



CRYSTAL
MAGIC
Series

TOPAZ DREAMS

An empathic woman searching for safety
An architect yearning for dreams
And the ghost house that endangers them both

New York Times Bestselling Author

PATRICIA RICE

TOPAZ DREAMS - SAMPLE



PATRICIA RICE



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To Purchase Topaz Dreams

Topaz Dreams
Patricia Rice

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ONE



JUNE 25: MIDDAY

“WHAT A DUMP!” QUOTING OLD MOVIES RATHER THAN POLLUTE THE MINDS of innocents, Theodosia Devine-Baker gaped in despair at the family homestead.

Childhood memories shattered, she regarded the faded gray clapboard shop her parents and grandparents had once called home. Their desperate flight up to this California mountain town, she’d recognized the town’s welcome sign of HILLVALE, SPIRITUAL HOME OF 325 LIVES AND COUNTLESS GHOSTS with glee and relief.

She hadn’t realized the sign was literal.

She didn’t need her weird empathy to warn that her childhood haven was not only a wreck but haunted. It had Stephen King’s signature written all over the rotting window frames.

“Gotta pee, Aunt T!” the four-year-old Goth in the back of the aging van cried.

Maybe she could become a cartoonist. There was definitely a comic panel in the scene of the battered and peeling sixties-era van parked in front of an ancient hippie crystal shop in a town

the world had left behind half a century ago.

She'd left when she was six or seven, so her memories were obviously rose-colored. Would the plumbing still work? Hadn't the rental agency done anything in twenty-plus years?

The kids, and what they claimed was a dog, had been cooped up in the van for hours on the drive here. She couldn't hide them any longer. Taking a deep breath and winging a prayer to any Omnipotence passing by, Teddy beat at the van door handle until it opened, then kicked the door wide. The sheepdog-labradoodle mutt whined until she cranked open the back door so the creature could fall out. The animal was ancient, but Teddy suspected it was more sheep than dog.

Teddy hoped there weren't any cops watching. The rolling wreck the kids climbed out of didn't have child restraints. It barely had seats. That reason alone had been excuse enough to buy it—to hide her niece and nephew on the floorboards. It wasn't as if the van could reach speeds of more than fifty, and she'd stayed off the freeways as much as possible. Her sister hadn't given her more than a few days to plan this escapade.

It was a relief to have reached safety—or what she had imagined would be a haven for the next few months. Her imagination had always been overactive.

With trepidation, she glanced up at the burned-out swathe of mountain above the town. There were varying degrees of safety, even here. That fire had been recent and a close call. It might mean mudslides this winter, but that wasn't her immediate concern.

Digging the ancient key out of her jeans pocket, she crossed the rickety boardwalk and inserted it in a door that hadn't been painted since Noah sailed the ark. She vaguely remembered it as having once been a magical periwinkle blue.

The key didn't fit. She glared at a relatively new doorknob.

Fu. . . Frigging heck. Teddy glanced down at the six- and four-year-old following her every word and move.

It was like being watched by Pugsley and Wednesday from the Addams Family. Teddy had dyed their beautiful red curls black, used a straightener on them, and then cut bangs so they no longer resembled their strawberry-blond mother. Teddy's hair was a more fiery auburn-red and hadn't taken the dye well. She hadn't been able to bear straightening and cutting it, so she was wearing her tangled mop in a braid pinned tightly and hidden under a knit cap. She probably looked like a jewel thief instead of a jeweler.

Jeb danced from foot to foot, holding the front of his pants like any good red-blooded male.

Her usual humor dampened by circumstances, Teddy stomped her heeled ankle boots down the boardwalk to the sagging alley gate. It, at least, opened. Glancing over her shoulder to see who might be watching, she gestured kids and dog inside.

Hillvale was much smaller than she remembered. Despite the brave gaiety of painted planters spilling with multi-colored blossoms lining the boardwalk, the line of structures on either side of the barely-paved road showed no sign of improvement since she'd lived here. Cracked and faded adobe buildings sat side-by-side with the teetering remnants of what could have been frontier storefronts like hers. She hoped the diner was still down the street because the kids would be starving soon.

