

"Patricia Rice is a reader's delight."
—TERESA MEDEIROS



PATRICIA RICE



WAYWARD ANGEL





photo credit: © Nancy Brown

PATRICIA RICE was born in Newburgh, New York. She attended the University of Kentucky and now lives in Mayfield, Kentucky, in a rambling Tudor house, with her husband and her two children, Corinna and Derek. Ms. Rice has a degree in accounting, and her hobbies include history, travel, and antique collecting.

Author's Note

Since this is a romance, I make no apology for not depicting the actual horrors of child abuse. I do apologize, however, if anyone reads this and believes that abused children can overcome their devastating emotional scars simply through their own motivation. Miracles can happen, but generally it requires the intervention of a third party.

Instead of offering actual scenes of abuse, I have attempted to portray the results of abuse through my characters. Children who suffer rejection from their families are frequently hostile and aggressive, emotionally unstable, lack self-esteem, and have a negative view of the world. Neglect often results in antisocial behavior, indulgence in drugs or alcohol, and inappropriate behavior such as fighting and recklessness. Often, a child who has never been praised for good behavior but is constantly punished for perceived faults will think the attention he receives for misbehaving is reason to continue the bad behavior.

With that kind of background, it is no wonder that abused children often grow into adults who cannot deal with life in any normal fashion. Girls, in particular, seek approval. As women, they continue seeking the approval of the kind of men who most resemble the parent who rejected them, thus inviting further abuse. Boys, being more aggressive, tend to take the opposite route. As men, their behavior is hostile, and they seek the kind of women who lack the self-esteem to fight back, women often like their mothers.

My characters may overcome these handicaps through their own strength of character and with the help of outside forces, but in reality, abused children, abused spouses, and their abusers need the kind of counseling the 1860s couldn't provide.

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WAYWARD ANGEL



Patricia Rice



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THE FIRST TIME

Pace bent his head to apply his mouth to hers with a force that reflected his hunger.

She was soft and small. Pace felt the slight exhalation of Dora's breath against his lips when he claimed hers, but something kept driving him on. He expected resistance but instead received a tentative, questioning pressure of her lips in return. He wanted more.

Suddenly she shuddered and gave a soft cry, but her fingers curled more securely into his shirt. She was responding. She was answering his plea, molding her lips to his, allowing his invasion, moving her body closer into the curve of his. He couldn't believe it. Wouldn't believe it. He wanted all of her. . . .

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To the survivors:

May love and the power of God heal all wounds.

I would like to dedicate this book to my mother,
who survived,
and to the Henwoods, whose acceptance gave her the
family she needed.

Prologue

Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John,
The Bed be blest that I lie on.
Four angels to my bed,
Four angels round my head,
One to watch, and one to pray,
And two to bear my soul away.

—THOMAS ADY, *A Candle in the Dark* (1656)

November 1851

Alexandra Theodora Beaumont grasped the rim of the polished mahogany library ladder and attempted to unhook it from the ledge of Bible study volumes. Although she had just turned eight, her hands were too small and helpless for the Herculean task. With a moue of disgust, she glanced around the lamp-lit library for an alternative.

Her gaze alighting on the rich maroon leather of a high-backed wing chair near the shelves she wished to reach, she set her determined little chin and advanced upon her goal like a soldier marching off to war. The lamp's flickering flame cast shadows over the deep wine of her short velvet gown but shimmered on the gold-threaded embroidery of the bodice. The gold threads could not match the angelic halo of white-gold curls creating a nimbus around her elfin features. Despite the rich threads and halo, there was very little angelic about Lady Alexandra at the moment. She knew she approached forbidden territory, and she moved with extreme caution, testing the chair for the squeak of its springs before climbing up on it.

Even the extra couple of feet gained by standing on the leather seat did not give her the height necessary to reach the shelf just tantalizingly out of her reach. Gareth had told her that the shelf contained the angel books.

He had even pulled down a volume and showed her the charming watercolors of golden angels in a blue sky. And then he had laughed and shoved the book back in its place—out of her reach. She hated her half brother with every fiber of her being, but she wouldn't let him defeat her. She might be ten years younger and small for her age, but she could do anything he could.

With cautious patience, she eased the chair around so the arm aligned with the bookcase. Then she scrambled back into the seat again and stepped up on the arm. The heavy old chair easily counterbalanced her slight weight. Standing on tiptoes, she curled her fingers around the first volume on the shelf.

The library door flew open with a thud that bounced off the paneled walls, echoing in the high-ceilinged room. The single lamp flame flickered, sending dancing shadows of her precariously perched figure across the shelves. Her fingers defiantly grasped the binding when the expected bellow ripped through the quiet library.

"Father, she's at it again, just as I said!"

There wasn't any use in running. She could drop the book, jump down, and look innocent, but it wouldn't matter. She really didn't even know why Gareth went to all the trouble of trapping her. He could tell their father anything and be believed. Grasping the book firmly, Alexandra pulled it off the shelf and hopped down into the chair seat. She stood firmly on the floor by the time her father had followed the sound of Gareth's voice and entered the room.

She clasped the volume to her chest, prepared to argue her position when she heard the sound of her mother's voice in the hall, and she cringed inwardly. Her mother shouldn't be here. She was supposed to visit the vicar. That meant the earl hadn't let her go after all. That meant . . .

She wouldn't think about what it meant. She wouldn't think about the whimpers and cries of pain coming from her parents' chambers on the nights her father decided her mother needed a lesson. It made her stomach hurt just thinking about it. And now he had Alexandra's disobedience to make him even more fierce with his justice.

She screwed up her inner courage, closed her eyes,