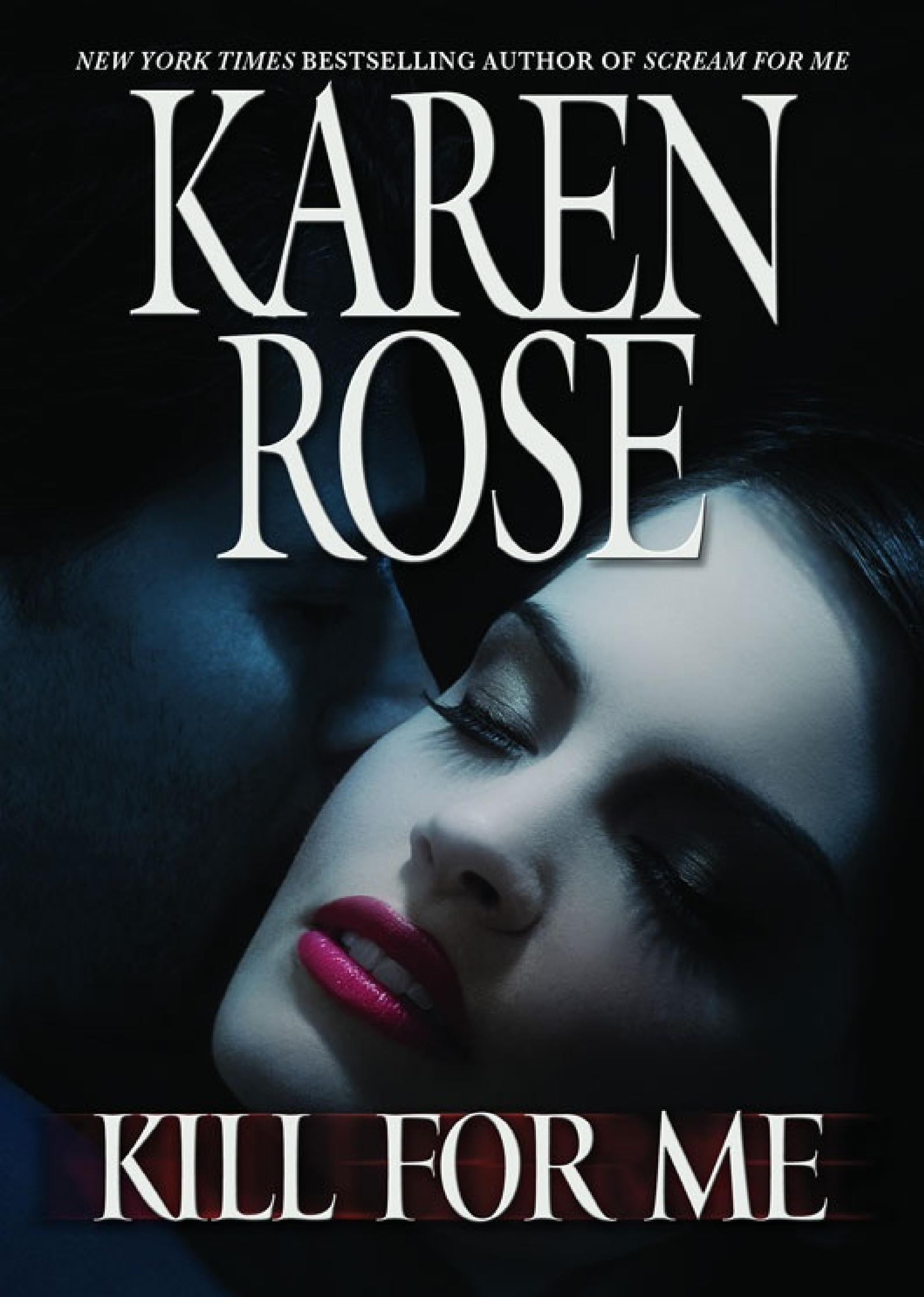


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF SCREAM FOR ME

KAREN ROSE



KILL FOR ME

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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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
Scream for Me

To Martin, for always believing in me even when I don't. I love you.

*To Sarah, for achieving your dreams despite all the obstacles. You inspire me. Life,
Prosperity, Health.*

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Karen Kosztołnyik, Vicki Mellor, and Robin Rue for all you do to make my dreams come true.

As always, all mistakes are my own.

Prologue

Port Union, South Carolina, August, six months earlier

Monica Cassidy felt a flutter in her stomach. *Today would be the day.* She'd waited for sixteen long years, but today the wait would be over. Today she'd be a woman. Finally. And wasn't it about time?

She realized she was twisting her fingers together and forced herself to stop. *Calm down, Monica. There's nothing to be nervous about. This is, like, natural.* And all her friends had done it. Some of them a lot more than once.

Today, it's my turn.

