

Scream For Me

Karen Rose

Published by Headline

Extract

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First published in Great Britain in 2008 by
HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP

1

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Cataloguing in Publication Data is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN 978 0 7553 3710 1
Trade paperback ISBN 978 0 7553 3711 8

Typeset in Palatino by Avon DataSet Ltd,
Bidford-on-Avon, Warwickshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Headline's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and
recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests.
The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform
to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

HEADLINE PUBLISHING GROUP
An Hachette Livre UK Company
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.headline.co.uk
www.hachettelivre.co.uk

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

KAREN ROSE

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.*

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.'

SCREAM FOR ME

'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?'

KAREN ROSE

'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 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

SCREAM FOR ME

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

KAREN ROSE

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 seat belt, 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. 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.

KAREN ROSE

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?'

SCREAM FOR ME

'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?'

KAREN ROSE

'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.

'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.'

SCREAM FOR ME

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 tech 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, 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 Corchrane.'

'Thanks, Officer.' Daniel pulled his leg back over the tape and started walking again, conscious of the officer's eyes following him. In two minutes everyone here would know a Vartanian was on the scene. Daniel hoped he could keep the hubbub to a minimum. This wasn't about him or any other Vartanian, it was about that woman lying in the ditch wrapped in a brown

SCREAM FOR ME

blanket. She had family somewhere, people who would be missing her. People who would need justice and closure to get on with their lives.

Daniel had once thought justice and closure to be the same thing, that knowing a perpetrator had been caught and punished for his crimes closed the book on a painful chapter in the lives of the victims and their families. Now, hundreds of crimes, victims, and families later, he understood that every crime created a ripple effect, touched lives in ways that could never be measured. Simply knowing evil had been punished wasn't always enough to allow one to move on. Daniel knew all about that, too.

'Daniel.' It was a surprised greeting from Ed Randall, head of the crime lab team. 'I didn't know you were back.'

'Just today.' It was supposed to have been tomorrow, but having been away for two weeks, Daniel was next in the barrel for an assignment. When this call had come in, his boss had called him back in early. He stuck out his hand to the sheriff. 'Sheriff Corchran, I'm Special Agent Vartanian, GBI. We'll provide any support you request.'

The sheriff's eyes widened as he shook Daniel's hand. 'Any relation to . . . ?'

God help me, yes. He made himself smile. 'I'm afraid so.'

Corchran studied him shrewdly. 'You ready to be back?'

No. Daniel kept his voice level. 'Yes. If it's a problem, I can request someone else.'

Corchran seemed to consider it and Daniel waited, keeping his temper carefully locked down. It wasn't right, wasn't fair, but being judged by his family's deeds was his reality. Finally Corchran shook his head. 'No, you don't need to do that. We're good.'

Daniel's temper settled and again he made himself smile. 'Good. So can you tell me what happened? Who discovered the body and when?'

'Today was our annual Cycle Challenge and this road is part of the course. One of the cyclists noticed the blanket. He didn't

want to lose the race, so he called 911 and kept cycling. I have him waiting at the finish line if you need to talk to him.'

'I'll want to talk to him, yes. Did anyone else stop?'

'No, we got lucky,' Ed Randall said. 'We had an undisturbed scene when we got here and no crowd watching – they were all at the finish line.'

'That doesn't happen very often. Who was first on the scene from your department, Sheriff?' Daniel asked.

'Larkin. He lifted only a corner of the blanket to see her face.' Corchran's stony face flinched, a telling sign. 'I immediately called you guys. We don't have the resources to investigate a scene like this.'

Daniel acknowledged the final statement with a nod. He appreciated sheriffs like Corchran who were willing to bring in the Georgia Bureau of Investigation. So many were territorial, viewing any GBI involvement as . . . a swarm of locusts descending on their town. Yes, that's how the sheriff of Daniel's hometown had put it only two weeks ago. 'We'll work with you in whatever capacity you choose, Sheriff.'

