



RAPID READS

VICKI DELANY



A  
WINTER  
KILL

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RAVEN BOOKS

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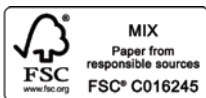
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**Summary:** When rookie police constable Nicole Patterson discovers a body on the edge of town, she's drawn into a murder investigation that's well beyond her experience and expertise. (RL 2.8)



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*For my mother, a teacher*

## CHAPTER ONE

Sometimes you can just tell.  
When they're dead.

They don't have to even look dead.  
Not really. More like they're sleeping.

There's something different about  
a dead body.

You can always tell.

I haven't seen many dead bodies.  
Not yet. I've only been a cop for six months.

I took a deep breath and swung the beam  
of my flashlight around the field. I touched  
the radio at my shoulder with one hand  
and the Sig Sauer at my hip with the other.

Trying to steady my nerves. The sky above was pitch black, and it was very cold.

A plastic bag that had blown up against the rusty wire fence moved. My heart jumped into my throat. It was only a cat. Yellow eyes glared at me. It hissed once and darted off. Its tail swayed in the still air and then it was gone.

All was quiet. A single car drove down the road. It did not stop. When I thought I could breathe properly again, I spoke into the radio. "Dispatch. Three-oh. One-oh-two."

"Go ahead, one-oh-two."

"I'm on Kingsley Road, not far from County Road Twenty-two. Near the airfield. VSA. I need an ambulance and backup."

VSA, the dispatcher knew, means vital signs absent. A dead body in other words.

This road was well out of town. The moon and the distant lights of Picton

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were hidden by thick clouds. The long rows of boarded-up buildings on the abandoned World War II airfield were dark. Amber and white security lights did little to break the night. The flashing red and blue of my patrol car reflected off the snow.

I shifted my feet. Snow crunched beneath my boots. I dropped to a squat beside the body. It was a woman. Her long pink scarf was wrapped tightly around her neck. Too tight to let air pass. I ran the beam of my flashlight across her face. Her eyes bulged. Her mouth hung open and a swollen pink tongue stuck out. A silver ball was pierced through the middle. She had piercings running up her right ear and in one eyebrow. I pulled off my gloves and held my fingers to the side of her neck. Cold and still.

She was dressed in jeans and scruffy running shoes and a bright blue jacket. Threads escaped from an old tear in the

jacket sleeve. Her hands were bare even though the temperature was well below freezing. She must have been very cold. Before she died.

Her hands were the color of skim milk, white touched with blue. Her jeans were unzipped and pulled down past her hips. I could see the lacy trim of a pink thong. But the jeans were still on, the girl's legs together. Had this been an attempted rape? If so, it had not gone very far.

Had something, or someone, scared him away?

It wasn't me. This girl had been dead for more than a few minutes.

I looked into her face and saw something familiar. Her skin was clean of makeup and her blond hair shone in the beam of my flashlight.

She was local. I'd seen her around. I was pretty sure she went to Prince Edward District High School.



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At the welcome sound of sirens I let out a breath I hadn't known I was holding in. Coming my way. Police car first, then an ambulance. I wanted to lower the girl's lids over her bulging eyes, but knew not to disturb the scene. I pushed myself to my feet and lifted my flashlight. I shone the beam of light across the field to the road, letting them know where I was.

The snow was very deep. It was all churned up around here, but I couldn't see any boot tracks. The body was a couple of yards from the road. It looked as if a vehicle had pulled in. She'd been dragged out of a car and dumped. Then whoever had done it had brushed away his tracks and driven off.

The light shone on something half buried in the snow. A piece of blue glass. I reached out my hand to pick it up, before remembering where I was.

And who I was.

A probationary cop with the Ontario Provincial Police in Prince Edward County, Ontario.

My name is Nicole Patterson. I'm twenty-four years old. I've been with the OPP for six months. This was a peaceful, mostly rural community. Lots of farms. Wineries and art galleries. Bed-and-breakfasts and tourist rentals close to the long sandy beaches of Sandbanks Provincial Park. Nice big homes for retired baby boomers from Toronto. Pretty scenery, proud people. Not much in the way of crime.

Before that night I'd seen two dead bodies. An old man who died alone a week before his neighbor began to wonder what the smell was. And a sixteen-year-old boy with a brand-new driver's license who thought he was too cool to wear his seat belt. He skidded on a patch of black ice and went into a hydro pole straight on.

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That was not cool.

The siren came closer and the field flooded with light.

“What you got, Patterson?” a man’s deep voice asked.

Sergeant Paul Malan, the detachment’s lead detective, was walking toward me. He was tall and thin, a runner’s body. His hair was cut short and his silver mustache was neatly trimmed. Behind him came the smaller frame of Constable Larry Johnstone.

I swung my flashlight to the ground. The young woman stared up at us through empty eyes. She was partially hidden behind a clump of bushes. I wouldn’t have seen her except that her legs were sticking out. The headlights of my cruiser had caught the white running shoes.

The paramedics stood back, watching. They had their stretcher out, piled with equipment bags. Malan made no move to invite them to move in.

There was no hurry.

“Look at that,” I said, pointing to the blue glass.

Malan crouched down and studied the object. Johnstone looked over his shoulder. The sergeant pulled a pen out of his pocket and slowly scooped the blue stone out of the snow. It was a ring. A large blue piece of glass set in a silver band. It didn't look as if it cost very much.

Malan pulled a plastic bag out of his pocket and dropped the ring in.

“Know her?” he asked me.

“She goes to Prince Edward District High.”

“Name?”

I shrugged. “Don't know it.”

“Okay. Let's seal this area off. Johnstone, park your vehicle up the road a couple hundred yards. Patterson, watch the intersection. No one in or out other than police. Log everyone who comes by.”

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“Got it,” Larry Johnstone grunted. He was also a new officer. He’d been on the force for about two years. I took one last look at the young woman on the ground. Her blond hair was long and straight. It shone in the headlights from the ambulance. She had been pretty, I remembered.

She was pretty no more.