

BEFORE SHE DIES

A Slaughter Creek prequel



RITA HERRON

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BEFORE SHE DIES

A Short Story

by Rita Herron

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Prologue

Sometimes people had to die for a good cause.

Soldiers did it all the time. And he was a soldier now as he always had been. A soldier who never questioned his orders.

Take a life. He aimed his gun and fired.

Go into combat. Done.

Spearhead this project at Slaughter Creek Sanitarium.

Here he was.

The tall mountain ridges jutted out like knives over the valley, an image that made him smile. His choice of weapon was a M24 sniper rifle, but he was equally adept with his hands and knives.

He had used all three to kill before.

And he would do so again if needed.

Anything to protect the assignment now entrusted in his hands.

And to ensure that the small population of Slaughter Creek, Tennessee, remained oblivious to what was about to be unleashed upon them.

Set apart from the rest of the world by the thick forests, the winding roads and steep hills kept strangers away and created a private oasis for the patients inside the lunatic asylum.

Well, maybe not exactly an oasis for the nutcases and head jobs but privacy as they received therapy and counseling and learned to manage drug treatments to enable them to fit into society and behave like a sane person should.

He wove down the narrow road through a tunnel of trees, the dark skies and unseen dangers lending an eerie feeling as if he might be walking into the devil's lair. Civilization had not yet cornered this part of the world where mountain lions and bears still roamed freely. Where hikers and campers ventured only in designated areas marked for camping.

Where anyone could hide and go unnoticed.

The winter wind blew leaves and twigs across the road, the trees swaying, dark gray clouds indicating a snowstorm on the way. The first flakes hit the ground as he eased through security, a dozen more crystals topping the barbed wire fencing that made the hospital feel

like a prison instead of a safe place to recover from whatever mental affliction seized the poor lost souls inside.

He rolled up the drive, parked in front of the building, then stared at the monstrosity. The sharp turrets and muddy gray stone structure looked like a haunted castle from some gothic horror show.

A smile creased his face.

Yes, Slaughter Creek was the perfect place for what they had planned.

And the best part -- no one would ever know what was going on.

Chapter One

Slaughter Creek – where the great battle between the Cherokees and the Creeks was fought.

Where people now live in peace and harmony.

Peace and harmony. That was exactly what she needed, Norma Nettleton thought as she drove past the town's welcome sign.

This small community tucked in the Tennessee mountains was going to be the perfect place to raise a child. She pressed a hand over her bulging belly as a sharp pain squeezed her abdomen.

Well, technically *two* children, since she was having twins. Two baby girls to love and adore, and to bind her and Ben together as a family.

Not that the unborn babies had done that so far. Far from it.

Instead of bringing them closer, the stress of the unexpected pregnancy coupled with Ben's job loss and worry over money had splintered their relationship.

But being here near her family was bound to ease the transition from single couple to parenthood.

Her mother and father had moved to Slaughter Creek three years ago and claimed it had changed their lives. The people in the town had folded them into their close-knit community with love and kindness, and the clean air and good living, far away from the crime and drugs in the city, had restored their faith in people.

According to her mama, everyone in Slaughter Creek knew everyone else. If you were sick or had a problem, there was always someone there to hold your hand.

Unlike the cities she and Ben had lived in. Of course, they hadn't stayed in one place long enough to get to know anyone. Because Ben had jumped from job to job.

A sign of the times, he'd said. The building business was down. Their bank funds were dwindling.

And complications with her pregnancy had kept her from working.

She gripped the steering wheel tighter, twisting her head to avoid looking at how steep the drop-off was as she made the curve, her Honda chugging as she climbed the mountain. The car needed repairs,

and with these hills and weather, would never last the winter. Another problem to face.

Snowflakes drifted down from the desolate skies, dotting the trees and ridges, making the idyllic scenery look like a Christmas postcard.

She passed pastures and farmland, signs for cabin rentals and camping spots then crossed into the tiny town. A flower shop, barbeque joint, diner, library, city hall and Five-and-Dime store were situated around the town square with a small grassy area complete with park benches and a playground for children in the center. She imagined herself pushing the babies in the stroller while she met with other young mothers to chat. She and her parents would meet there for coffee and watch the kids play as they got older.

Another sharp pain tightened her stomach, and she tried to massage it away. It had to be one of those Braxton Hicks contractions. It was too early to have the babies.

Eight weeks too early.

She had too much to do to go into labor. Unload the clothes and household items she'd been able to fit in to her car. Set up the house she'd rented.

Put the baby clothes the local church had collected for her in the nursery.

Make it look like a home before Ben showed up tomorrow with the pitiful little bit of furniture they'd accumulated in the last eight months.

But the pain in her stomach intensified instead of passing. She gritted her teeth and breathed through it, noting a sign for a free clinic on the corner. Her daddy said the doctors in town were so kind-hearted they let people pay when they could. Other times they just donated their time and gave free services to the needy.

A blessing for her and Ben and the twins.

Another pain ripped through her, and she moaned. Her legs were cramping, her back throbbing. As soon as she reached the house, she had to lie down. If she propped her feet up and rested, surely the contractions would stop.

And Ben would be here tomorrow.

Once he saw the town and realized they had support from her

parents, that when she recovered from the birth and the babies got bigger, she could get a job, he'd feel better. Her mama had already agreed to babysit the girls.

She'd worked as a dental assistant in Harrogate, and in a doctor's office back in Nashville, so hopefully she'd find a job here once the babies were a little bigger. Her daddy said they were building a new development on the other side of the mountain, and he'd talked to the foreman. He'd agreed to hire Ben.

Ben wouldn't be running the project, but it would provide a paycheck, and he liked construction.

She passed the clinic, then turned onto the road leading out of town toward her new home, anxious to get there. Tall trees towered above her, shading the road and casting an almost eerie feel to the isolated area. She'd seen cars in town, but no other cars were on the mountain road tonight. The small town probably turned in early.

She slowed as she rounded the curve and maneuvered the switchback.

Another contraction gripped her, this one so hard and painful that she gasped and ran off the road onto the shoulder.

She braked, panicking as she hugged the curve, the drop off below making her lungs claw for air as she envisioned flying into the ravine. Tires screeched as she struggled to maintain control, surviving that curve only to run up on another. She downshifted, the pain in her belly intensifying as she searched for a place to turn around.

She wasn't going to make it to the house.

