

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *DIE FOR ME*

KAREN ROSE

SCREAM
FOR ME

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ALSO BY KAREN ROSE

Don't Tell

Have You Seen Her?

I'm Watching You

Nothing to Fear

You Can't Hide

Count to Ten

Die for Me

To Martin, because the sun shines brighter whenever you're with me. Of course, living in a very sunny state doesn't hurt, but you get my drift. I love you.

To Kay and Marc. Your friendship is without price.

And to my editor, Karen Kosztołnyik, and my agent, Robin Rue. Thank you.

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Shannon Aviles for your support and all the buzz.

Beth Miller for all your enthusiasm!

All mistakes are my own.

[Prologue](#)

Mansfield Community Hospital, Dutton, Georgia
Thirteen years ago

A bell dinged. Another elevator had arrived. Alex stared at the floor and wished to be invisible as a strong perfume tickled her nose.

“Violet Drummond, come on. We’ve still got two patients to visit. What are you *doing*? Oh.” The last was uttered on an indrawn breath.

Go away, Alex thought.

“Isn’t that . . . *her*?” The whisper came from Alex’s left. “The Tremaine girl that lived?”

Alex kept her eyes fixed on the fists she clenched in her lap. *Go away*.

“Looks like,” the first woman answered, dropping her voice. “My goodness, she looks just like her sister. I saw the other one’s picture in the paper. Spittin’ images, they are.”

“Well, they are twins. Identical, even. Were, anyway. God rest her soul.”

Alicia. Alex’s chest closed up and she couldn’t breathe.

“Shame, it was. Pretty thing like that found dead in a ditch without a stitch on. God only knows what that man did to her before he killed her.”

“Dirty no-good drifter. I hope they fry him alive. I heard he’d . . . *you* know.”

Screaming. Screaming. A million voices were screaming in her head. *Cover your ears. Make them stop*. But Alex’s hands stayed clenched in her lap. *Shut the door. Shut the door*. The door in her mind closed and the screaming abruptly stilled. There was quiet again. Alex dragged in a breath. Her heart was racing.

“Well, *that* one in the wheelchair there tried to kill herself after she found her mama dead on the floor. She took every pill Doc Fabares prescribed for her mother’s nerves. Luckily her aunt found her in time. The girl, of course. Not the mother.”

“Well, of course not. You don’t get up after shootin’ yourself in the head.”

Alex flinched, the crack of the single shot echoing through her mind, again and again and again. And the blood. *So much blood. Mama*.

I hate you I hate you I wish you were dead.

Alex closed her eyes. Tried to make the screams go away, but they wouldn’t stop. *I hate you I hate you I wish you were dead*.

Shut the door.

“Where’s she from, the aunt?”

“Delia at the bank says the aunt’s a nurse from Ohio. She and the girl’s mama are sisters. Were anyway. Delia says when the aunt walked up to her window she nearly had heart failure. Lookin’ at the aunt was just like looking at Kathy—spooked her good.”

“Well, I heard Kathy Tremaine used the gun that belonged to that man she was livin’ with. What an example to set for those girls of hers, livin’ with a man, and at her age.”

Panic began to well. *Shut the door*.

“Hers *and* his. He has a daughter, too. Bailey’s her name.”

“They were wild, wild girls, all three of ’em. Somethin’ like this was bound t’ happen.”

“Wanda, please. It’s not that girl’s fault some homeless man raped and killed her.”

Alex’s breath was backing up in her lungs. *Go away. Go to hell. Both of you. All of you. Just leave me alone and let me finish what I started*

me alone and let me finish what I started.

Wanda scoffed. “Have you seen the way these girls dress today? Just askin’ for a man to drag them off and do God-knows-what. I’m just glad *she’s* being taken away.”

“She is? The aunt’s takin’ her back to Ohio?”

“That’s what Delia at the bank told me. I say it’s a blessing that she won’t be going back to the high school. My granddaughter goes to that school, in the tenth grade, same as the Tremaine girls. Alexandra Tremaine would have been a terrible influence.”