'For now, take it all,' Corchran said. 'My department is at your disposal.' His jaw squared. 'We haven't had a murder in Arcadia in the ten years since I've been in office. We want to see whoever did *that* go away for a long time.'

'We do, too.' Daniel turned to Ed. 'So what do you know?'

'She was killed somewhere else and dumped here. Her body was found wrapped in a brown blanket.'

'Like a shroud,' Daniel murmured and Ed nodded.

'Just like. The blanket appears to be new, it's some wool blend. Her face was beaten badly and there was bruising around her mouth. The ME can give you more on that. There's no sign of struggle down there and no footprints up or down the slope.'

Daniel frowned and looked down into the ditch. It was a drainage ditch and the water ran down to the storm sewer about a hundred yards away. The sides were smooth mud. 'Then he must have walked through the water to the storm sewer, then up

SCREAM FOR ME

to the road.' He considered it a moment. 'This bike race. Was it widely publicized?'

Corchran nodded. 'This is a big fund-raiser for the local youth clubs, so the boosters put flyers in towns fifty miles away. Besides, we've had this race on the last Sunday in January for more than ten years. We get bikers from up north who want to ride where it's warmer. It's a pretty big deal.'

'Then he wanted her to be found,' Daniel said.

'Daniel.' The ME techs came over the crime scene tape. One of them went straight to their rig and the other stopped next to Ed. 'Good to see you back.'

'Good to be back, Malcolm. What do you know?'

Malcolm Zuckerman stretched his back. 'That it's going to be fun getting the body out of that ditch. The incline's steep and the mud's slick. Trey's gonna jerry-rig a crane.'

'Malcolm,' Daniel said with exaggerated patience. Malcolm was always complaining about his back or weather conditions or something. 'What do you know about the victim?'

'Female, Caucasian, mid-twenties most likely. She's been dead about two days. Cause of death appears to be asphyxiation. Bruising on her buttocks and inner thighs indicates sexual assault. Her face has been beaten with a blunt object. Don't know what yet, but it caused significant damage to her facial structure. Nose, cheekbones, jaw are all broken.' He frowned. 'The beating of her face may have been postmortem.'

Daniel lifted a brow. 'So he wanted her to be found, but not identified.'

'That's what I'm thinkin'. I'm betting we won't find her prints in the system. There is a pattern of bruises to the side of her mouth, could be from her assailant's fingers.'

'He held his hand over her mouth until she smothered,' Corchran muttered, his jaw clenched. 'Then pounded her face to pulp. Sonofabitch.'

'That's what it looks like,' Malcolm said, sympathy in his voice, but a weariness in his eyes Daniel more than understood. Too many bodies, too many sonsofbitches. 'We'll get more once

KAREN ROSE

the doc does the examination. You done with me, Danny?’

‘Yeah. Call me when you do the autopsy. I want to be there.’

Malcolm shrugged. ‘Suit yourself. Doc Berg will probably start after Three-M.’

‘What’s Three-M?’ Corchrane asked as Malcolm went back to the ME rig to wait.

‘Morgue morning meeting,’ Daniel told him. ‘That means Dr Berg will probably start the autopsy at nine-thirty or ten. You’re welcome if you want to watch.’

Corchrane swallowed. ‘Thanks. I will if I can.’

Corchrane looked a little green and Daniel didn’t blame him. It wasn’t easy to watch the MEs do their thing. The sound of the bone saws still made Daniel queasy after years of autopsies. ‘That’s fine. What else, Ed?’

‘We got shots of all the area around the body and on both sides of the ditch,’ Ed said. ‘Video and still. We’ll search this side of the ditch first so Malcolm won’t destroy anything getting her out of here, then we’ll set up the lights and search the rest.’ He waved at his team and they headed over the tape. Ed started to follow, then hesitated before drawing Daniel aside. ‘I’m sorry about your parents, Daniel,’ he said quietly. ‘I know there’s nothing I can say. I just wanted you to know.’