A few customers lingered in front of a grocery across the highway dividing the town. They watched with curiosity, but that was any small town. Teddy didn't know if anyone would remember her. She was hoping it wouldn't matter out of the city and out of sight.

The back doorknob had been changed too. Darnation. She wondered if editing epithets constituted good nurturing. Since

Jeb was already urinating on a pear cactus, she figured Sydony hadn't reared him any better than Teddy was doing.

Sullen silent Mia clung to her sheep-dog's collar and looked around in disdain—worldly cynicism from a six-year-old.

The dirt yard was buried in a layer of gray ash and sported a few straggling weeds and rocks. The tree stump she'd used as a tea table when she was a kid had rotted and developed mushrooms. Pines overhung the fence from the steep downside of the mountain behind the house. There would be cabins beyond the fence, hidden among the evergreens, scattered down the mountainside. She could just barely see the roof of one below.

Producing the backpack she'd learned to carry when she was with her niece and nephew, Teddy set it on the stump. "I need to hunt down the keys, kids. Feed the fairies with your snacks and keep Prince Hairy company until I get back, okay?"

Her sister had named the dog when she'd rescued it, back when Mia was a baby. Teddy was pretty certain her niece didn't recognize the reference.

Clothed all in black, her little Goths dug into the backpack in a manner as uncivilized as the original barbarians. She knew Prince Hairy wouldn't go anywhere. His main advantage was that he was big and had protruding fangs ferocious enough to scare strangers.

Teddy checked her cellphone for messages as she closed the gate and returned to the street. No bars. Frigging darn heck. How would she know if Syd was all right?

First things first. They needed a roof over their heads. She had used a library computer to e-mail the rental company named in the contract from their parents' lockbox, told them she would be arriving and to not let the house out this summer. But this business of sneaking around and covering her trail

didn't come naturally. She hadn't been certain if she should call to confirm.

And now she couldn't even check her phone to see if another e-mail had arrived. Passing a few window-shoppers, she clunked down the warped boardwalk, hunting signs for the rental agency. Her house was at the entrance to town. The two-story town hall was on the far end, across the street. Thankfully, the diner was still a few doors down from her shop, with CAFÉ on the plate glass window in chipped gold letters. It looked busy, so that was a good sign.

She was actually feeling a little better about Hillvale after passing a consignment clothing store with an upscale cross-dressing mannequin in the window and an antique store displaying genuine Victorian garnets. She didn't need walk-in customers, but if these stores drew broad-minded clientele with deep pockets, she might actually find a new market for her designs. That would give her the breathing room she needed to experiment with the gift she'd just discovered and push her business in a different direction that wouldn't require so much travel.

The rental agency had a business sign in the downstairs window and curtains upstairs—living space and shop all in one like hers. At least this door was painted. She pushed it open onto a sparse office with a desk, a couple of faded chairs, and a paper calendar with a silvery fish photo on the wall. An older man with thinning gray hair, sagging jowls, and a tailored navy blazer looked up. The name plaque on his desk said Xavier Black.

“Hi, I'm Teddy Baker.” She'd dressed the part of harried aunt in jeans and plaid cowboy shirt, so she figured she didn't come across as one of the wealthy tourists that occupied the resort above the town. “I e-mailed you about the Baker property?”

Mr. Black stood, looming over her as most people did. “Miss

Baker, a pleasure. We haven't had any Bakers here in over twenty years, if I remember correctly."

"Well, my mother's cousin stayed here after we left, but she was married to a Thompson. I understand after she moved out that our parents turned the property over to you to rent?"

He looked exceedingly uncomfortable. Uh-oh. He gestured at one of the chairs. "There seems to be a misunderstanding. Won't you take a seat?"

She had strong nerves, but she'd never been responsible for kids before. Her world had turned violent and ugly these last months. She needed a safe new one. Teddy's insides knotted, and she had to deliberately refrain from clutching her fingers into fists.