“Terrible,” Violet agreed. “Oh, look at the time. We still have to visit Gracie and Estelle Johnson. Push the elevator button, Wanda. My hands are full with these violets.”

The button dinged and the two old women were gone. Alex was shaking from inside her body out to her skin. Kim was taking her to Ohio. Alex didn’t really care. She didn’t plan on making it to Ohio anyway. All she wanted was to finish what she’d started.

“Alex?” Footsteps clacked on the tile and she smelled a new perfume, clean and sweet. “What’s wrong? You’re shaking like a leaf. Meredith, what happened? You were supposed to be watching her not sitting on that bench with your nose in a book.”

Kim touched her forehead and Alex wrenched back, keeping her eyes on her hands. *Don’t touch me.* She wanted it to be a snarl, but the words echoed only in her own mind.

“Is she okay, Mom?” It was Meredith. Alex had a vague memory of her cousin, one big girl of seven playing Barbies with two five-year-olds. *Two little girls. Alicia.* Alex wasn’t part of two anymore. *I’m alone.* Panic began to well again. *For God’s sake shut the door.* Alex drew a breath. Focused on the darkness in her mind. Quiet darkness.

“I think so, Merry.” Kim knelt in front of the chair and tugged on Alex’s chin until she lifted her face. Her eyes met Kim’s and instantly skittered away. With a sigh, Kim stood and Alex breathed again. “Let’s get her to the car. Dad’s bringing it up to the door.” The elevator door dinged once again and Alex’s chair was pulled into the elevator backward. “I wonder what upset her? I was only gone for a few minutes.”

“I think it was those old ladies. I think they were talking about Alicia and Aunt Kathy.”

“What? Meredith, why didn’t you say something to them?”

“I couldn’t really hear them. I didn’t think Alex could hear them either. Mostly they were just whispering.”

“I’ll just bet they were, old busybodies. Next time, come get me.”

The elevator dinged and the chair was pushed into the hall. “Mom.” Meredith’s voice took on a warning tone. “It’s Mr. Crighton. And he’s got Bailey and Wade with him.”

“I was hoping he’d do the right thing for once. Meredith, run out to the car and get your father. Have him call the sheriff, just in case Mr. Crighton gives us any trouble.”

“Okay. Mom, don’t make him mad, please.”

“I won’t. Now go.”

The wheelchair came to a stop and Alex stared hard at the hands in her lap. Her own hands. She blinked hard. They looked different. Had they always looked this way?

“Dad, she’s taking her. You can’t let her take Alex away.” Bailey. It sounded like she was crying. *Don’t cry, Bailey. It’s better this way.*

“She’s not taking her anywhere.” His boots stopped shuffling on the tile.

Kim sighed. “Craig, please. Don’t make a scene. It’s not good for Alex or your own kids. Take Wade and Bailey home. I’m taking Alex with me.”

“Alex is my daughter. You can’t have her.”

“She’s not your daughter, Craig. You never married my sister, never adopted her children. Alex is

She's not your daughter, Craig. You never married my sister, never adopted her children. Alex I mine and she leaves with me, today. I'm sorry, Bailey," Kim added, her voice gentling. "But this is the way it needs to be. *You* can come visit her any time."

Scuffed black work boots stopped next to Alex's own feet. She pulled her feet back. Kept her eyes down. *Breathe.*

"No. That girl lived in my house for five years, Kim. She called me 'Daddy.' "

No, that Alex had never done. She'd called him "sir."

Bailey was crying now, hard. "Please, Kim, don't do this."

"You can't take her. She can't even look at you." There was desperation in Craig's voice and truth in his words. Alex couldn't look at Kim, not even now that she'd changed her hair. It was a nice try and Alex knew she should be grateful for Kim's sacrifice. But Kim couldn't change her eyes. "You cut and dyed your hair, but you still look like Kathy. Every time she looks at you, she'll see her mama. Is that what you want?"