Daniel dropped his eyes to the ground, caught off balance. Ed was sorry Arthur and Carol Vartanian were dead. Daniel wasn’t sure he could be. Some days Daniel wasn’t sure his parents hadn’t brought a large measure of their doom on themselves. Simon had been evil, but his parents had enabled his brother, in their own way.

The people Daniel felt truly sorry for were Simon’s other victims. Still . . . Arthur and Carol had been his parents. He could still see them lying in the Philadelphia morgue, dead at the hand of their own son. That hideous picture mixed in with all the others that haunted him, awake or asleep. So much death. So many lives destroyed. *Ripples*.

Daniel cleared his throat. ‘I saw you at the funeral. Thanks, Ed. It meant a lot.’

SCREAM FOR ME

'If you need anything, you know where to call.' Ed gave Daniel's shoulder a hard clap, then followed his team. Daniel turned back to Corchrán, who'd been watching.

'Sheriff, I'd like to talk to Officer Larkin and have him take me down to the body the same way he approached earlier. I know he'll do a thorough report, but I'd like to get his memory and impressions straight from him.'

'Sure. He's stationed down the road, keeping curiosity seekers back.' Corchrán radioed Larkin and in less than five minutes the officer had joined them. Larkin's face was still a little pale, but his eyes were clear. In his hand he held a piece of paper.

'My report, Agent Vartanian. But there is one other thing. I just remembered it when I was driving back here. There was a murder just like this not far from here.'

Corchrán's brows shot up. 'Where? When?'

'Before you got here,' Larkin replied. 'It was thirteen years ago this April. A girl was found in a ditch just like this. She was wrapped in a brown blanket, and she'd been raped and suffocated.' He swallowed. 'And her face had been beaten in, just like this.'

Daniel felt a chill race down his spine. 'You seem to remember it clearly, Officer.'

Larkin looked pained. 'The girl was sixteen, same age as my own daughter at the time. I don't remember the girl's name, but it happened outside of Dutton, which is about twenty-five miles east of here.'

The chill spread and Daniel clenched his body against a shiver. 'I know where Dutton is,' he said. He knew Dutton well. He'd walked its streets, shopped in its stores, played Little League on its team. He also knew that evil had lived in Dutton and had borne the Vartanian name. Dutton, Georgia, was Daniel Vartanian's hometown.

Larkin nodded as he put Daniel's name with current events. 'I expect you do.'

'Thank you, Officer,' Daniel said, managing to keep his voice level. 'I'll look into it as soon as possible. For now, let's go take a look at Jane Doe.'

Dutton, Georgia, Sunday, January 28, 9:05 P.M.

Alex closed the bedroom door, then leaned against it, drained. 'She's finally asleep,' she murmured to her cousin Meredith, who sat on the sofa in the adjoining sitting room of Alex's hotel room.

Meredith looked up from her study of the pages and pages of the coloring books four-year-old Hope Crighton had filled since Alex had taken custody of her niece from the social worker thirty-six hours before. 'Then we need to talk,' she said softly.

There was concern in Meredith's eyes. Coming from a paediatric psychologist who specialized in emotionally traumatized children, this only intensified Alex's dread.

Alex sat down. 'I appreciate you coming. I know you're busy with your patients.'

'I can get someone to take care of my patients for a day or two. I would have been here yesterday had you told me you were coming, because I would have been sitting on the plane right next to you.' There was frustration and hurt in Meredith's voice. 'What were you thinking, Alex? Coming down here all by yourself. Of all places . . . *here*.'

Here. Dutton, Georgia. The name made Alex's stomach churn. It was the last place she'd ever wanted to come back to. But the churning in her stomach was nothing compared to the fear she'd felt when she'd first looked into Hope's blank gray eyes.