She had to go back to town. Call her mama to come and get her. Maybe stop at that clinic and let the doctors examine her.

But a truck raced toward her, taking the curve too fast and crossing the line. She jerked the car to the right to avoid him. The tires churned over gravel, and she lurched forward, skidded and slammed into the guardrail.

A lamp from the back seat pitched forward, a bag of diapers the church in Nashville had given her flying over the seat, pelting her.

Then she felt a warm gush and looked down. Good Lord, her water had broken.

Panic seized her.

She needed a phone. Needed to call Ben and her parents.

But she was miles from the house. The town was closer.

The free clinic.

If she could make it back there, they would take care of her and carry her to the hospital.

Breathing through the pain again, she tried to start the car, but the engine sputtered and died. Frustrated, she grabbed her purse and threw it over her shoulder, shoved open the car door and dragged herself out of the car. Her lower back ached so bad her knees nearly buckled.

With determination, she gripped her stomach with her hand and began to walk. Her little girls needed her to be strong.

She wouldn't let them down.



All Ben Nettleton wanted was to take care of his family. To put food on the table.

And for his baby girls to be born healthy.

But worry knotted his insides as he loaded the rocking chair Norma had found at a dumpster on some side street in Nashville into his pickup truck.

Right now he was a miserable failure. And about the babies...

Fear choked him.

He leaned over, braced his hands on his knees and dragged in air. He had to focus.

Finish loading. Then he'd sleep on the floor tonight and drive to Slaughter Creek in the morning.

But moving there cut at him. Norma wanted to be close to her parents, said they'd help her with the kids and enable her to get a job.

But making her go back to work meant her father would know that he couldn't provide for his daughter and grandkids.

He slid the rocking chair in beside the dresser that Norma had found at a garage sale for five dollars. Norma claimed she didn't mind hand-me-downs, thrift store or garage sale finds. She didn't even mind shopping in the dumpsters because some folks threw out good things. Their garbage was her treasure.

This rocker only needed cleaning up and a new coat of paint. And the dresser, well, who cared if the knobs were off and it was scratched? She'd put one of those doilies her grandmother had crocheted on top to cover up the marks. And she could find some knobs at the five-and-dime.

Besides, the babies wouldn't care.

But *he* cared, dammit.

He hated that he was so poor that his wife had to pick up other people's trash and take it home. That he'd been laid off at a time when he needed work – and money – the most.

That his little girls wouldn't have fancy new cribs with frilly curtains and plush toys. That he had no idea how he would buy diapers and formula to supplement Norma's breastfeeding if she couldn't make enough milk for both babies.

Sweat broke out on his forehead, and he swiped at it with the back of his sleeve.

Plus, what if something went wrong with the delivery? He didn't have insurance, and hospitals cost a fortune. Then there was the pediatrician and baby shots and ear aches and colds...

He hoisted the faded Formica table and the four vinyl chairs a neighbor had given them onto the truck next, trying to put his fears aside. But he couldn't.

His secret haunted him.

It had every single day since Norma had wrapped up that little baby rattle and had him open it, her way of telling him she was pregnant.

He had been nauseated at the sight. Poor Norma thought he wasn't happy but that wasn't it. He was scared shitless.

He should have told Norma the truth before they married, should have told her doctor at her first OBGYN visit, but the shame of it ate at him like a cancer. If Norma had known, she wouldn't be so happy.

She'd be scared to death like him.

But he hated to rob her excitement.

He stacked both cribs and their mattresses in the back of the cab, his hands shaking. Was he protecting his wife, or was he just a damn coward?

The phone in the house jangled. Knowing it might be Norma, he

raced inside to answer it.

Hopefully she'd made it to Slaughter Creek and everything was fine.

But as soon as he heard Walt Nettleton's deep voice on the line, his stomach clenched.

"Ben, it's Norma. She's gone into labor. You need to come now."

Ben had to bend over again to catch his breath. He'd had a bad feeling all day.

"Did you hear me?" Walt said.

"Yeah, I'm on my way." But his head swam as he climbed in the truck and tore from the house they'd lived in for the last six months.

He'd never been a man who was close to God. Hadn't been raised in the church or attended Sunday school when he was a kid. His own daddy had been a drunk, his mama a tramp from the trailer park.

He'd vowed to do better when he grew up. To take care of his family.

But he'd failed.

And now Norma was in labor, and he was terrified their babies would be born sick.

Desperate, he glanced at the dark sky as he headed into the mountains and prayed that there was a God after all.

And that he'd make sure his little girls were born healthy and normal.

Chapter Two

“I can’t have the babies yet,” Norma cried. “I need Ben.”

Patty, the nurse who’d helped admit Norma to the hospital, wiped her forehead with a damp cloth. “I know, honey, but babies have a way of coming when they want to come.”

Another pain seized Norma, and she closed her eyes, trying to envision some place safe and peaceful. A field in the spring with wildflowers blowing in the wind. A picnic by the lake.

Wading in the creek. Yes, she and Ben would take the girls wading one day in Slaughter Creek, and they’d splash and play and laugh and take a hundred pictures.

She breathed in and out the way Patty instructed her, blinking back tears. There was so much she wanted to do with her babies and Ben. So many Christmases to look forward to. Easter dresses to make. Halloween costumes and birthday parties and sports.

She’d never been good at softball or soccer or basketball, but maybe one of her girls would be athletic like Ben. Or maybe one of them would be artistic and like to paint like her.

They’d stand their canvases outside on the hill by the house overlooking Slaughter Creek, and each of them would paint to their hearts’ content. Mixing swirls of color to create the images in their fantasies.

The pain eased up, and she relaxed against the pillow. She was already exhausted from the drive, and she’d had to walk nearly a mile after she’d run off the road. But thankfully, a nice couple in a truck had come along and insisted they drive her to the hospital.

Her mama was right. The people in Slaughter Creek were friendly. She and Ben and the girls would be happy here.

Another pain assaulted her, and Patty spoke softly to her, talking her through it. Her mama rushed in and took her hand, her eyes blurring with tears.

“This is so exciting, Norma, I can’t wait to hold these little girls.”

“Me, too,” Norma said as that contraction ended. But they were coming one on top of the other.

The babies would be here soon.

She rubbed her hand over her belly. Would Ben make it in time?

“Are you sure you don’t want any medication or an epidural?” Patty asked. “It would help ease the pain.”