"If she stayed with you, she'd see her mama dead in the living room every time she came downstairs," Kim snapped. "What were you thinking, leaving them alone?"

"I had to go to work," Craig snarled back. "It's what keeps bread on my table."

I hate you. I wish you were dead. The voices screamed in her mind, loud and long and angry. Alex bent her head low and Kim's hand brushed the back of her neck. *Don't touch me.* She tried to pull away, but Craig was too close. So she stayed frozen.

"Damn you and damn your work," Kim said bitterly. "You left Kathy alone on the worst day of her life. If you'd been home, she might be alive and Alex wouldn't be here."

The boots came closer and Alex pulled her feet back further.

"Are you saying *I* caused this? That *I* made Kathy kill herself? That *I* made Alex swallow a bottle of pills? *Is that what you're saying?*"

The silence between them was tense and Alex held her breath, waiting. Kim wasn't saying no and Craig's hands were now fisted as tight as Alex's were.

The doors swished open, then closed and there were more footsteps on the tile floor. "Kim, is there a problem?" Kim's husband, Steve. Alex let out the breath she held. He was a big man with a kind face. Alex could look at his face. But not now.

"I don't know." Kim's voice trembled. "Craig, is there a problem?"

Another few beats of silence and Craig's fists slowly relaxed. "No. Will you at least let me and the kids say good-bye?"

"I suppose that would be okay." Kim's perfume grew faint as she moved away.

Craig was coming closer. *Shut the door.* Alex squeezed her eyes closed and held her breath while he whispered in her ear. She concentrated hard, keeping him out of her mind, and finally, finally he stepped away.

She sat hunched over while Bailey hugged her. "I'll miss you, Alex. Whose clothes will I steal now?" Bailey tried to laugh, but choked on a sob. "Write to me, please."

Wade was last. *Shut the door.* Again she held herself rigid as he hugged her good-bye. The voices screeched. It hurt. *Please. Make it stop.* She focused, hands on the door, shoving it closed. Finally Wade stepped away and she could breathe once more.

"Now we'll leave," Kim said. "Please let us go." Alex held her breath again until they reached a white car. Steve scooped her up and settled her on the seat.

Click. Steve fastened her seatbelt, then cupped her face in his hand.

"We'll take care of you, Alex. I promise," he said softly.

He slammed her car door and it was only then that Alex let herself unclench her fist. Just a little

He slammed her car door and it was only then that Alex let herself unclench her fist. Just a little. Just enough to see the bag she held. Pills. A lot of tiny white pills. Where? When? It didn't matter where or when. What mattered was she could now finish what she'd started. She licked her bottom lip and forced her chin up.

"Please." She flinched at the sound of her own voice. It was rusty from lack of use. In the front seat both Steve and Kim jerked around to look.

"Mom, Alex talked!" Meredith was grinning.

Alex was not.

"What is it, honey?" Kim asked. "What do you need?"

Alex dropped her eyes. "Water. Please."

Chapter One

Arcadia, Georgia, Present day
Friday, January 26, 1:25 a.m.

He'd chosen her with care. Taken her with relish. Made her scream, long and loud.

Mack O'Brien shivered. It still gave him goose bumps. Still made his blood race and his nostrils flare as he remembered how she'd looked, sounded. Tasted. The taste of pure fear was like nothing else. This he knew. She'd been his first murder. She would not be his last.

He'd chosen her final resting place with equal care. He let her body roll off his back and drop to the soggy ground with a muted thud. He squatted next to her and arranged the rough brown blanket in which he'd wrapped her like a shroud, his anticipation growing. Sunday was the annual cross-county bicycle race. One hundred cyclists would be passing this way. He'd placed her so that she'd be visible from the road.

Soon she would be found. Soon *they* would hear of her demise.

They'll wonder. And they'll suspect each other. They'll all be afraid.

He stood, satisfied with his handiwork. He wanted them to be afraid. He wanted them to shake and tremble like girls. He wanted them to know the true taste of fear.

Because he knew that taste, just as he knew hunger and fury. That he knew all those flavors so intimately was their fault.