She perched on the edge of the vinyl-upholstered chair. "What misunderstanding? I have a key." One that didn't work. "I have a deed. I have the rental contract. I let you know I was coming."

He laced his fingers together on the desk. "I had to look up the property. It hasn't been listed in your father's name in decades. The Kennedy Corporation purchased it from the Thompsons when they moved out."

Teddy sat stunned. All their plans for escape. . . She couldn't let Sydony down like this. She shook her head until the stupid cap almost came off, rummaged in the messenger bag she carried on her shoulder, and produced the documents from the lockbox. "My parents own that property. I have the deed. The Thompsons never bought it from us. They merely took care of it until they could buy their own place. I even have letters from my mother's cousin Thalia with the date she planned to move out, plus the rental contract with your agency."

Their parents were in Malaysia, but they'd left the keys and documents with their lawyer to be used as needed. Surely they

wouldn't have left a deed to a house they no longer owned.

Mr. Black looked worried as he perused her documents. "I will have to call Mr. Kennedy and ask for his paperwork. I can call the property tax office, but I've been handling the expenses, and I know he's been paying the taxes and maintenance."

"Maintenance," she snorted. "The place doesn't look as if it's been lived in since California became a state."

"Well," he looked even more uneasy. "It's been a difficult property to rent. Let me call Mr. Kennedy."

Seething, Teddy stood. "You do that. I'll be at the café."

She would not lose her temper. She would not get flustered. She would be calm and patient and not rip the graying hair off an old man's head. She marched out and back to the house, where she gathered up Goth One and Goth Two and paraded them over to the café. His Hairy Royal Majesty was quite happy to remain in his sunlit bed in the yard.

Teddy took the kids to the restroom to wash their hands, then came out to find a sturdy waitress with a lovely black braid adorned in beads waiting with plastic menus.

Teddy wanted to wash the dye out of her hair right now. Her pale skin would never look as natural against black as this bronzed local's.

"I'm Mariah," the waitress said, steering them to an open booth. "Can I bring you anything to drink?"

"Coke!" both Goths piped up.

"Lemonade," Teddy corrected. "And unless you have whiskey straight up, I'll just take water, please."

"Mama lets us have Coke," Mia protested, sliding down in the booth in a sulk that suited her black bangs and sinister black t-shirt with a frowning emoticon. Mia had chosen that one herself. Teddy could scarcely blame her. Her niece's world had been torn in two, then ripped again.

Jeb lay his black hair on the table and sucked his thumb—probably not a good sign.

“We saw you over at the old Thompson place,” a plump, cuddly woman not much older than Teddy said from her stool at the counter. Her auburn hair had a more orange cast than Teddy’s natural red, and she wore enough bangles to ring like a wind chime. “I tried setting up shop there when I first arrived, but the apparition refused to share.”

Teddy wasn’t certain how to respond to that. She was accustomed to sensing strong energies that others didn’t, but she was not used to other people blatantly stating weird stuff she thought only she knew.

Unfazed by Teddy’s silence, the chatty woman continued, “I’m Amber. That’s my shop across the street.” She nodded at the window.

The shops visible from this perspective were the grocery and a tarot reader. Oh goody. That explained a lot. Teddy smiled in anticipation.

“Happy to meet you, Amber. I’m Teddy Baker.” She and Sydony had decided their father’s last name was common enough that it wouldn’t be easily traced while she was traveling, and gave the added benefit of matching Teddy’s ID, if not her professional or full name. Now that they were in Hillvale, there would be no concealing who she was, but there was no reason for Assbutt aka Butthead to know about Hillvale.

“This is Goth One and Goth Two,” she pointed her fingers at the sulking kids.

Mia glared. “My name is Mia. My mama used to live here.”

Oh well, it didn’t take long to take that cat out of the bag. She’d known it wouldn’t be easy. Mariah merely swung her beaded braid and departed in search of drinks—not exactly the chatty waitress stereotype.