Monica sat on the hotel bed and brushed the dirt off the keycard, which had been hidden exactly where Jason said it would be. She shivered, her lips curving in a small smile. She'd met him in a chat room and they'd clicked right way. She'd meet him in person soon. *In the flesh.* He'd teach her things. He'd promised. He was a college guy, so he'd be a lot better at it than the gross boys that tried to cop a feel every time there was a crush in the hallway between classes.

Finally she'd be treated like an adult. Not like her mom did. Monica rolled her eyes. She'd be a forty-year-old virgin if her mother had her way. *Good thing I'm smarter.*

She grinned to herself, thinking of all the steps she'd taken to cover her tracks that morning. No one friend knew where she was, so they couldn't blab if they wanted to. She'd be back home, well and truly fucked, before her mother made it home from work.

How was your day, honey? Mom would ask. *Same old, same old,* Monica would answer. And as soon as she was able, she'd come back. Because she was sixteen years old for God's sake and nobody was going to tell her what to do ever again. Bells trilled and Monica dug furiously in her purse for her cell. She drew a breath. It was him.

RU there? she read.

Her thumbs were actually trembling. *W8ing 4 U. WAU.* "I'm waiting for you. Where are you?" she murmured as she entered her reply.

POS. PITA. SYS. ILY, he answered. His parents were watching him over his shoulder, she thought, rolling her eyes again. His folks were as big a pain in the ass as hers. But he'd see her soon. She smiled. *He loves me.* This would be so worth it.

ILY2, she typed and snapped her phone shut. It was an old phone. It didn't even have a camera. She was the only one in her crowd without a damn camera on her

phone. Her mom had one. But did Monica? *No.* Mom was such a control freak. *You'll get a phone when you bring up your grades.* Monica sneered. *If you only knew where I am. You'd shut up.* She stood up, suddenly restless. "Treat *me* like a fucking kid," she muttered, taking her purse to the dresser and staring in the mirror. She looked fine, every hair in place. She looked pretty, even. She wanted to be pretty for him.

No, she wanted to be *hot* for him. Monica rummaged in her purse, pulling out the condoms she'd pilfered from her mother's ancient, never-used supply. But they hadn't hit their ex-date, yet, so they'd still be good. She looked at her watch.

Where was he? She was going to be late getting home if he didn't get here soon.

The door creaked open and she turned, the feline smile she'd practiced firmly in place. "Hello there." Then she froze. "You're not Jason."

It was a cop and he was shaking his head. "No, I'm not. Are you Monica?"

Monica lifted her chin, her heart pounding. "What's it to you?"

"You don't know how lucky you are. I'm Deputy Mansfield. We've been tracking your 'boyfriend' Jason for weeks. Your 'boyfriend' is really a fifty-nine-year-old pervert."

Monica shook her head. "No way. I don't believe you." She rushed for the door. "Jason! Run, it's a trap! They're *cops!*"

He caught her shoulder. "We arrested him already."

Monica shook her head again, slower this time. "But he just *IM'd* me."

"That was me using his phone. I wanted to be sure you were in here and that you were unhurt." His face gentled. "Monica, you really are a lucky girl. So many predators out there are trolling for girls just like you, pretending to be boys your age."

"He said he was nineteen. A college boy."

The deputy shrugged. "He lied. Come on, get your things. I'll take you home."

She closed her eyes. She'd seen stories like this on TV and every time her mom would wag her finger. *See?* she'd say. *Perverts out there everywhere.* Monica sighed. *This can't be happening to me.* "My mom is going to kill me."

"Better your mom than that perv," he said evenly. "He's killed before."

Monica felt the blood drain from her face. "He has?"

"At least twice. Come on. Moms never really kill you."

"Shows what you know," she muttered. She grabbed her purse, furiously. *I am so dead.* She'd thought her mother was crazy protective before. *She'll lock me up and throw away the key.* "Oh God," she moaned. "I can't believe this is happening."

She followed the deputy to an unmarked car. She could see the light on the dash when he opened the passenger door. "Get in and buckle up," he said.

Grimly she obeyed. "You can just take me back to the bus station," she said. "You don't have to tell my mom."

He just gave her an amused look before slamming her door shut. He got behind the wheel and reached behind the seat, grabbing a bottle of water. "Here. Try to relax. What's the worst your mom can do?"

"Kill me," Monica muttered, twisting the top off the bottle. She drank a third of it in great gulps. She hadn't realized she was so thirsty. Her stomach growled. And hungry. "Can you stop at MickeyD's at the exit? I haven't eaten today. I have my own money."

"Sure." He started the car and pulled onto the stretch of highway that went back to

the interstate. In a few minutes he'd covered what had taken her an hour to walk that morning after the last ride she'd hitched let her off at a gas station at the exit.

Monica frowned when the world went spinning. "Whoa. I must be hungrier than I thought. There's a . . ." She watched the golden arches disappear behind them as he got back on the interstate. "I need to eat."

