock it off, Al. She's too damn young for you."

"Mighty touchy today, Jay, don't you think?" Al leaned back in his chair studying Jaycen. The fluorescent lights made his premature gray hair whiter in appearance. "I may be getting old, but I'm not dead."

"At forty-five, you're far from old." Jaycen grinned. "You just look it."

"And I supposed she'd be more suited to your age?"

The smile shed his face. "She's not my type."

Kyle laughed. "With a face and a body like that...she's every man's type. You blind, Jaycen?"

"Come on Al, she's Kelly Jo's cousin."

Al sat forward, crossing his arms on the Formica. "I'm sorry, Jay. That was insensitive."

"I'm sorry, too. I'm a bit off center with Kelly's case being brought up again. Not that it isn't ever far from my mind. I should've known better than to come here. Sara's just another reminder."

"We'll do everything we can to catch this guy. You know that, Jay."

"We already have been, Al. And unfortunately, it isn't good enough. The man's a phantom. He's leaving us no clues. And unless we find something, Kyle has just shone us that Kelly Jo wasn't his last and I don't think Anita will be either. We need to find some workable clues and fast."

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“I hate to bring it up again” —Kyle cleared his throat— “but maybe we should look at his choice of victims thus far. See if we can find any similarities between your wife and Anita Campbell. If we can figure out why them, maybe we can get some clue who his next victim might be.”

Al nodded. “Makes sense. If you can get a feel on this Campbell woman, we’ll compare Kelly Jo’s characteristics. And I think we need to examine Kelly Jo more closely.” He looked at Jaycen; concern edged his gray gaze. “Not before Alexis’ death, Jay...but after. You have to admit, Kelly changed. You and I both know it.”

Sara returned to the table and set each of their plates in front of them. Pasting a false smile on her face, she asked, “Will there be anything else?”

Damn if his presence wasn’t upsetting her scale as well. He could read it in her expression. Maybe he ought to take her offer of help. After all, what other options did he have?

“Can we talk, Sara?” Jaycen asked.

“Now? I believe I’m working.” She spun on her heel to leave. He supposed he deserved that after he’d spurned her desire to help.

Jaycen stood and caught her elbow. Surely they were putting on quite the display. But he needed this...for the case. If anyone knew who Kelly Jo was before her death, it would be Sara.

She shook off his grip. “Leave me alone, Jaycen. You made it quite clear the other night you didn’t want my help. So if you’ll excuse me—”

“It’s about Kelly Jo. I need to ask you some questions. What time do you get off work?”

Her lips turned down. “Three-thirty.”

“Great, I’ll pick you up.”

“What was that all about?” Al asked as Jaycen returned to his seat and Sara disappeared into the kitchen.

“You said we need to find out who Kelly Jo had become before she died.” He shrugged. “No one knew her better than Sara. Maybe she can shed some light on what Kelly Jo had been up to.”

“Are you sure that’s all that little exchange was about?”

“And just what the hell is that supposed to mean, Al? She’s my wife’s cousin. That’s it,” Jaycen grumbled, shoving a bite of pork into his mouth. The last thing he needed was his partner questioning his motives. Although Sara was an extremely attractive woman, she was off-limits.

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Chapter 3

JAYCEN SAT IN his black Dodge Ram, tapping his fingers to the beat of an unknown tune on 98.9 The Bear. He listened to the radio little, opting for the scanner most days, but he needed the distraction as he waited for Sara. Truth be told, his nerves stood on end. He wasn't in much of a hurry to be in Sara's company again. She'd likely serve him his balls on a platter, and he couldn't say he blamed her. He had done nothing but push her away since Kelly Jo's murder; had not even considered how much the loss affected her. He had been a selfish son of a bitch. Jaycen watched the back door of the restaurant. Maybe the best way to start the conversation would be with an apology.

Knowing Sara, mere words wouldn't work. He'd better learn to grovel.

The metal door opened, and Sara stepped though. She glanced across the parking lot and spotted his truck. Her jaw tightened and her lips thinned. After approaching the passenger side, she opened the door and stepped up into the cab. "Someplace you wanted to go, or did you want to talk here?"

Jaycen turned the key in the ignition and the truck roared to life. He pulled the gearshift into drive and circled the parking lot, answering her question.

"Mind telling me where we are going?"

"The Tap. I figured we could both use a beer."

Her harrumph spoke of her agitation. A very uncomfortable silence followed. He leaned over and turned up The Bear to break the quiet.

Five minutes later, sitting across from each other with two longnecks between them, Jaycen said, "Look, I'm sorry. I suppose I owe you that."

She nodded, tipped back her beer, and took a sip. Damn, she wasn't going to make this easy.

"Look, Sara, this has been a rough time for me."

Her gaze zeroed in. Anger smoldered within the depths. Wrong thing to say, but too damn late to take it back. "It's always about you, Jaycen."