“No,” Norma said. “I don’t want to take a chance on the drugs hurting my infants.” After all, back in Nashville natural childbirth was now the rage.

Another pain robbed her breath, then the doctor stepped in the room. Patty coaxed her mother into the hall to be with her father. She could hear him pacing the floor outside the door.

The doctor examined her, then looked up at her with a smile. “I believe it’s time you bring these little ones into the world.”

“No,” she cried, tears leaking down her cheeks. “Ben has to be here. I can’t do it without him.”

The nurse and doctor exchanged concerned but knowing looks.

She *would* have to do this without Ben, have to give birth while he was racing to get here. She had no choice.

They tucked the blanket around her, pushed the bed through the door. Her mother and father both kissed her, then the nurse wheeled her toward the delivery room.

An icy coldness engulfed her as they rolled her into the sterile room. Bright lights blinded her, the sterile odors sending bile to her throat. As the rubber gloves snapped against the doctor’s hands, Patty moved up beside her and the doctor instructed her to push.

Pain rocked through her so intensely she almost came off the bed. She felt like she was splitting in two and let out a scream.

A second later, a baby’s cry echoed through the room.

A sob escaped her, her body trembling as the next contraction ripped through her, followed by the splitting pain again, and another push.

The room erupted into chaos. Two or three more nurses and another doctor slipped into the room. Everything blurred as she struggled to see what they were doing.

“Is the baby all right?” she asked trying to see the first twin while she gave birth to the next.

“We have to examine the baby and clean her up,” one of the nurses said.

The doctor patted her leg. “Norma, focus, we still have another little girl to deliver. And this one’s sideways.”

Panic seized her. “What?”

“It’s okay,” he murmured. “I’m going to try to turn her.”

Norma braced herself, her body screaming in pain as he reached inside her and turned the baby. A few feet away, her first little girl wailed in the nurse’s arms.

“Now push again,” the doctor ordered.

Sweat beaded her face as she propped herself on her elbows and pushed as hard as she could. Patty kept coaxing her, and tears fell down her cheeks as she gave another push.

Finally she felt the baby slip out.

But there was no sound of a baby’s cry this time.

Her heart stuttered. Something was wrong.

“Hang in there,” Patty said as she eased Norma back onto the pillow.

But she shoved away the nurse’s hands. She had to see.

“What’s wrong? Is she breathing?”

A deafening silence stretched through the room, the tension thick as they carried the tiny infant to the second bassinet and began to work over her.



Ben barreled into the parking lot of the hospital, swerved to miss an ambulance heading out and practically ran up on the curb as he threw the truck into park.

He’d flown over the roads, gotten a damn ticket for speeding, and almost crashed into a jerk on a motorcycle who’d cut him off when he tried to pass on the winding mountain road. Not that he was supposed to pass there, but his wife was in labor, dammit, and he wanted to be there and see his babies born.

Sweating bullets, he jumped out, but a security guard yelled at him. “Sir, you can’t park in a handicap spot.”

He jerked his hand toward the emergency room. “But my wife’s in labor.”

The beefy man strode over to him, hands on hips. “I don’t care. That

space is reserved for the handicapped.”

Ben threw up his hands in a gesture for the guy to calm down.

“Just let me go in and I’ll move it later – ”

The guard patted the handcuffs at his waist. “Either move it now or I’ll arrest you.”

Ben cursed, but jumped in the truck, fired the engine up and shifted into reverse. The guard vaulted out of the way as he spun to the right and parked a few feet away.

When he got out this time, he was mad as hell. He glared at the guard, then jogged into the hospital emergency room and raced over to the check-in desk. “My wife, Norma Nettleton, she’s in labor.”

The receptionist frowned up at him, but Walt’s voice boomed. “Ben, Norma had the twins.”

Something caught in Ben’s throat. What if ...no, he couldn’t bring himself to ask.

He swallowed hard. “Where is she?”

“Come on, I’ll walk you to her room.”

Fear clawed at Ben. There was something his father-in-law wasn’t telling him.

“Norma did good,” Walt said. “Her mama’s with her now.”

“What about the girls?”

“They’re so little,” Walt said. “Not even five pounds.”

The long corridor seemed to stretch for miles. Panic made Ben want to turn and run. If his little girls were sick or had inherited that genetic disorder, what would they do?

Norma would hate him.

But no more than he’d hate himself.

Walt knocked on the room door, and Norma’s mother opened it.

“Come on in, Ben, Norma’s been asking for you.”

He inhaled deeply, still shaking as he entered the room. Norma sat propped against a bank of pillows, her auburn hair spread across the white bedding. She looked radiant and so damn beautiful that for the hundredth time he wondered what in the hell she saw in him.

He scanned the room. Where were the twins?

Norma reached out her arms. “Ben, honey, I’m sorry, so sorry. “

Tears blurred his eyes as he rushed to her. He heard Walt murmur

to Norma's mama for them to leave the room, to let him have some time with Norma.

Did she have bad news to tell him?

Worry overcame him, and he buried his head against her and drew her into his arms.



Norma wrapped her arms around Ben and hugged him to her, hating that he'd missed the most important event in their lives.

But she hadn't expected Ben to get so emotional. Finally he pulled back, and looked up at her. "What happened?" he asked in a choked voice.

"I went into labor when I was driving to the house. I ran off the road, and the car wouldn't start, so I started walking back to town. Then this nice couple picked me up."

"Norma...the – "

"The car wasn't damaged much," she said.

"I'm not worried about the damn car," he said. "What about the ... girls?"

Norma stroked his cheek. "They're so tiny, Ben."

"Walt said that," he murmured.

"One of them had the cord around her neck," Norma said, the fear she'd experienced earlier hacking at her again. "She wasn't breathing –"

He dropped his head forward. "Oh, God."

"I know, I was so scared." Norma squeezed his hand. "But they gave her oxygen, and then she cried, and it was the most beautiful sound I've ever heard."

A sigh rumbled from him. "And now?"

"They're monitoring both of them and running some tests," Norma said. "Do you want to walk down to the nursery and see your little girls?"

He nodded, his eyes dark with emotions. Norma shoved the covers off of her, and stood. She reached for the robe her mother had brought her, and Ben helped her into it.

"Are you okay?" Ben asked.

Norma nodded. "I just want to hold our daughters."

He took her hand, and together they walked down the hall. When they reached the nursery, Norma pointed through the window to two bassinets side by side. Pink blankets had been wrapped around the infants, and they both wore small pink caps.