"You'll eat later," he said coldly. "For now, just shut up."

Monica stared at him. "Stop. Let me out."

He laughed. "I'll stop when I get to where you're going."

Monica tried to grab the door handle, but her hand didn't move. Her body didn't move. *She couldn't move.*

"You can't move," he said. "Don't worry. The drug's only temporary."

She couldn't see him anymore. She'd closed her eyes and now couldn't open them. *Oh God. Oh God. What's happening?* She tried to scream, but couldn't. *Mom.*

"Hey, it's me," he said. He'd made a call on his phone. "I have her." He laughed softly. "Oh, she's very pretty. And she just might be a virgin like she claimed all along. I'm bringing her in. Have my money ready. Cash, like always."

She heard a sound, a terrified keening, and knew it came from her own throat.

"You shoulda listened to your mama," he said mockingly. "Now you're mine."

Chapter One

Ridgefield House, Georgia, Friday, February 2, 1:30 p.m.

The ringing of Bobby's cell phone brought an abrupt halt to their chess game.

Charles paused, his forefinger hovering over his queen. "Do you need to get that?"

Bobby checked the caller ID and frowned. It was Rocky, calling from her private phone. "Yes, I do. Excuse me, please."

Charles gestured his assent. "By all means. Should I leave the room?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Bobby said, then into the phone asked, "Why are you calling?"

"Because Granville called *me*," Rocky said tensely, road noise in the background. She was in her car. "Mansfield's with him at the river place. Mansfield got a text from Granville saying Daniel Vartanian knew about the product, that he's coming with the state police. Granville says he didn't send the message. I don't think he's lying."

Bobby said nothing. This was far worse an outcome than expected.

After a moment of silence, Rocky hesitantly added, "Vartanian wouldn't have warned them. He would have just shown up with a SWAT team. I . . . I think we were too late."

"We were too late?" Bobby asked scathingly and there was silence.

"All right," Rocky said quietly. "I was too late. But it's done now. We have to assume the river place has been compromised."

"Fuck," Bobby muttered, then winced when Charles lifted his brows admonishingly. "Clear out by the river, not the road. The last thing you want is to meet the cops coming in as you're driving out. Call Jersey. He's moved shipments for me before."

"Granville called him and he's on his way. Trouble is, we can only fit six in the boat."

Bobby scowled. "Jersey's boat is big enough to fit twelve in the cargo hold, easily."

"That boat's elsewhere. This is the only vehicle he had available."

Dammit. Bobby glanced at Charles, who listened avidly. "Eliminate what you can't carry. Make sure you leave nothing behind. Understand? *Nothing can remain.* Use the river if you don't have time to make other arrangements. There are some sandbags behind the generator. Bring them here. I'll meet you at the dock."

"Will do. I'm on my way down there to make sure those two don't fuck it up."

"Good. And watch Granville. He's . . ." Bobby glanced at Charles again, saw he

now appeared amused. "He's not stable."

"I know. One more thing. I hear Daniel Vartanian went to the bank today."

This was far better news. "And? What did you hear that he came out with?"

"Nothing. The safe-deposit box was empty."

Of course it was. Because I emptied it myself years ago. "That's interesting. We'll discuss it later. Now move. Call me when the job is done." Bobby hung up and met Charles's curious gaze. "You know, you could have told me Toby Granville was unraveling before I took him on as a business partner. Freaking crazy SOB."

Charles's mouth curled up in a self-satisfied smile. "And miss all the fun? I don't think so. How is your new assistant working out?"

"Smart. Still gets a little green around the gills when she has to process orders, but never lets the men see it. And it's never stopped her from getting the job done."

"Excellent. Glad to hear it." He tilted his head. "So is everything else all right?"

Bobby sat back, brows lifted. "Your business is fine. Nothing else is your business."

"As long as my investment continues to pay dividends, you may have your secrets."

"Oh, you'll get your dividends. This has been a very good year. Base business profits are up forty percent and the new premium line is just flying out the door."

"But you're about to 'eliminate' stock."

"That stock was at the end of its useful life anyway. Now, where were we?"

Charles moved his queen. "Checkmate, I believe."

Bobby swore lightly, then sighed. "So it is. I should have seen that coming, but I never do. You've always been the master of the chessboard."

"I've always been the master," Charles corrected, and pure reflex had Bobby sitting up a little straighter. Charles nodded, and Bobby swallowed back the annoyance that rose every time Charles tugged the reins. "Of course, I didn't drop by simply to beat you at chess," he said. "I have some news. A plane landed in Atlanta this morning."

An uneasy shiver skittered up Bobby's spine. "So? Hundreds of planes land in Atlanta every day. Thousands even."

"True." Charles began putting the chess pieces in the ivory case he carried with him everywhere. "But this plane carried a traveler in whom you have a vested interest."

"Who?"