'I don't know,' Alex admitted. 'I should have known better. But Mer, I had no idea it would be this bad, but it is as bad as I think, isn't it?'

'From what I've seen in the last three hours? Yes. Whether her traumatizing event was waking up to find her mother gone on Friday or the years that came before that, I can't say. I don't know what Hope was like before Bailey disappeared.' Meredith frowned. 'But she's nothing like I expected her to be.'

'I know. I'd prepared myself for a dirty, malnourished child. I mean, the last time I saw Bailey, she was really bad, Meredith.

SCREAM FOR ME

High and dirty. Track marks on both arms. I've always wondered if I could have done something more.'

Meredith lifted an auburn brow. 'So here you are?'

'No. Well, maybe it started that way, but as soon as I saw Hope, all that changed.' She thought of the little girl with the golden curls and Botticelli angel face. And empty gray eyes. 'I thought for a moment they'd brought me the wrong child. She's clean and well-fed. Her clothes and shoes were like new.'

'The social worker would have given her clean clothes and shoes.'

'Those were the clothes the social worker took from Hope's preschool. Hope's teacher said Bailey always kept a clean set in Hope's cubby. They said Bailey was a good mom, Mer. They were shocked when the social worker told them Bailey had disappeared. The school director said Bailey would never leave Hope alone like that.'

Meredith lifted her brows. 'Does she suspect foul play?'

'Yeah, the preschool director did. She told that to the cops.'

'So what do the cops say?'

Alex clenched her teeth. 'That they're following every lead, but that junkies disappear every day. It was a standard "leave us alone" response. I couldn't get anywhere with them on the phone. They just ignored me. She's been gone three days and they haven't declared her a missing person yet.'

'Junkies do disappear, Alex.'

'I know that. But why would the preschool director lie?'

'Maybe she didn't. Maybe Bailey was a good actress or maybe she had a good spell of sobriety but went back on the juice. For now, let's focus on Hope. You said the social worker told you she'd been coloring all night?'

'Yes. Nancy Barker, she's the social worker, said it was all Hope had done since they'd taken her from the closet.' The closet in Bailey's house. Panic began to well, as it did every time she thought of *that* house. 'Bailey still lives there.'

Meredith's eyes widened. 'Really? I thought it would have been sold years ago.'

'No. I checked the property records online. The deed's still in Craig's name.' The pressure in Alex's chest increased and she closed her eyes, focusing on quieting her mind. Meredith's hand closed over hers and squeezed.

'You okay, kid?'

'Yeah.' Alex shook herself. 'Stupid, these panic attacks. I should be past this.'

'Because you're superhuman,' Meredith said blandly. 'This place was the site of the worst disaster of your life, so stop beating yourself up for being all too human, Alex.'

Alex shrugged, then frowned. 'Nancy Barker said the house was a mess, piles of trash on the floor. The mattresses were old and torn. There was rotten food in the fridge.'

'That I would expect from a junkie's house.'

'Yes, but they found no clothes for Hope or Bailey. None. Clean or dirty.'

Meredith frowned. 'Based on what the preschool said, that is surprising.' She hesitated. 'Did you go to the house?'

'No.' The word shot from Alex's lips like the crack of a bullet. 'No,' she said more evenly. 'I haven't. Yet.'

'When you do, I'll go with you. No arguments. Is Craig still there?'

Focus on the quiet. 'No. Nancy Barker said they tried to locate him, but nobody's heard from him in a long time. I was listed as the emergency contact at the preschool.'

'How did the social worker know where Hope went to preschool?'

'Bailey's coworker told her. That's how they found Hope – Bailey hadn't shown up to work and her coworker was worried and went to check on her during her break.'

'Where does Bailey work?'

'She's a hairdresser, apparently in a pretty upscale salon.'

Meredith blinked. 'Dutton has an upscale salon?'

'No. Dutton has Angie's.' Her mother used to go to Angie's every other Monday. 'Bailey worked in Atlanta. I got the coworker's phone number, but she hasn't been home. I left messages.'