"And what the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"You think this has been easy on me?"

Jaycen ran both hands through his hair and sat back. "No, I don't suppose."

"You've been doing such a great job at wallowing in self-pity you've been too blind to see that anyone other than yourself has been hurting. I could've used your support as well. Instead, every time I reached out, you pushed me away. Hell, you pushed away everyone, Jaycen. And frankly, I'm tired of it. I thought I could hold out because of my loyalty to Kelly Jo—maybe even

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understand—but I can't do it any longer. You want to live in self-hate, fine by me. But you aren't dragging me down with you."

"For crying out loud, Sara, I said I was sorry."

"And you think that fixes everything?" She snapped her fingers. "Just like that."

"Look, I didn't come here to argue."

"Why am I here, then? You said something about having questions concerning Kelly Jo. What could I possibly know that you don't?"

Jaycen sighed and leaned forward, crossing his arms on the table. "Ever since Alexis died, Kelly changed. We both know that."

Sara shrugged. "You both did. Don't pretend you're even close to the person you once were. Kelly Jo no longer knew how to reach you."

"Did she tell you that? Confide in you?"

"She sure wasn't getting support from you." Sara took another swig from her longneck, then slammed it back to the table. "You wouldn't talk to her. Who was she supposed to turn to?"

"I'm glad she had you."

Tears glistened in her eyes. "Yeah, well it wasn't easy for any of us...not with what she was thinking of doing."

Jaycen drew his brows together. "What do you mean?"

"She wanted to leave you, Jay. She had already gone to a lawyer to draw up papers. I assume you never got served because of her disappearance."

The air whooshed from his chest, as if he had been kicked soundly in the sternum. Kelly Jo planned to split? Walk away from their marriage? Divorce?

"I told her she needed to work things out, give you another chance. But she wasn't listening."

Jaycen picked up his bottle and downed the liquid. Deaden the pain, blessed numbness; ease the weight centering in his chest. His ears buzzed, his heart rate accelerated and he was having a devil of a time drawing breath. He needed to get these panic attacks under control before the PD clued in. He didn't need any psych evaluations or anyone questioning his performance. But dear God, his wife planned to divorce him. He thought of their last fight, just before she had walked out. *You're such an ass, Jaycen. You never listen to me.* And he hadn't; he stopped long ago. *You wouldn't care if I left and never come back.* But he would have, though he'd never said as much. Jaycen ran a callused hand down his face. He'd never get the chance to tell her now.

He raised his bottle to the bartender, who quickly replaced the empty. Jaycen stared at the brown glass before tipping it back and taking another healthy swallow. Maybe he'd be drunk by nightfall. Inebriated or not, though, once his head hit the pillow, he'd be wide-awake and staring at the cold, empty side of his bed.

"I'm sorry, Jay. I shouldn't have told you."

Hell, he didn't even know what to say. Sara sat there staring at him like he should have some sort of reply. All he wanted was to be left alone.

"Say something."

"What do you want me to say, Sara? You just told me the woman I loved...spent fifteen years of my life with...wanted to leave me. Had already drawn up the damn papers."

"You weren't exactly the easiest person to live with at the time, Jay. You'd changed."

"Kelly Jo changed, too, but I didn't stop loving her."

"No, but you stopped talking to her."

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He couldn't argue with that. Many times he remembered shutting out Kelly Jo. How many times had he driven her from the house due to his silence? And never once had he questioned where she went. Sara hit the nail on the head. He had been so busy with his own misery that he'd failed to see the signs of a deteriorating marriage.

"So, what did you drag me here for? The other day at your house, you told me you didn't want my help."

"I was being an ass."

She rolled her eyes, earning him the understatement of the year award.

"Look, Sara, I already apologized twice. What more do you want?"

"For you to quit being such a jerk."

Jaycen chuckled. "I don't much like myself. How can I expect anyone else to?"

"What do you want to know about Kelly Jo that you don't already know?"

Thankfully, she let the subject of his attitude drop. Finding Kelly Jo's murderer was the priority, not his deep-seated issues and self-loathing. "What did she do with herself on the weekends?"

"She never told you?"

His face heated. Damn, he really had been uncaring. "I never asked."

"She went clubbing."

His brow furrowed. "Was she seeing someone?"

Sara shrugged again. "I don't know."

"Would she have told you if she was?"

"Maybe. She told me she was planning on leaving you. So why leave out the part she found someone else?"

"I don't know." He rubbed his jaw. "Which club did she frequent? Napoleon has none, so she'd have to leave town. Where'd she go?"

"Toledo. She went on Saturdays because it was Goth night at some bar."

"Goth?" Warning bells went off in his head, remembering his early conversation with Detective Miller. "What the hell would she be going to a Goth club for?"

"She liked the music."