He looked down, nudged the brown blanket with his toe. She had paid. Soon, every one of them would suffer and they would pay. Soon they'd know he'd returned.

Hello, Dutton. Mack is back. And he wouldn't rest until he'd ruined them all.

Cincinnati, Ohio, Friday, January 26, 2:55 p.m.

"Ow. That hurt."

Alex Fallon glanced down at the pale, sullen teenage girl. "I suppose it does at that." Quickly Alex taped the IV needle in place. "Maybe you'll remember this the next time you're tempted to skip school, eat an entire hot fudge sundae, and end up in the ER. Vonnie, you have diabetes and denial won't change that. You have to follow—"

"My diet," Vonnie snarled. "I know already. Why can't everybody leave me alone?"

The words echoed in Alex's mind, as they always did. Gratitude to her family mixed with the sympathy for her patient, as it always did. "One of these days you're going to eat the wrong thing and end up . . . downstairs."

Vonnie gave her best shot at belligerence. "So? What's downstairs anyway?"

"The morgue." Alex held the girl's startled gaze. "Unless that's what you want."

Abruptly, Vonnie's eyes filled with tears. "Some days it is."

"I know, honey." And she understood more than anyone outside her family imagined. "But you're going to have to decide which it's going to be. Live or die."

"Alex?" Letta, their charge nurse, poked her head into the examination room. "You've got an

urgent call on two. I can take over in here."

Alex squeezed Vonnie's shoulder. "I'm done for now." She gave Vonnie the eye. "I don't want to see you in here again." She handed the chart to Letta. "Who is it?"

"Nancy Parker from Fulton County Social Services down in Georgia."

Nancy Barker from Fulton County Social Services down in Georgia.

Alex's heart sank. "That's where my stepsister lives."

Letta lifted her brows. "I didn't know you had a stepsister."

Technically Alex didn't, but the story was too long and her relationship with Bailey too convoluted. "I haven't seen her in a long time." Five years, in fact, when Bailey had shown up on Alex's Cincinnati doorstep higher than a kite. Alex had tried to get Bailey into rehab, but Bailey had disappeared, taking Alex's credit cards with her.

Letta's brow creased with concern. "I hope everything's okay."

Alex had been both expecting and dreading this call for years. "Yeah. Me, too."

It was one of those sad ironies, Alex thought as she hurried to the phone. Alex had been the one to attempt suicide all those years ago and Bailey was the one who'd ended up an addict. Family had made a huge difference. Alex had had Kim and Steve and Meredith to get her through. But Bailey's family . . . Bailey had no one.

She picked up line two. "This is Alex Fallon."

"This is Nancy Barker. I'm with Fulton County Social Services."

Alex sighed. "Just tell me, is she alive?"

There was a long pause. "Who, Miss Fallon?"

Alex winced at the "Miss." She still wasn't used to not being "Mrs. Preville." Her cousin Meredith said it would be just a matter of time after her divorce, but a year had passed and Alex felt no closure. Perhaps it was because she and her ex still crossed paths several times a week. Right at this moment, as a matter of fact. Alex watched Dr. Richard Preville reach next to the phone for his own messages. Carefully not meeting her eyes, he bobbed an awkward nod. No, sharing shifts with her ex was not speeding her along the road to relationship recovery.

"Miss Fallon?" the woman prompted.

Alex wrenched her focus back. "Bailey. That is who you're calling about, isn't it?"

"Actually I'm calling about Hope."

"Hope." Alex repeated it blankly. "I don't understand. Hope what?"

"Hope Crighton, Bailey's daughter. Your niece."

Alex sat down, stunned. "I didn't know Bailey had a daughter." *That poor child.*

"Oh. Then you didn't know that you're listed as the emergency contact on all of Hope's registration forms at her preschool."

"No." Alex drew a bolstering breath. "Is Bailey dead, Ms. Barker?"

"I hope not, but we don't know where she is. She didn't show up for work this morning and one of her coworkers went to her house to check on her. The coworker found Hope curled up in a little ball in a closet."