Charles met Bobby's narrowed eyes with another satisfied smile. "Susannah Vartanian is back in town," he said, holding up the white ivory queen. "Again."

Bobby took the queen from Charles's hand, trying to appear blasé, when inside a geyser exploded. "Well, well."

"Well, well, indeed. You missed last time."

"I didn't try last time," Bobby snapped defensively. "She was only here a day when the judge and his wife were buried last week." Susannah had stood at her brother's side at their parents' grave, her face expressionless even though turbulence had churned in her gray eyes. Just seeing her again after all this time. . . . The turbulence in Susannah's eyes was nothing compared to the seething rage Bobby had been forced to swallow.

"Don't you snap the head off my queen, Bobby," Charles drawled. "She was hand-

carved by a master craftsman outside Saigon. She's worth more than you are."

Bobby placed the queen on Charles's palm, ignoring that last jab. *Calm down. You make mistakes when you're riled.* "She went back to New York too quickly last week. I didn't have time to adequately prepare." It sounded whiny, which made Bobby angrier.

"Planes fly both ways, Bobby. You didn't have to wait for her to return." Charles snuggled the queen into her velvet slot within his ivory case. "But, it would appear you now have a second chance. I hope you plan more effectively this time."

"On that you can depend."

Charles's smile was cagey. "Just promise me a ringside seat when the fireworks begin. I'm partial to the red fireworks myself."

Bobby's smile was grim. "I can guarantee lots of red. Now if you'll excuse me, I have some pressing business to attend to."

Charles stood. "I have to be going anyway. I have a funeral to attend."

"Who's getting buried today?"

"Lisa Woolf."

"Well, Jim and Marianne Woolf better enjoy it. At least they won't have to fight the other reporters. They'll have a ringside seat, right on the family pew."

"Bobby." Charles shook his head in mock outrage. "Such a thing to say."

"You know I'm right. Jim Woolf would sell his own sister for a byline."

Charles settled his hat on his head and picked up his walking stick, his ivory box tucked under his arm. "And someday, you may be able to say the same."

No, Bobby thought, watching Charles drive away, *not for something as insignificant as a byline.* Now for a birthright . . . that was an entirely different matter. But there would be time for dreams later. Now there was work to be done.

"Tanner! Come here. I need you."

The old man appeared, seemingly from nowhere, as was his way. "Yes?"

"Unexpected guests are on the way. Please prepare accommodations for six more."

Tanner gave a single nod. "Of course. While you were in with Mr. Charles, Mr. Haynes called. He'll be coming by tonight to secure a companion for the weekend."

Bobby smiled. Haynes was a premium client, a rich man with depraved tastes. And he paid cash. "Excellent. We'll be ready."

Charles stopped his car at the end of the street. From here the turrets of Ridgefield House were still visible. The house had stood in that place for nearly a hundred years. It was a strong house, built the way they used to be. Charles had an appreciation for good architecture, having lived in many places a rat wouldn't call home.

Bobby used Ridgefield to house "inventory," and the location was ideal for this purpose. Situated far off the main road, most people didn't even know the house still stood. It was close enough to the river for convenience, but far enough away that it was safe if the river swelled. It wasn't large enough or beautiful enough or even old enough to be on any conservator's list, which made it simply perfect.

For years Bobby had spurned this house as old and ugly and beneath consideration, until maturity had revealed what Charles had learned long ago. *Flashy packages draw attention. The mark of true success is invisibility.* Being able to hide in plain sight had

enabled him to pull the strings of the flashy, the pompous. *Now, they are nothing but my puppets. They dance to my tune.*

It made them angry, powerless, but they didn't know the true meaning of powerlessness. They lived in fear of losing the possessions they'd accumulated, so they surrendered their pride, their decency. Their *morality*, which was merely a religious man's farce. Some surrendered with barely a nudge. Those people Charles viewed with contempt. They had no idea what it meant to lose everything. *Everything*. To be stripped bare of physical pleasure, to be deprived of the most basic of human needs.

The weak feared losing their stuff. But Charles did not. Once a man was stripped to the bone of his humanity . . . then he had no fear. Charles had no fear.

But he did have plans, plans that included Bobby and Susannah Vartanian.

Bobby was a level higher than all the others. Charles had molded Bobby's quick mind when it was young and molten and full of fury. Full of questions and hate. He'd convinced Bobby the time would come for revenge, for claiming the birthright that circumstances—and certain people—had denied. But Bobby still danced to Charles's tune. Charles simply allowed Bobby to believe the tune was original.

He opened the top of his ivory box, lifted the queen from her slot, and pressed the hidden spring that had a lower drawer sliding out. His journal was on top of the belongings he never left home without. Thoughtfully he thumbed to the first blank page and began to write. *Now is the time for my protégé's revenge, because I wish it to be. I planted the seed years ago. I've only watered it today. When Bobby sits down at the computer to work, the photograph of Susannah Vartanian will be waiting.*

Bobby hates Susannah, because I wish it. But Bobby was indeed correct on one score: Toby Granville is becoming more unstable every year. Sometimes absolute power—or the illusion thereof—does corrupt absolutely. When Toby becomes too big a danger, I'll have him killed, just like I had Toby Granville kill others.