She'd never seen anything so precious in her life.

Patty, her labor nurse, stepped up to her. "If you want, you can go in and hold them for a moment. Baby two is still receiving oxygen, but she's breathing better now. Since they were premature, we have to monitor them more closely."

She led the two of them into the room to scrub, then into the corner of the nursery. Ben helped her into a rocking chair, and the nurse handed her the baby closest to her. The tiny infant wiggled her nose and pursed her little lips, squirming, then snuggling into her arms.

Then the nurse handed Ben baby number two. She scrunched up her nose, and let out a wail, her small fists and legs working as she gained steam.

Norma stroked the baby's fine hair, hair the color of her own. "They're beautiful, aren't they? And look at all their hair."

Ben nodded and tried to soothe the other twin by rocking her back and forth.

"Look, they have my little pug nose and your stubborn chin," Norma whispered.

Ben squinted as if trying to see it, and she laughed.

"Let's call this little angel Sadie after my grandmother," she said gesturing to the infant in her arms. "And – " she rubbed her hand over the other baby's back. "Do you want to name her after your mother?"

Ben shook his head and jiggled the baby, but she continued to cry. "How about Amelia after my grandmother?"

"Sadie and Amelia," Norma whispered. "That's perfect." She pressed a kiss to each baby's cheek. "Just like our perfect little girls."



Ben tried to comfort Amelia, but she screamed so hard that her little round face turned beet red, and her legs kicked and thrashed working their way out of the blanket.

Sadie snuggled into Norma's arms though and nursed, content and peaceful.

Maybe it was him. He'd heard that babies picked up on their parents' nerves. Maybe that was the reason Amelia couldn't quiet down.

"Shh, little one," he murmured as he walked her back and forth. "Don't cry. Daddy's here. I love you, baby."

But instead of calming, her screams intensified.

"Maybe you should try feeding her," Ben said, feeling totally inept. He'd failed as a husband. He couldn't pay his bills.

He'd missed his children's births.

Now he couldn't even comfort his own daughter.

But when he handed the baby to Norma, she continued to fuss.

Fear paralyzed him. Was something wrong with Amelia?

He should tell the doctors right now to test her.

But he looked at the joy on his wife's face, and he couldn't bring himself to destroy the moment.

Chapter Three

Two years later

The screams woke Norma again, a shrill sound that reeked of terror and fear and monsters in the dark.

A sound that made the walls of the old wood house vibrate as it echoed in the night.

A sound that tore at her heart.

She leapt from bed and raced to her twin daughters' room. This was the third time this week Amelia had woken up screaming, crying, terrified, inconsolable, although God knows Norma tried her best to comfort her and find out what was causing the nightmares.

She rocked and sang and patted and danced and did everything in her power to soothe her, but lately nothing worked.

Rain and wind beat at the windows, rattling the windowpanes and sending a tree branch scratching at the foggy glass.

She wrapped her robe around her, shivering as a chill enveloped her. She felt like such a failure, like God was punishing her for some wrong she'd done. If only she knew what it was, she'd change it and beg for forgiveness.

Anything to help her little girl.

Because something was wrong with her daughter. She just didn't know what it was.

Her husband couldn't handle the endless sleepless nights and screaming and had walked out three weeks ago.

The truth was, he'd been distant and strange ever since the girls' birth as if something was eating away at him, but he refused to discuss what was on his mind or attend counseling.

She'd begged him to confide in her, but the more she pressed, the more he brooded. And Amelia's cries exacerbated the situation.

The scream resounded again, louder, making her shudder with worry as she opened the nursery door.

Two-year-old Sadie was sound asleep, but Amelia thrashed at the covers, her eyes wide, her body shaking.

Another ear-piercing scream split the air, and Norma dashed to the bed and scooped her baby into her arms. But instead of snuggling up

to her and calming, Amelia fought and scratched, pulling her hair and screaming at the top of her lungs as if her body was on fire.

Tears blurred Norma's vision as she spoke softly to Amelia, trying to calm her. "Shh, baby girl, Mama's here, it's all right."

But Amelia kicked and wailed and yanked her hair again, pulling so hard that several strands came out in her small, thin hand.

A helpless feeling overwhelmed Norma, but she steeled herself to make it through the night. She wrapped her baby in her arms, struggling to hold onto her sanity as her daughter beat at her and cried.

Finally too exhausted to stand, Norma carried Amelia to her room, dropped down into the rocking chair, and began to sing a lullaby, stroking Amelia's baby fine hair and inhaling the scent of baby powder, lotion and all the sweet things little girls were made of.

But frustration knotted her shoulders and neck when Amelia didn't quiet.

She had to do something.

Tomorrow she'd carry Amelia to the doctor and insist he run tests.

She'd do anything she could to make sure Amelia received the help she needed to be healthy and have a happy life.



Guilt ate at Ben as he finished his shift at the construction site. The foreman handed him a paycheck, and he headed to the bank. He needed to deposit some money in Norma's account for the girls.

Coward.

Money didn't compensate for him not being there, and he knew it.

But Amelia's cries and nightmares had intensified to the point that he hadn't been able to sleep or think about anything but the fact that he'd passed on some horrible disease to his daughter.

That if it wasn't for him, she'd be happy and healthy. That maybe Norma and Sadie were better off without him.

But the hurt on Norma's face when he'd packed his bag tormented him. She was exhausted and just as worried as he was, but she hadn't walked away from their child.

Mentally berating himself wasn't helping her though.

He had to get his shit together and find a way to tell Norma the truth.

Confessing might tear them even further apart, but Norma deserved to know that he hadn't left because he didn't love her and the girls.

He did love them. With all his heart.

Sweating, he climbed in his truck and drove to the graveyard where his sister was buried, then knelt by her grave. Her illness had taken its toll on his parents, had driven his father to drink and his mother to seek love in any bed she could find.

He traced a finger over Geneva's headstone, then the date she'd died. She'd only been eleven. The chromosome disorder had caused a multitude of health problems and had eventually eaten away at her body and brain until she hadn't even known her name.

Was that going to happen to Amelia?

No, dammit.

He stood and paced past the grave to the river, then picked up a stone and hurled it across the water. The rock skimmed the surface, skipping along the waves and splashing to the bottom below.

The winter wind picked up and tossed leaves across the embankment, whirling others into the river. The dead leaves floated on the surface, brittle and crumbling as they floated downstream and were swallowed by the current.