Sick dread settled in Alex's gut, but she kept her voice calm. "And Bailey was gone."

"The last anyone saw her was last night when she picked Hope up from preschool."

Preschool. The child was old enough for preschool and Alex had no idea she'd even existed. *Oh, Bailey, what have you done?* "And Hope? Was she hurt?"

"Not physically, but she's scared. Very scared. She's not talking to anyone."

"Where is she?"

"Right now she's in emergency foster care." Nancy Barker sighed. "Well, if you're not going to take her, I'll line up a permanent foster family for her."

"I'll take her." The words were out of Alex's mouth before she even knew she planned to say them. But once said, she knew it was the right thing to do.

"You didn't even know she existed until five minutes ago," Barker protested.

You didn't even know she existed until five minutes ago," Barker protested.

"It doesn't matter. I'm her aunt. I'll take her." Like Kim took me. And saved my life. "I'll get there as soon as I can arrange leave from my job and buy a plane ticket."

Alex hung up, turned, and walked into Letta, whose brows were nearly off her forehead. Alex knew she'd been listening. "Well? Can I have the leave?"

Letta's eyes were filled with worry. "Do you have vacation saved up?"

"Six weeks. I haven't taken a day in more than three years." There hadn't been reason to. Richard never had time to go anywhere. He'd always been working.

"Then start out with vacation," Letta said. "I'll get somebody to cover your shifts. But, Alex, you know nothing about this child. Maybe she has a disability or special needs."

"I'll cope," Alex said. "She has no one, and she's family. I won't abandon her."

"Like her mother did." Letta tilted her head. "Like your mother did you."

Alex fought the wince, keeping her face impassive. Her past was only a few clicks away from anyone with Google. But Letta did mean well, so Alex made her lips curve. "I'll call you when I get down there and find out more. Thanks, Letta."

Arcadia, Georgia, Sunday, January 28, 4:05 p.m.

"Welcome back, Danny boy," Special Agent Daniel Vartanian murmured to himself as he got out of his car and surveyed the scene. He'd only been gone two weeks, but it had been an eventful two weeks. It was time to get back to work, back to his life. Which in Daniel's case meant the same thing. Work was his life, and death was his work.

Avenging death, that was. Not causing it. He thought of the past two weeks, of all the death, all the lives destroyed. It was enough to drive a man insane, if he let it. Daniel didn't intend to let it. He'd go back to his life, finding justice for one victim at a time. He'd make a difference. It was the only way he knew to . . . atone.

The victim this day was a woman. She'd been found in a ditch on the side of the road, which was now lined with law enforcement vehicles of all shapes and functions.

The crime lab was already here, as was the ME. Daniel stopped at the edge of the road where someone had strung yellow crime scene tape and peered down into the ditch where the body lay, a technician from the ME's office crouched by her side. She'd been wrapped in a brown blanket that had been pulled away just enough to do the exam. Daniel could see she had dark hair and was perhaps five foot six. She was nude and her face was . . . damaged. He'd lifted one leg over the tape when a voice stopped him.

"Stop, sir. This area is off limits."

Straddling the tape, Daniel looked over his shoulder to where a young, earnest-faced officer stood with one hand on his weapon. "I'm Special Agent Daniel Vartanian, Georgia Bureau of Investigation."

The man's eyes widened. "Vartanian? You mean—I mean—" He took a breath and straightened abruptly. "I'm sorry, sir. I was just surprised, that's all."

Daniel nodded, giving the young man a kind smile. "I understand." He didn't like it, but he did understand. The name Vartanian had gotten quite a bit of publicity in the week since his brother Simon's death, none of it good, all of it deserved. Simon Vartanian had taken seventeen lives in Philadelphia—two of those victims his own parents. The story had made every newspaper in the country. It would be a long time before the name Vartanian could be said without a wide-eyed response. "Where can I find the sheriff?"

The officer pointed about forty feet down the road. "That's Sheriff Cochran."

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