Taking a life is a powerful thing. Sticking your knife into a man's gut and watching the life seep from his eyes . . . a powerful thing indeed. But forcing another to kill . . . that is the ultimate power. Kill for me. It's playing God. Charles smiled. *It's fun.*

Yes, Toby would soon need to be killed. But there would be another Toby Granville. In time, there would be another Bobby. *And I will go on.* He closed his journal, replaced it and the queen in their proper places as he'd done countless times before.

Dutton, Georgia, Friday, February 2, 2:00 p.m.

She hurt. All over. They'd beaten her head this time, and kicked her ribs. Monica firmed her lips in grim satisfaction. But it had been worth it. She'd get away or die trying. She'd force them to kill her before she let them use her anymore.

Then they'd lose a *depreciable asset*. That's what they'd called her. She'd heard them, talking on the other side of the wall. *They can kiss my depreciable asset.* Anything, even death, was better than the life she had lived for . . . how long had it been?

She'd lost track of how many months had passed. Five, maybe six. Monica had

never truly believed in a hell before. She sure as hell did now.

For a while she'd lost her will to live, but thanks to Becky, she'd gotten it back. It was Becky who'd tried to escape so many times. They'd tried to stop her, to break her. They'd broken Becky's body, but not her spirit. In the short time they'd whispered through the wall that separated them, Monica had drawn strength from the girl she'd never seen. The girl whose death had rekindled her own desire to live. *Or die trying.*

She drew what she'd wanted to be a deep breath, wincing before her lungs fully inflated. Her rib was probably broken. Maybe more than one. She wondered where they'd taken Becky's body after they'd beaten her to death. She could still hear the crunching blows, because they'd meant for her to. They'd opened all their doors so they could hear every punch, every kick, and every one of Becky's moans. They'd meant for them all to hear. To be afraid. To learn a lesson.

Every girl in the place. There were at least ten of them, in varying degrees of *depreciation*. Some were newly initiated, others old hands at the oldest profession in the world. *Like me. I just want to go home.*

Monica gave her arm a weak shake and heard the resulting clink of the chain that held her to the wall. Just like every girl in the place. *I'm never going to escape. I'm going to die. Please, God, just let it be soon.*

"Hurry, you idiots. We don't have time to fuck around."

Someone was out there, in the hall outside her cell. *The woman.* Monica's jaw clenched. She hated the woman.

"Hurry," the woman said. "Move. Mansfield, put these boxes on the boat."

Monica didn't know the woman's name, but she was bad. Worse than the men—the deputy and the doctor. Mansfield was the deputy, the one who'd kidnapped her and brought her here. For a long time she hadn't believed he was a real deputy, had thought that his uniform was just a costume, but he was for real. It was when she'd realized he was a real cop that she'd given up hope.

As mean as Mansfield was, the doctor was worse. He was cruel, because he enjoyed seeing them in pain. The look in his eyes when he was doing his worst . . . Monica shivered. The doctor wasn't sane, of that she was certain.

But the woman . . . she was evil. To her, this horror, this so-called *life* . . . it was "just business." To the woman, every girl in the place was a depreciable, renewable *asset*. Renewable because there were always more teenaged girls stupid enough to be lured away from the safety of their families. Lured here. To hell.

Monica could hear the grunts as they moved the boxes onto . . . what? She heard squeaking and immediately recognized the sound. It was the gurney with the rusty wheels. It was where the doctor "fixed them up," got them ready to go "back in the game" after a "client" had beaten the ever-living shit out of them. Of course sometimes the doctor did the beating, then all he had to do was lift them from the floor to the gurney, making his job that much easier. She *hated* him. But she feared him more.

"Take the girls in ten, nine, six, five, four and . . . one," the woman said.

Monica's eyes flew open. She was in cell number one. She squinted, willing her eyes to get used to the darkness. *Something's wrong.* Her heart started to beat faster. Someone was coming to help them. *Hurry. Please hurry.*

"Cuff their hands behind them and take them out one at a time," the woman

snapped. "Keep your gun on them at all times and do not let them get away."

"What do we do with the others?" It was a deep voice. The doctor's guard.

"Kill them," the woman said flatly, without hesitation.

I'm in cell one. She's going to put me on a boat and take me away. Away from the help that was coming. I'll fight. By God, I'll get away or die trying.

"I'll take care of them." It was the doctor, whose eyes were so eager. So cruel.