Jaycen thought of the CDs lining the shelves at home: Stabbing Westward, gODHEAD, In Extremo, Dope. Groups he had never heard of, let alone listened to.

"You ever go with her?"

Sara shook her head. "It wasn't my scene."

"You know which club it was?"

"No. She never said and I wasn't interested."

"Kelly Jo disappeared on a Saturday, which means she was more than likely headed to this club. Why didn't you tell me about this before?"

"I didn't think it was relevant. You said her car was found in the Spring Meadows Shopping Center parking lot. Besides, I figured you knew what she was doing with her weekends."

"Apparently, I didn't know my wife at all."

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Sara shoved the clothes on the rack to one side in Alexis' room and leafed through the articles. Jaycen hadn't been in his daughter's room once since she had succumbed to leukemia. He hadn't found anything in his search of the rest of the house, so he wasn't sure they'd find anything now. Sara had mentioned it might be possible, if Kelly Jo had wanted to hide something from him, what better place than the one room everyone knew to be off limits to Jaycen than

Pulling a black pleather floor-length skirt and halter from the back of the child's wardrobe, Sara looked at him. One brow shot upward. "You ever see this before? Looks to me like something she might have worn on Goth night. Pretty sexy."

Jaycen rubbed his forehead. "That I think I'd have remembered. She never wore anything like that around me."

He thought of the large bag she carried for a purse. It would have been easy enough for her to roll the outfit and shove it inside before leaving. What kind of secret life had Kelly Jo been living?

Sara tossed the outfit to the single bed and went back to the closet. His gaze fell on the shiny black, rubberized material. He tried to imagine Kelly going anywhere dressed in it. He had to admit the image that came to mind was quite erotic. So why had she kept it from him?

"How about this?" Sara pulled a black Lycra, razor-slit shirt from the hanger and tossed it at him. "Wouldn't leave much to the imagination."

The thought of his wife wearing something so provocative for someone else's pleasure sickened him. He sat heavily on the bed and shook his head.

Sara sat beside him. "I'm sorry, Jay. I never considered how hard this might be on you."

He picked up the Lycra shirt and held the silky fabric to his nose. He couldn't smell her essence on it to prove she had even worn the article. And he certainly couldn't conjure up an image of her in it. What the hell had been going through her mind when she purchased it? His Kelly wore turtleneck sweaters and low rider Levi's. The most provocative thing she had ever worn around him was a belly shirt.

A smile tugged his mouth as he remembered the day he took her to the tattoo parlor to get her belly pierced. Kelly Jo hadn't wanted it at first, but Jaycen found it sexy. He convinced her that, even after having Alexis, she had a belly sexy enough to rival most teens. Lying in bed at night, he'd absently play with the ring as they fell asleep. He shook off the memory and tossed the black shirt atop the pleather skirt. And she'd thought the belly ring daring? Closets had doors on them for a reason, and sometimes it seemed better to leave them closed.

"You going to be all right?"

Jaycen looked at Sara. Damn if she didn't resemble her cousin. They had the same warm, auburn-brown silky hair. He didn't need to touch it to know the texture. He had run his fingers through it nightly. They both had fathomless deep-brown eyes. Sara's complexion was fair, where Kelly Jo had resembled her father's Sicilian heritage. But other than the contrast of skin tones, they could have been sisters, taking most features from their mothers' side of the family. Sara stood taller than Kelly, her body more femininely rounded. Her lips were fuller as well, lips that begged to be—

He ran a hand over his whiskered jaw. The last thing he needed was to start thinking of Sara as anything other than Kelly Jo's cousin. "I'll be fine."

"You look a little pale. Can I get you a drink?"

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“I said I’m fine,” he grumbled, gruffer than he intended. After all, it wasn’t Sara’s fault what his late wife’s activities had been or the fact she’d kept it from her husband. “Look, I don’t think this was such good idea.”

Sara slid off the bed and knelt before him; her hands rested on his knees. She looked up at him. “You came to me, Jaycen, because you wanted to know what your wife had been up to. I didn’t come to you. I don’t know what’s going on with the case, but I have a feeling you were talking about it this afternoon when you came to the restaurant. It’s pretty obvious that whatever was discussed at lunch brought you to this point. Otherwise, you wouldn’t have sought me out. You made it clear you didn’t want my help...until today. So, do you want to tell me what this is really about? Then maybe I can help you.”

“I shouldn’t discuss this with you, Sara. It’s police business.”

“You going to tell me something that might nail this guy?”

“No.”

“Then I highly doubt anything you’re afraid to tell me will be that relevant to the case. Besides, who am I going to tell?”

“The guy my partner and I were having lunch with is from the Columbus PD. He’s working on a case over there that’s very similar to Kelly Jo’s. It looks like this piece of shit killed again.”