Just like he'd felt for the last two years.

But it was time he stepped up and forgot about his own pain. His girls deserved better.

He shouldn't have left Norma and the twins. What kind of man deserted his family when they needed him?

A bastard, that's the kind.

He tossed another rock in the river and watched it disappear, then turned and strode back to his car.

He had to confess the truth to Norma. If she hated him, he'd have to live with it.

Maybe doctors had made progress in treating the disorder in the last few years. Maybe they'd found a cure or a treatment that he didn't know about.

Feeling better now he'd decided to take action, he started the engine

and headed to the apartment he'd rented on the other side of the mountain. He'd look up the specialists in Nashville and make an appointment for Amelia before he saw Norma. Maybe he'd even have hope to offer her when he saw them.

He'd do whatever he had to do in order to take care of his family.



Norma rocked Amelia in her arms as she sat in the waiting room at the free clinic. The room was packed with mothers and children who needed vaccinations, well baby checks and medicine.

A little girl named Grace Granger was perched in the corner, her small body jerking and spasming as if she was having a seizure. Another boy named Joe Swoony grunted as he banged his head against the wall.

An uneasy feeling slivered through her. When she'd first moved to Slaughter Creek, she'd envisioned a perfect life with Ben in this small town.

And Sadie *was* thriving, talking and laughing.

But Amelia was doing none of those things.

The nurse, a plump woman named Myrna, stepped from the back. "Miss Nettleton, the doctor will see you now."

Norma shifted Amelia in her arms, but Amelia shook her head violently. "No, no, no...Bessie no go."

Norma patted her back. "It's okay, honey. You're not getting a shot today."

"Bessie no go, no go!" Amelia hit her with her fists.

The nurse scowled at Amelia and led her into an exam room.

One of the doctors who volunteered at the clinic entered the room, a stuffed toy attached to his stethoscope. "Hello there, Norma." He leaned toward Amelia, but Amelia ducked her head into Norma's shoulder and clawed her arm.

"How is our precious little Amelia today?" Dr. Sanderson asked.

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about," Norma said.

"Is she sick? Running a fever?"

Norma shook her head. "No, it's the night terrors, the screaming. Her ...behavior. I'd like for you to run some tests."

He narrowed his eyes. “She’s two, Norma. Two-year-olds have temper fits.

We discussed this before -- children develop at different rates.”

“I know that,” Norma said. But her motherly instinct warned her there was more. “But I’ve been reading about autism, about genetic disorders that cause developmental delays, about psychological problems that start at an early age. Maybe she has a chemical imbalance.”

“Those tests are expensive and not covered by your insurance,” he said with a condescending smile. “Don’t you think you’re overreacting, maybe being paranoid?”

Sometimes, yes. But she didn’t want to risk her daughter’s health.

“Maybe I am just a worrying mother. And if my insurance doesn’t cover it, I’ll find a way to pay. But I still want you to recommend a specialist who can run a battery of tests.”

Dr. Sanderson released an irritated sigh. “All right, let me make some phone calls.”

She nodded, the nurse stepped in and whispered something low in his ear. A frown marred his face when he looked back up at her. “Excuse me just a moment.”

He followed the nurse out of the room, and Amelia lifted her head slightly. “Bessie home.”

Norma rubbed Amelia’s back. Bessie was Amelia’s imaginary friend. But sometimes Amelia talked as if she *was* Bessie.

Amelia’s chart was lying on the table by the wall, and Norma inched over and opened the file. There were notations about Amelia’s vaccines, a patient number three, which she didn’t quite understand, then another section where the doctor had scribbled notes about Amelia’s development.

So he *had* noticed something abnormal.

“Potty,” Amelia said, kicking her legs. “Bessie potty.”

Norma headed to the door knowing timing was crucial.

But still she wanted to study Amelia’s file.

“Potty, potty, potty, potty!” Amelia wailed.

Norma opened the door. The bathroom was on the other side of the office space, but as she stepped into the hallway, she saw the doctor

talking on the phone in a hushed voice, his back to her.

“Listen to me,” he said, “Norma Nettleton is asking questions about one of the twins. We have to do something before she finds out what’s we’re doing at the clinic.”

Norma’s chest clenched. What was he talking about?

“Yes, but her daughter Amelia is exhibiting adverse signs.” His voice grew lower, almost ominous. “All right, just take care of it. My reputation is on the line.”

The doctor pivoted, and Norma darted back into the exam room and closed the door.

Amelia had always balked at coming to the clinic, but she’d assumed it was typical childhood fears.

The image of Grace Granger and Joe Swoony in the waiting room taunted her. They had been treated by the same doctors, and all three of them obviously had developmental problems.

Amelia grunted, making odd noises in her throat.

“We’re going home, baby,” Norma whispered, rocking Amelia in her arms.

She grabbed Amelia’s file and tucked it in her purse.

The door opened, and the doctor strode in, his brows furrowed. “Now, where were we?”

“I ...I’m sorry, something came up. I have to leave.” She threw her purse over her shoulder, then rushed past him out the door.

In the waiting room, children were building with blocks in the corner. But Joe Swoony was rolling on the floor making guttural sounds. Grace Granger was beating her face as she rocked back and forth, her gaze latched on the wall.

Norma ran outside, cradling Amelia close to her. “Shh, darling,” she whispered as she strapped her in her car seat.

A minute later, she drove toward home. Sadie was napping at her mother’s, so she dashed back to her house and tucked Amelia in her crib to rest.

Amelia fussed and cried, screaming as if there were monsters in the room. But finally after patting her for half an hour, she fell asleep.

Her nerves on edge, Norma made herself a cup of tea, took the medical file to the table and began to read.



“The Nettleton woman was asking questions today at the clinic.”

“What kinds of questions?”

“About her daughter’s condition. And – ” he paused, a mountain of tension in the space. “She stole Amelia’s file.”

“Fuck. I told you no paper trail.”

“But the notes are necessary to track the patients’ reactions and responses,” he said.

“So is stopping the Nettleton woman from nosing around anymore.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll handle it. She’ll take whatever she knows with her to her grave.”

Chapter Four

Ben was frantic to talk to Norma. He had been foolish not to confess the truth about his family's genetic disorder the day she'd told him about her pregnancy.

But it was because he loved her so damn much. Her and the girls.