"Fine," the woman said. "Just don't leave their bodies here. Dump them in the river. Use the sandbags behind the generator. Mansfield, don't just stand there. Get those boxes and girls on the damn boat before we have cops crawling up our asses. Then bring the gurney back for the good doctor. He'll need it to get the bodies to the river."

"Yes, sir," Deputy Mansfield sneered.

"Don't get smart," the woman said, her voice fading as she moved away. "Move."

Silence hung in the air, then the doctor said quietly, "Take care of the other two."

"You mean Bailey and the reverend?" the guard asked in a normal voice.

"Sshh," the doctor hissed. "Yes. Do it quietly. *She* doesn't know they're here."

The other two. Monica had heard them, through the wall. The doctor's office was next to her cell, so she heard a lot. The doctor had beaten the woman he'd called Bailey for days, demanding a key. *A key to what?* He'd beaten the man, too, demanding a confession. What did he want the reverend to confess?

In a few seconds Monica forgot about Bailey and the reverend. Shrieks and sobs filled the air, louder even than the blood pounding in her ears. The screams scraped at the inside of her mind as one girl was dragged away, then another, then another. *Stay calm.* She had to stay focused. *They're coming for me.*

Yes, but they have to unlock the chain before they cuff you. For a few seconds, your hands will be free. You'll run, scratch, claw their goddamn eyes out if you have to.

But even as she tried to bolster her courage, she knew it was useless. Before the last beating she might have had a chance. And once she got out, then what? They were miles from anywhere. She'd be dead before she got to the hallway.

A sob rose in her throat. *I'm sixteen and I'm going to die. I'm sorry, Mom. I should have listened to you.*

Crack. She flinched at the gunshot. More screams, terrified, hysterical screams. But Monica was too tired to scream. She was almost too tired to be afraid. Almost.

Another shot. And another. And another. Four shots so far. She could hear his voice, the doctor. He was taunting the girl in the next cell.

"Say your prayers, Angel," he said, laughter in his voice. Monica hated him. She wanted to kill him. She wanted to see him suffer and bleed and die.

Crack. Angel was dead. And four others.

The door flew open and Deputy Mansfield stood in the opening, his face hard and hateful. He was on her in two strides, unlocking the chain that held her to the wall, none too gently. Monica squinted at the light as Mansfield yanked the shackle from her wrist.

She was free. *So fucking what?* She was trapped, just the same.

"Come on," Mansfield grunted, dragging her to her feet.

"I can't," she whispered, her knees giving out.

"Shut up." Mansfield jerked her to her feet as if she weighed no more than a doll.

At this point, that wasn't too far from the truth.

"Wait." The woman was in the hallway, right outside Monica's door. She stood in the shadow, as she always did. Monica had never seen her face, but still she dreamed of the day she could claw the woman's eyes out.

"The boat's full," the woman said.

"How can it be?" the doctor asked, from out in the hall. "It holds six. You took five."

"The boxes took up a lot of the space," the woman answered, her tone short. "Vartanian will be here any minute with the state cops. We need to be downstream before he gets here. Kill her and get the bodies out of here."

So it'll be now. No need to run or fight. Monica wondered if she'd hear the gun fire or if she'd be dead instantly. *I won't beg. I won't give him the satisfaction.*

"This one's not that bad off," the doctor said. "She can still work for months, maybe a year. Toss some of the boxes overboard or burn them. But make room for her. Once I break her, she'll make the best asset we've ever had. Come on, Rocky."

Rocky. The woman's name was Rocky. Monica committed it to memory. Rocky moved closer to the doctor, so that she emerged from the shadows and Monica had her first look at the woman's face. Monica squinted, trying to block out the spinning room as she memorized every feature. If there was a life after death, Monica would come back and haunt her until the woman was a drooling lump of insanity.

"The boxes stay on the boat," Rocky said impatiently.

The doctor's mouth twisted in contempt. "Says you?"

"Says Bobby. So unless you want to tell Bobby why you left incriminating records behind that would ruin us all, you'll shut your mouth and kill this bitch so we can get out of here. Mansfield, come with me. Granville, just do it and hurry. And for God's sake, make sure they're all dead. I don't want them screaming as we chuck them in the river. If any cops are close, they'll come running."

Mansfield released Monica and her leg buckled. She dropped to her knees holding on to the dirty cot for support as Mansfield and Rocky left the room, leaving her staring at the end of the doctor's gun.

"Just do it," Monica hissed. "You heard the lady. Hurry up and do it."

The doctor's mouth turned up in that cobra smile that turned her gut to water. "You think it's going to be fast. You think it's going to be painless."

Crack. Monica screamed as the pain in her head was drowned out by the burning in her side. He'd shot her, but she wasn't dead. *Why am I not dead?*

He smiled at her as she twisted, trying to make the pain stop. "You've been a thorn in my side since the day you got here. If I had time, I'd slice you to ribbons. But I don't. So say good-bye, Monica." He lifted the gun, then jerked his head to one side, his face darkening in rage at the same moment another shot rang in her ears. Monica screamed again as fire burned across the side of her head. Squeezing her eyes shut, she waited for the next shot. But it never came. Blinking back tears, she opened her eyes.