SCREAM FOR ME

Meredith picked up one of the coloring books. 'Where did all these come from?'

Alex eyed the stack. 'Nancy Barker found one in Hope's backpack. She said Hope was staring into space, but when she gave her the coloring book and crayons, Hope started to color. Nancy tried to get her to draw on blank paper, hoping Hope would tell her something through her pictures, but Hope kept grabbing the book. She ran out of coloring books early last night and I had to pay the bellboy to go to the store and buy more. More crayons, too.' Alex stared at the box that had held sixty-four crayons, when new. It now held fifty-seven – every color except red. Every redlike crayon was gone, used down to a half-inch nub.

'She likes red,' Meredith observed.

Alex swallowed hard. 'I don't even want to consider the implications of that.'

Meredith lifted a shoulder. 'It may mean nothing more than that she likes red.'

'But you don't think so.'

'No.'

'She's holding a red crayon now. I finally gave up and let her take it to bed with her.'

'What happened when she ran out of red crayons last night?'

'She cried, but she never said a single word.' Alex shuddered. 'I've seen thousands of children cry in the ER, in pain, in fear . . . but never like that. She was like . . . a robot the way she cried – no emotion. She never made a sound. Not a word. Then she went into what looked like a catatonic state. She scared me so badly that I took her to the clinic in town. Dr Granville checked her out, said she was just in shock.'

'Did he run any tests?'

'No. The social worker had told me she'd taken Hope to the ER after they found her hiding in the closet on Friday. They ran tox screens and titers to check her immunization record. She's had all her childhood immunizations and everything else was in order.'

'Who is her family doctor?'

'I don't know. Granville, the doctor here in town, said he'd never seen Hope or Bailey in "a professional capacity." He seemed surprised Hope was so clean and well cared for, as if he'd seen her dirty before. He wanted to give her a shot, to sedate her.'

Meredith's brows lifted. 'Did you let him?'

'No, and he got a little huffy, asking why I'd brought her at all if I didn't want him to treat her. But I didn't like the idea of drugging a child if you don't need to. She wasn't violent and there seemed no danger of her hurting herself, so I didn't want her drugged.'

'I agree. So all this time Hope never said a word? Are we sure she can speak?'

'The preschool says she's very talkative, big vocabulary. In fact, she can even read.'

Meredith looked taken aback. 'Wow. She's what, four?'

'Barely. The preschool said Bailey read to Hope every night. Meredith, none of this feels like a junkie abandoning her child.'

'You think foul play, too.'

Something in Meredith's voice rubbed Alex wrong. 'Don't you?' she demanded.

Meredith was unperturbed. 'I don't know. I know you've always given Bailey the benefit of the doubt. But now this isn't just about Bailey, it's about Hope and what's best for her. Are you going to bring her home? To your home, I mean?'

Alex thought of the little apartment she only slept in. Richard had kept the house. Alex hadn't wanted it. But her apartment was big enough for herself and one small child. 'That's my intent, yes. But Meredith, if something did happen to Bailey . . . I mean, if she has changed and she's met with some harm . . .'

'What will you do?'

'I don't know yet. I couldn't get anywhere with the police over the phone and I couldn't leave Hope alone to go in person. Can you stay with me for a few days? Help me with Hope while I check this out?'

SCREAM FOR ME

'I had all the appointments with my most critical patients moved to Wednesday before I left. I have to fly back late Tuesday night. It's the best I can do for now.'

'It's a lot. Thank you.'

Meredith squeezed her hand. 'Now go get some sleep. I'll sleep here on the sofa. If you need me, wake me up.'

'I'll sleep in there with Hope. I'm just praying she sleeps through the night. So far she hasn't slept more than a few hours at a time, then she wakes up and colors. If she needs you, I'll let you know.'

'I wasn't talking about Hope needing me. I was talking about you. Now go to sleep.'