He hadn't shown it though. He'd deserted her when she needed him most because the guilt and shame ate at his soul.

He was flawed. Flawed to the point that it had hurt his own baby. That tore at him the most.

He phoned the house, but Norma didn't answer so he left a message asking her to take the kids to her parents so the two of them could talk. They needed time to discuss the secret he'd kept, to hash over the details of what he'd learned from the doctors about testing, Amelia's treatment and her prognosis if she'd inherited the disorder.

The drive from Nashville took forever, the traffic crawling by. Ice from the recent snowstorm made the roads hazardous, the gray skies threatening more snow. The temperature had dropped to the teens with the wind chill making it feel twenty below.

His heart thumped wildly the closer he drew to Slaughter Creek, his anxiety mounting. Norma would be furious at him for not divulging the truth about his background.

A truth she deserved to know.

But at least now he'd spoken with specialists, he had information to offer her.

And hope that Amelia might one day grow up and have a normal life.

Emotions threatened to overcome him, but he pushed them aside. By God, he'd been a wreck for three years.

No more.

He was going to take charge and take care of his daughter.

Night descended as he passed through the town of Slaughter Creek, the storm clouds obliterating the stars. He hit a pothole, gears grinding as he wound around the mountain to the little bungalow Norma had found for them. It was a small wooden frame house with two bedrooms, but she'd added homey touches like needlepoint

pillows, crocheted doilies and the wedding ring quilt her mother had given them as a wedding present.

He had meant the vows they'd spoken on their wedding day, but their problems had become insurmountable to him and he'd lost faith.

He swiped a hand over his forehead. He had so much to make up for.

If Norma could forgive him and she allowed him to move back home, he'd build her the sewing room she'd always wanted and add a front porch so she could sit in the rocking chair and watch the girls run and play in the yard.

A relieved breath gushed from his chest. Yes. Everything was going to be all right.

He chugged up the inclined part of the drive, noting the grass needed cutting, the weeds pulling. He'd take care of the yard this weekend, and they'd look for a swing set for the girls, one of those with the little glider where the girls could sit together.

He'd also take the twins on a picnic by the creek, and they'd go fishing.

That is, if the weather turned warmer like the weatherman predicted.

Norma's little car was in the drive by the house, so he parked by it, grabbed the roses he'd bought and hurried up to the house.

He'd been gone long enough that he knocked before barging in. What if he'd already lost Norma and his daughters?



Norma paced the living room, her stomach tied in knots. She had listened to Ben's message a dozen times.

Had he decided he wanted a divorce?

Her heart raced. How could she deal with losing him for good?

She glanced at the file, her anxiety mounting. Maybe once she told him about the file, he'd change his mind.

But why would he? She had no real proof that the doctors had done anything to Amelia. Just her suspicions and the troubling notations in the file that were too complicated for her to understand.

And what if she was wrong?

For God's sake, the doctors had treated the twins free for two years. Everyone in Slaughter Creek thought they were saints.

And she'd thought that, too. Until today...

The sound of footsteps outside jarred her even though she'd heard Ben's truck rolling up the drive and his door slamming. Tears blurred her eyes as she remembered the day he'd left her and the girls.

He hadn't wanted the twins here today either.

Because he wanted to discuss a divorce?

She braced herself. Even if he did, she had to ask for his help and tell him what she suspected.

He might not love her anymore, but he was an honorable man, and he'd do the right thing. He would help her.

He had to.

Their daughter's life might depend on it.

She glanced through the window and saw him standing at the door, his face haggard. He'd lost weight and his cheeks looked sunken and hollow as if he hadn't been sleeping either.

Still, he was so handsome that her heart fluttered. She loved him.

Did Ben know that? Did he care?

He rapped on the door, and she called for him to come in. His footsteps pounded as he entered.

"Norma..." He paused, his dark gaze meeting hers.

For the briefest of seconds, she thought she saw the familiar flame of desire burning in his eyes. The hunger for her that she'd thought would never die.

"I got your message," she said, her voice strained.

Ben heaved a breath. "I'm sorry, Norma, so damn sorry I ran out on you and the girls."

Norma's chest constricted, hurt and pain suffusing her. She ached to go to him and beg him to stay. But pride kept her in place.

He balled his hands into fists at his side, flexing them over and over again, a nervous habit he'd always had. "I should have told you the truth all along," he said gruffly.

Oh, Jesus, did he have another woman on the side? Was he in love with her?

Her legs wobbled, and she sank onto the sofa, her palms sweating.

“Ben, please... “ Please what? Love me again? Don’t leave me?

“Just listen,” he said, his voice cracking.

She nodded, her throat too thick with emotions to do anything else.

He crossed the room to her, knelt in front of her, then clasped her hands in his. “I was a coward, Norma, I...should have told you from the beginning.”

Norma rallied for courage. If he said he’d never loved her, that their marriage was a mistake, she’d let him go. Somehow she’d take care of their daughters.

“But I...was afraid of losing you,” Ben said, his voice choked.

Confused, Norma swallowed back the tears that had threatened all day. “Why would you be afraid of losing me?” She couldn’t help it. She’d missed him so much she reached up and pressed a hand against his cheek.

His skin felt warm, his cheek coarse with beard stubble. God, she wanted to kiss him so badly she had to bite her lip to hold back.

“Because of me...my family,” he said in a low voice.

“What are you talking about?” Norma asked softly.

Turmoil darkened his eyes. “My family, my sister...she had a genetic disorder, Norma. The doctors, they didn’t even know what to call it twenty years ago, how to treat her, but...she was never normal.”

Norma frowned, past conversations echoing in her head. Ben had never wanted to talk about his family. She’d known his father was a drunk, that his mother had slept around.

But he’d never mentioned a sister.

Ben cleared his throat. “The minute you told me you were pregnant, I was afraid I might pass that disorder on to one of our children.”

The memory of Ben’s reaction taunted her. She’d wanted him to be surprised, happy, but he’d been upset.

Now his reaction made sense.

Dear God, had Amelia inherited this disorder? Was that what he was trying to tell her?

“I should have told you,” he said, his voice filled with regret. “But I was too afraid, so I waited and watched and prayed our girls would be okay. When Amelia started having those nightmares, started screaming for no reason, I thought she must have inherited the

disorder, and I...blamed myself.”

“Ben,” Norma said, glancing back at that file. “Did you talk to the doctors about this when the girls were born?”