When she returned with lemonade, Teddy ordered sweet potato fries and veggie burgers for all. Mia demanded a hot dog. Jeb drooled. Before Teddy's patience frayed, Mariah waved a pencil like a magic wand. "Dinah will fix just what you need, wait and see."

"Dinah is magic," Amber said, standing up from her stool. "She always knows what we need, although we don't get kids in here a lot. If you're planning on living in the Thompson place, we can try smudging it again. We're more powerful now that Mariah and Sam are here. Just let Dinah know, and we'll be right over."

As Amber departed, Teddy clicked her boot heels under the table and whispered in delight, "We're not in Kansas anymore, Toto."

She was just exactly where she needed to be while the outside world took care of itself. When their meal arrived, Dinah's fabulous sweet potato pie and crunchy green bean fries improved her outlook. The kids happily dug into vegetables disguised as junk, and Teddy almost felt as if she might conquer this motherhood thing—eventually.

The mysterious Dinah did not appear. Mariah took Teddy's cash at an old-fashioned register. With her decorated braid, the waitress looked like a Disney version of a Native American princess. Teddy was relieved to note that flannel and jeans were the correct attire for blending in, so far as it was possible to blend in a place that ghosts called home.

She took the kids back to the restroom, then carried a sleepy Jeb back to the house, with Mia trailing along, clinging to her shirrtail. They'd been through a lot these last few days, so a little clinging was well deserved.

It was cool enough up here on the foggy mountain to feel safe cranking down the van windows and leaving the kids in their

bedrolls to nap. She allowed them to run back and fetch Prince Hairy and load him up. Jeb liked to sleep with the dog. Mia would play with her Nintendo or read instead of sleeping. Either way, she was out of the way of confrontation.

Because Teddy wasn't feeling good about the housing situation at all.

Even as she emerged from tucking in the kids, she saw Mr. Black strolling across the parking lot with a broad-shouldered exec in a stiff tie and tailored business suit. This must be the Mr. Kennedy who thought he owned her house.

Her Inner Monitor wasn't reliable and often painful, so she'd quit using it long ago. Recent events had taught her the hard way that was a serious mistake. With the kids to protect, she needed all the extra help she could summon. She reluctantly tuned in as the pair approached.

She slammed into a sensation akin to hitting a stone bluff at a hundred miles an hour. She froze, trying to assess the experience. Instead of radiating energy, the exec was like a powerful magnet—who buried his power. Did that make sense? Hastily shutting down her inner senses, she studied him warily, expecting a demon beneath the sophisticated attire.

The tailored civilization of a suit barely disguised the muscular grace of an athlete. Thick-lashed brown eyes matched styled hair burnished to the color of rich mahogany. With his deep tan and stubborn jaw, he appeared only a few years older than she, and definitely not demon material. She'd categorize him with any wealthy man who got his own way too often, except there were tired lines around his eyes and mouth that said life wasn't treating him as well as expected.

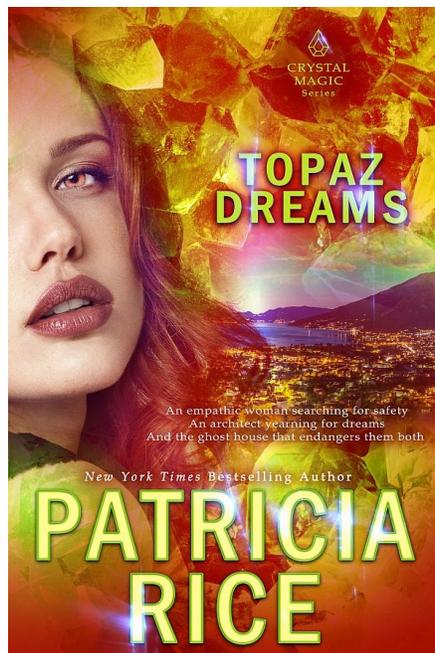
"Miss Baker?" he said, holding out a manicured hand as he joined her on the boardwalk. "Kurt Kennedy. Xavier says we have a problem?"

The electrical zap of their joined hands should have warned her.

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