He was gone and she was alone. And not dead.

He missed. Goddamn him to hell, *he missed.* He was gone. *He'll be back.*

But she saw no one. *Vartanian will be here any minute with the state cops.* The woman had said this. Monica didn't know anybody named Vartanian, but whoever he was, he was her only chance at survival. *Get to the door.* Monica pushed to her knees

and crawled. A foot. Another foot. *Get to the hall and you can get away.*

She heard footsteps. A woman, beaten and bloody, her clothes torn, was staggering toward her. *The other two*, the doctor had said. This was Bailey. She'd gotten away. *There was still hope.* Monica lifted her hand. "Help me. Please."

Bailey hesitated, then yanked her to her feet. "Move."

"Are you Bailey?" Monica managed to whisper.

"Yes. Now, move or die." Together they staggered down the hall. Finally they came to a door and stumbled into daylight, so bright it hurt.

Bailey came to an abrupt stop and Monica's heart dropped to her stomach. In front of them stood a man with a gun pointed straight at them. He wore the same uniform as Mansfield. The badge on his shirt said "Sheriff Frank Loomis." This wasn't Vartanian with the state police. This was Mansfield's boss and he wouldn't let them get away.

So this is how it would end. Tears seeped down her face, burning her raw skin as Monica waited for the next crack of gunfire.

To her shock Sheriff Loomis put his finger to his lips. "Follow the trees," he whispered. "You'll find the road." He pointed to Monica. "How many more in there?"

"None," Bailey whispered harshly. "He killed them all. All except her."

Loomis swallowed. "Then go. I'll go get my car and meet you by the road."

Bailey tightened her hold. "Come on," she whispered. "Just a little bit longer."

Monica stared at her feet, willing them to move. One step, then another. Freedom. She'd get to freedom. Then she'd make them all pay. Or die trying.

Dutton, Georgia, Friday, February 2, 3:05 p.m.

Susannah Vartanian stared at the passenger side mirror as the house in which she'd grown up grew smaller as each second passed. *I have to get out of here.* As long as she remained here, at this house, *in this town*, she was no longer the woman she'd become. She was no longer a successful New York City assistant district attorney who commanded respect. As long as she was here, she was a child, alone and afraid, hiding in a closet. A victim. Susannah was damn tired of being a victim.

"Are you all right?" The question came from the man behind the wheel. Special Agent Luke Papadopoulos. Her brother's partner and best friend. Luke had driven her here an hour before and then the growing dread in the pit of her gut had made her wish he'd slow down. Now that it was over, she wished he'd drive faster.

Get me away from here. Please. "I'm fine." She didn't need to look at Papadopoulos to know he watched her. She'd felt the weight of his gaze from the moment they'd met the week before. She'd been standing next to her brother at their parents' funeral and Luke had come to pay his respects. He watched her then. He watched her now.

But Susannah's gaze was fixed on the passenger side mirror. She wanted to look away from the rapidly shrinking house of her youth, but her eyes would not obey. The lone figure standing in the front yard compelled her to keep watching. Even from a distance she could feel the sadness that weighed down his broad shoulders.

Her brother Daniel was a big man, as their father had been. The women in their family were small, but the men were hulking and large. Some larger than others.

Susannah swallowed back the panic that had lurked at the base of her throat for the past two weeks. *Simon's dead, for real this time. He can't hurt you anymore.* But he could, and he would. That he could torment her from beyond the grave was an irony Simon would find hilarious. Her older brother Simon had been one son of a bitch.

Now he was a dead son of a bitch and Susannah hadn't shed a single tear. Her parents were dead as well, because Simon had killed them. Now, only the two of them remained. *Just me and Daniel,* she thought bitterly. *Just one big happy family.*

Just she and her oldest brother, Special Agent Daniel J. Vartanian, Georgia Bureau of Investigation. One of the good guys. Daniel had built a career trying to make up for the fact that he was Judge Arthur Vartanian's spawn. *Just like I have.*

She thought of the devastation in his eyes when she'd walked away, leaving him standing in the front yard of the old house. After thirteen years, Daniel finally knew what he'd done, and more importantly, what he had not.

Now Daniel wanted forgiveness, Susannah thought bitterly. He wanted atonement. After more than ten years of total silence, her brother Daniel wanted a relationship.

Her brother Daniel wanted too damn much. He'd have to live with what he had done, and what he had not. *Just like I have.*

She knew why he'd left, so long ago. Daniel hated the house almost as much as she did. *Almost.* She'd managed to avoid the house the week before, when they'd buried their parents. After the funeral Susannah walked away, vowing never to return.