He shook his head. “No. But I’ve done some research this week. I went to see some specialists today, and they’ve made great strides in treating patients – ”

Norma cupped his face between her hands, unable to stand the guilt in his voice. “What if it’s not your fault?”

“Of course it is, but there’s hope now – ”

“That’s not what I mean,” Norma said firmly. “I don’t think Amelia’s problems have to do with you.”

Ben frowned, a look of denial in his eyes. “I didn’t want to believe it either, but I had to face the truth, Norma, and so do you.”

“Listen to me,” Norma said firmly. “Today I carried Amelia to the doctor. I asked him about running a battery of tests to see if she had a chemical imbalance or a psychological disorder.”

“That’s good,” Ben said. “We’ll see a specialist.”

“That’s exactly what I told him. But he tried to dissuade me, then I heard him talking to someone on the phone about me. He sounded upset that I was asking questions.”

Ben gripped her hands, his eyes narrowed. “I don’t understand.”

“I’m not sure I do either, but he specifically mentioned Amelia. He said she was exhibiting adverse reactions, whatever that means. “ She paused to catch her breath. “Amelia isn’t the only child being treated there who has problems, Ben.”

“What do you mean?”

“I noticed a little girl named Grace and a boy named Joe. They received vaccinations about the same time and have been treated by the same doctors. Both Joe and Grace are acting out just like Amelia.”

Shock twisted his features. “You think the doctors did something to make the kids sick?”

“I don’t know, but they didn’t want me asking questions.”

A tense moment passed between them. “If you think something’s wrong, we’ll ask the sheriff to launch an investigation.”

Norma clung to him. “That’s what I was thinking.” She soaked up his features. His handsome strong jaw. Those eyes that could be so

serious and brooding one moment, then turn dark and sexy the next.

“I’m so glad you came today, Ben. I ...need you.”

He tilted her chin up with his hand. “I need you, too, Norma.” He paused, guilt lining his face. “I’m so sorry I wasn’t here for you.”

“You are now, Ben. That’s all that matters.”

He looked so tormented that she pressed her lips to his. Ben reacted immediately. He drew her into his arms and kissed her, then pulled her against the vie of his thighs.

Passion exploded between them, their hands racing over each other, tearing at each other’s clothes. She tossed her shirt and jeans on the floor in a puddle, his followed, the two of them falling to the couch as they touched and tasted each other.

Norma’s skin was on fire, love, need and hunger driving them together. The rest of their clothes flew off, then Ben cupped her face between his hands as he crawled above her.

“I love you, Norma, I’m so sorry I left.”

“Shh, it doesn’t matter. You came back.”

“I’ll never leave you or the girls again,” Ben said gruffly.

Norma looked into his eyes and knew he was sincere, understood that he’d left because of guilt and fear, not because he didn’t love them.

They had to talk to the sheriff about what was happening in Slaughter Creek, but it was too late tonight to do anything.

They’d go first thing in the morning.

At the moment, she wanted to hold her husband, to feel his body meld with hers. So she pulled him closer, parted her thighs and welcomed him inside her.

Chapter Five

Ben had craved Norma for so long that even after making love to her all night, he wanted her again. Morning sunlight seeped through the windows, and he rolled her to the side, tucked her in his arms, and held her tight.

He never wanted to let her go.

Norma traced a finger across his chest, making his skin tingle.

“If you keep that up, we’re never going to get out of bed,” he murmured.

Norma laughed softly, a musical sound he hadn’t heard enough of the past two years.

“I’d like that,” Norma whispered, her voice laden with sexual innuendo. “But we have to talk to the sheriff today.”

The pleasure in her voice faded, the worry back.

He tilted her face up to look at him. “You’re right. If you think they’re doing something unethical at the clinic, they have to be stopped.”

They kissed again, reluctantly breaking apart. Hurriedly he threw on his clothes and made coffee while Norma dressed and phoned her parents to ask them to watch the girls for the morning.

Norma poured a cup of coffee to go then shoved a folder into his hands. “Come on, I’ll drive. You can read the file on the way and see if you can make sense of it.”

They grabbed coats and hurried out to her car. Ben buckled his seat belt as Norma sped down the winding road. The dark clouds dumped snow and sleet, the visibility increasingly difficult.

He flipped open the folder and studied the doctor’s notations while Norma dodged the patches of black ice and maneuvered the switchbacks on the mountain.



The memory of Amelia’s screams taunted Norma as she slowed on the slick, icy road. Her poor little girl.

What was wrong with her? What had they done to her child?

Would she ever be normal?

“Dammit,” Ben mumbled. “I don’t understand this medical jargon, but you’re right. Something looks fishy here. Did you approve this list of medications?”

“Of course not.” Norma’s stomach rolled as she climbed the hills, braking as she approached Blindman’s Curve, one of the most dangerous places on the mountain.

But when she pumped the brakes, the car sped up instead of slowing. She tried them again, easing down this time, but the pedal went all the way to the floor and instead of the car slowing, it accelerated.

Fear choked her as they raced down the incline.

Ben dropped the folder as the car jerked to the right and skidded on the shoulder. “Slow down, Norma.”

“I’m trying but the brakes aren’t working,” Norma cried.

Ben gripped the dash with a white-knuckled grip as she pumped the brakes again, but they failed, and the car swerved out of control. She tried to steer into the curve, but the car hit a patch of black ice, tires squealed and they skidded toward the ravine.

Ben shouted again, and Norma screamed as they careened toward the edge of the mountain. The car barreled over the embankment and tumbled down the rocky incline, slamming into the rocks below with such force that Norma flew forward.

The next minute the world went dark.

Sometime later, Norma stirred, dazed and confused, her body aching. She tasted blood then panicked when she saw blood tricking down Ben’s cheek. His leg looked crooked, his face pale. She shook his arm, terrified he was dead.

“Ben...honey, are you all right?”

He opened one eye. The other was black and blue, swelling shut. A piece of shattered glass was stuck in his thigh, blood soaking his pants.

“Yes, are you?”

“I think so,” she whispered as she glanced through the window at the brush and trees where they’d landed.

Ben pulled her into his arms. “It’ll be okay,” he whispered. “Someone will find us.”

Tears blurred her vision. She wanted to believe him, but they were

way off the road. “If we don’t make it – ”
“Shh,” Ben said as he stroked her arm. “We *will* make it. We just found each other again.”