“A serial killer?” Sara sat back on her haunches, staring at him. Her complexion blanched. “He’s not going to stop, is he?”

Jaycen hung his head. “It doesn’t look that way.”

Blubs for other works by Patricia A. Rasey. Check them out at Amazon.com, BN.com and some works also available at www.AmberQuill.com.

The Hour Before Dawn

Tevan Zaber wants to be a detective. But how far is he willing to go to get it? Thrust into the dark underworld of real vampires, reality begins to blur into the society of role-playing. Can *Krystal Braxton*, who wrestles with her own demons, save Tevan from becoming one of them? Together they must infiltrate the occult covens to save the city from a blood-thirsty killer resurrected from a year’s old case as they enlist the help of Fairview Park’s lieutenant, Cole Kincaid.

The Hour Before Dawn picks up where *Deadly Obsession* leaves off.

Awards: RIO Award of Excellence 2003 2nd place (Paranormal Romance), The Road to Romance Reviewer's Choice Award, 2001 EPPIE Finalist, Romantic Times Magazine, Best Electronic Book of 2001 Nominee

Deadly Obsession

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A killer is loose who has a taste for human blood. *Cole Kincaid* presses harder into the investigation, but the body count climbs. He has personal reasons for detesting the press, so sparks fly when *Laurie Michaels* hounds him for a story. Fate forces them to work as one, neither one anticipating the attraction that ensues. But just as Cole thinks he is close to finding all the answers, both personal and professional, Laurie disappears.

Awards: The Road to Romance Reviewer's Choice Award, 2000 EPPIE Finalist, 1999 Romance Communications Reviewers Choice Awards Nominee

Eyes Of Betrayal

The long-awaited sequel to *Kiss Of Deceit*

Two long years have passed since Marcus "Snake" Gallego left behind Henry County and Detective LeAnne McVeigh, leaving her to mourn the fact he had ridden into the sunset without her. But when he finally returns to her Ohio town, he isn't alone. Snake has brought along a friend, *Egan Tate*, who looks the epitome of evil. And if things couldn't possibly get worse, her best friend, the good doctor *Whitney Montgomery*, has her eyes set on Tate.

When a vicious murder suddenly stirs the relatively peaceful community to turmoil, a murder reminiscent of the killings that plagued the county several years earlier, LeAnne begins to wonder about this mystery man Snake has befriended. Has a copycat killer truly emerged, or does Henry County have a ghost on its hands?

Awards: RIO Award of Excellence 2003 1st place (Romantic Suspense), CAPAs 2003 Winner, 2004 EPPIE Finalist, Word Museum: Reviewer's Choice Masterpiece (July '03), Word Weaving Award of Excellence, AQP Best Seller, 2004 Sizzler Awards Finalist

Kiss of Deceit

Marcus "Snake" Gallego lives in the fast lane. Play hard, ride fast, die young. But nothing seems to touch him, not until his faithless wife turns up dead, and a pretty little detective slams his head against a bar, cuffing his hands behind his back.

LeAnne McVeigh has a murderer to catch and "Snake" is a prime suspect according to her fiancé, the County prosecutor. She fights her growing attraction to the biker, but the pull is too strong to ignore and more than that, he proves to be her friend in adversity.

Awards: Dorothy Parker Award of Excellence 2000 Finalist (Mystery/Suspense), Word Weaving Award of Excellence, AQP Best Seller, RIO Award of Excellence 2003 Finalist (Missed Gem)

Facade

Deputy Detective KC Tanner, guards his private life much the same as his Doberman, Zappa, guards his home. He's content to live a life of solitude, hiding behind the wall he's carefully constructed around himself. Trouble is *Sharalee MacArthur*, stuck in a fantasy world of her own

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making, still envisions KC as the man she will one day marry. That is until reality shatters his isolation and dashes her hopes, and a madman running loose in their homey little community has KC and Shar running for their lives.

Awards: Dorothy Parker Award of Excellence 2000 (HM), Word Weaving Award of Excellence

Fear the Dark

Pat's novella originally appeared in the anthology...

"Twilight Obsessions"

A vicious serial killer is on the loose--and his weapon of choice slithers, rattles...and bites! Also included in the paperback edition: **In the Mind of Darkness!**

"Read Pat Rasey's latest thriller at your own risk and way before dark. It's deadly!"--Ann Bachman, Lifetime Best-selling Author of Together Again

Awards (Anthology): Nominated for 2000 PEARL

Sanitarium

Pat's novella originally appeared in the anthology...

"Once in a Blue Moon"

Jake, a vampire opposing his very nature, lives a life of self-imposed isolation, waiting for the legend of the *Blue Moon* to come true. Should he not feed from human blood for the period between the new moons and find true love...he'll be restored to his mortal self. But with only a fortnight left, has he found true love in Annie?

Awards (Anthology): The Road to Romance Reviewer's Choice Award