But a phone call from Daniel the day before had brought her back. *Here.* To Dutton. *To this house.* To face what she had done, and importantly, what she had not.

An hour ago she'd stood on that front porch for the first time in years. It had taken every ounce of her strength to walk in that door, up those stairs, into her brother Simon's old bedroom. Susannah did not believe in ghosts, but she did believe in evil.

Evil lived in that house, in that bedroom, long after Simon died. *Both times.*

The evil had settled around her as soon as she'd entered Simon's room, sending panic clawing up her throat along with a scream she kept silenced. She'd drawn on her last reserves, keeping the illusion of serenity and control intact as she'd forced herself into the closet, dreading what she feared lay behind its walls.

Her worst nightmare. Her greatest shame. For thirteen years it had remained hidden in a box in a hidey-hole behind Simon's bedroom wall, unbeknownst to anyone. *Even me. Especially me.* After thirteen years, the box was out of the closet. *Ta-da.*

Now, the box resided in the trunk of the car belonging to Special Agent Luke Papadopoulos, GBI. Daniel's partner and friend. Papadopoulos was taking the box back to GBI headquarters in Atlanta where it would be entered into evidence. Where CSI techs and detectives and the legal team would sort through the contents. Hundreds of pictures, hideous and obscene and very, very real. *They'll see. They'll know.*

The car went around a bend and the house disappeared. The spell broken, Susannah eased back against the seat and drew a quiet breath. It was finally over.

No, it was only beginning for Susannah, and nowhere near the end for Daniel and his partner. Daniel and Luke were chasing a killer, a man who'd murdered five Dutton women in the last week. A man who'd turned his murder victims into clues to lead authorities to what was left of a band of rich-boy thugs who'd wreaked their own evil on Dutton's teenaged girls thirteen years before. A man who, for his own reasons, wanted the rich boys' crimes made public. A man who hated the band of rich-boy

bastards almost as much as Susannah did. Almost. No one hated them more than Susannah. Unless it was one of their twelve other surviving victims.

Soon they'll know, the other victims. Soon everyone will know, she thought.

Including Daniel's partner and friend. He still watched her, his eyes dark and brooding. She sensed Luke Papadopoulos saw more than she wanted anyone to see.

He'd certainly gotten an eyeful today. Soon, everyone would. Soon . . . Her stomach pitched and she concentrated on not throwing up. Soon her greatest shame would be the chatter around water coolers and coffee pots all over the country.

She'd overheard enough water cooler chatter to know exactly how it would go. *Did you hear?* they'd whisper, pretending to look horrified. *Did you hear about those rich boys down in Dutton, Georgia, who drugged and raped those girls thirteen years ago? One of them even murdered one of the girls. They took pictures. Can you imagine?*

And they'd all shake their heads, imagining it and secretly wishing those pictures would get leaked to the Web where they might "accidentally" stumble upon them.

Dutton, another would muse, unwilling to be left out. *Isn't that the town where all those women were murdered and left in drainage ditches? Just in the last week?*

Yes, another would confirm. *It's also that Simon Vartanian's hometown. He was one of the rich-kid rapists—he took the pictures thirteen years ago. He's also the one who killed all those people up in Philadelphia. Some detective up in Philly killed him.*

Seventeen people dead, including her own parents. Countless lives destroyed. *I could have stopped it all, but I didn't. Oh my God. What have I done?* She kept her expression cool and her body stationary, but in her mind she rocked like a scared child.

"That was difficult," Papadopoulos murmured.

His rumble of a voice brought her back and she blinked hard, remembering who she was now. An adult. A respected attorney. One of the good guys. *Yeah. Right.*

She turned away from him, fixing her gaze once again on the side mirror. *Difficult* was far too sanitized a word for what she'd just done. "Yes," she replied. "Difficult."

"Are you all right?" he asked again.

No, I am not all right, she wanted to snap, but kept her voice cool. "I'm fine." And outwardly, she was. Susannah was skilled at maintaining the illusion, as she should be. She was Judge Arthur Vartanian's daughter, after all, and what she hadn't inherited through blood she'd learned by watching her father live a lie every day of their lives.

"You did the right thing, Susannah," Papadopoulos said quietly.

Yeah, right. Thirteen years too late. "I know."

"We'll be able to put away three rapists with the evidence you helped us find today."

There should have been seven men going to prison. *Seven.* Unfortunately, four of them were already dead, including Simon. *I hope you're all burning in hell.*

"And thirteen women will be able to face their attackers and get justice," he added.

There should have been sixteen women facing their attackers, but two had been murdered and the other had taken her own life. *No, Susannah, there should have only been one victim. It should have stopped with you.*

But she'd said nothing then, and she'd have to live with that for the rest of her life.

"Facing one's attacker is an important part of dealing with an assault," Susannah said levelly. At least that's what she'd always told the rape victims who were uncertain about testifying in court. In the past she'd believed it. Today she wasn't so sure.