She nodded, her throat thick as she rested her head against his chest. “You’re right. We have to. The girls need us,” Norma said holding onto him tight.

Although worry mushroomed inside her as the snow continued to fall.

If they didn’t make it, the girls would be alone.

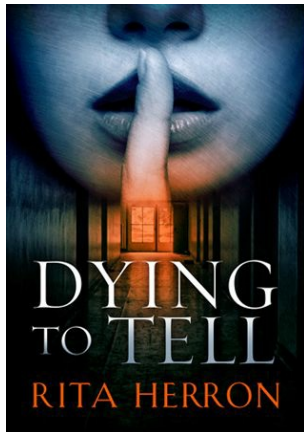
No, her parents would take care of them. And Sadie was tenacious; when she got older she’d figure out what was wrong with her twin sister.

The world was spinning again, but Ben kissed her. A tender, sweet kiss that promised they would be always be together.

And she knew they would.

She just prayed someone rescued them soon.

Then they would find out what was happening to the children in Slaughter Creek...



Watch for [*DYING TO TELL*](#),
the first exciting installment in the
Slaughter Creek series, December 25 , 2012
from Amazon Montlake!
ISBN: 978-1469276601

Afterword

Thank you so much for reading BEFORE SHE DIES. I hope this short prequel whets your appetite for my new romantic suspense series set in the fictitious, small rural Tennessee town of SLAUGHTER CREEK.

Book one DYING TO TELL picks up twenty-five years later with Sadie and Amelia, and is a dark romantic suspense thriller set around a mysterious sanitarium nestled in the mountains.

If you enjoyed this story, do me a favor and post a review on www.Amazon.com.

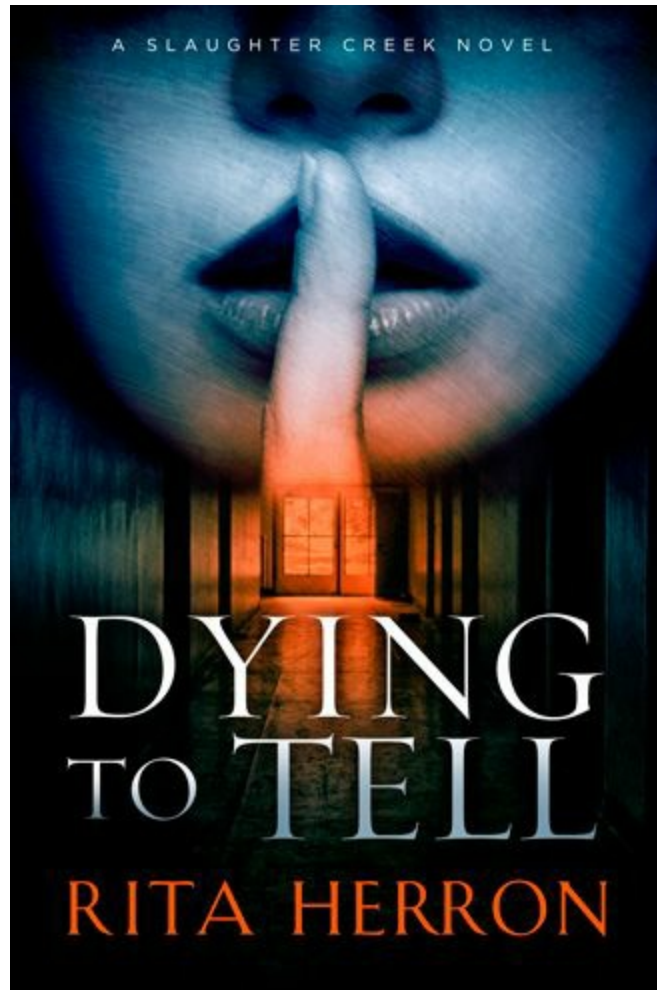
Thanks so much!

DYING TO TELL

Sadie Nettleton fled Slaughter Creek ten years ago, leaving behind the only home she'd ever known — and the only man she ever loved. Sadie knew Jake Blackwood could never forgive her if he discovered her terrible secret, so she ran and never looked back. But when her grandfather is murdered, and her mentally ill twin sister charged with the crime, Sadie has no choice but to return and face the ghosts of her past...

For Sheriff Jake Blackwood, time has not dimmed the love he felt for Sadie Nettleton — or the pain of her leaving. But now that she's back, he's determined to help her uncover the truth about her grandfather's death. As their investigation leads them deeper into a world of secrets, lies, and betrayal in Slaughter Creek, Sadie becomes the target of a madman who will do anything to keep the truth buried. Jake would give his life to protect Sadie. But can he again risk giving her his heart?

*And here's a sneak peek at the beginning of
DYING TO TELL...*



Prologue

From the moment I decided to kill him, I began to feel relief.

It had to be done. There was no other way to escape.

No turning back.

He had led me to the secret room so many times. He'd taken my soul and left me empty inside.

Ting. Ting. Ting.

The chimes began to ring. Crying. Shrill, grating sounds like a knife scraping bone.

No, he shouted.

Crying wasn't allowed.

I heard the tears anyway. Silent streams of pain. Pleas for help.
Prayers to die.

But no one came.

Were the screams just in my mind? Or were they real?

It didn't matter.

I had to save myself.

The screech of the metal door echoed in the night. The bright light seared my eyes. The gruff sound of his voice whispering that he loved me.

My fingers curled around the knife as he walked nearer. So close I saw the whites of his eyes.

The black pupils where his soul should have been, if he had ever had one.

The smell suffused me. Seeped into my pores.

The antiseptic. The cleansing soap. The faint hint of sweat.

Sickening.

Then he leaned over me.

Ting. Ting. Ting.

Emotions left me, bleeding out like the crimson life force I intended to take from him.

I raised the knife and jammed it in his chest. His grunt of pain and shock echoed in the icy cold chamber.

His blood spurted onto my face.

Then his body collapsed against mine, and I waited for him to die.

It was the only way I could survive...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Award-winning, bestselling author Rita Herron fell in love with books at the ripe age of eight when she read her first Trixie Belden book, but she didn't think real people grew up to be writers. Now she writes so she doesn't have to get a real job. She has written several romantic comedies, but especially enjoys writing dark, sexy romantic suspense thrillers set in small rural towns.

For a list of all her works, visit her at www.ritaherron.com

You can also find her on Twitter: @ritaherron & facebook.com/ritaherron!