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Karen Rose's next Cincinnati novel

INTO THE DARK

On sale November 26

||| CINCINNATI, OHIO
SATURDAY, MARCH 9, 1:30 A.M.

R*un. Don't look back. Just run.*

Michael Rowland clutched Joshua tighter and gritted his teeth against the sharp rocks and twigs digging into his feet. And he ran as fast as he could.

Blinking away tears, he focused on reaching the end of the driveway, at the bottom of the big hill.

Get to the road.

And then? He didn't know. He'd figure it out when he got there.

He'd figure it all out when he got there.

Where is there?

Shut up. Shut up and run.

He fought the urge to look behind him. He wasn't sure if he'd knocked Brewer out or not. Even if he had, the asshole could come to, and the minute he did, he'd be coming after them. Checking to see wouldn't make a bit of difference. It would only slow them down and make it easier for Brewer to catch them.

He'll kill me, Michael thought. Of that he had no doubt. But he'd do worse to Joshua. Joshua, who was only five. So Michael kept running.

He was approaching the cluster of trees that Joshua called the "forest." At one time it had been an orchard. Now it was totally overgrown. Branches grew every which way and bramble bushes had nearly taken over.

Damn bramble bushes. Michael's feet were bleeding now. *It doesn't matter.* He ignored the pain, welcoming the cover of the trees. *Move. Move.*

He found another burst of speed, ducking around trees, grateful for the agility drills that his coach had made them do. Michael was fast—fastest on the JV soccer team, even though he'd been the youngest. But he needed to run faster. *Please let me be faster.*

The flickering light that marked the end of the driveway was closer now, barely visible through the trees. He'd run about halfway. Another quarter mile to go.

He felt the yank on his foot, a millisecond before he was pitching forward into the darkness. Airborne.

Joshua.

Michael tilted his body at the last moment, hitting the ground with his shoulder. A burst of pain had him swallowing a grunt, the last-minute tilt giving him enough momentum to continue rolling to his back, then around to rest his elbows on the ground, his arms still clutching Joshua tightly.

He dragged in a breath, blinking as he got his bearings. He hunched over Joshua, in case Brewer had been on their tail. But there were no kicks. No hits.

Nothing.

Michael lifted his head and looked around. No one was behind him. It hadn't been Brewer grabbing his foot. *Must have been a tree root.*

Maybe he had knocked Brewer out. The thought filled him with dark satisfaction.

He glanced down at Joshua. Still asleep. Not dead. Just drugged. He wondered what had been in the syringe the bastard had been injecting him with. Michael said a small prayer of thanks for the extra soda he'd had before bed. If he hadn't needed to pee, he wouldn't have been awake to see Brewer plunging a needle in his brother's arm.

Michael frowned at Joshua's peaceful little face. *Should I take him to the hospital?* He wasn't even sure how to do that. He'd have to figure that out, too, once he'd gotten them away from Brewer's house.

He took another moment to watch his brother's chest rise and fall. *At least he's not dead.*

When he'd staggered down the stairs—his own sight blurry from the punch Brewer had thrown to the side of his head when he'd tried to grab the syringe—he'd seen Brewer carrying Joshua toward the front door. For a terrible minute, he'd thought Joshua was dead. He hadn't been moving.

Michael hadn't hesitated to find out. Whatever Brewer had planned, it wasn't good. Leaping from the third step onto Brewer's back, he'd knocked the man down.

Brewer had released Joshua long enough to punch Michael a second time, this time in the gut. Stumbling backward, Michael had grabbed the iron shovel from the fireplace and swung it with all his might. Brewer had been leaning down to pick up Joshua from the floor when Michael had hit him in the head with the shovel. Brewer had gone down on his knees and Michael had shoved him away from his little brother.

Who *had* been breathing. *Thank God.*

Then Michael had picked up Joshua and run.

Wincing at the pain in his shoulder, Michael pushed to his knees, gently settling Joshua on the ground so that he could do a three-sixty search.

So many times in his life he'd wished he could hear. Never so much as this moment. If Brewer was following, Michael wouldn't be able to hear a twig breaking or the man's labored breathing.

Brewer could be hiding anywhere. Michael didn't trust the bastard as far as he could throw him.

Stop wasting time. Get to the road.

Drawing a deep breath, Michael picked Joshua up and cradled him against his good shoulder. He took a step and had to bite back a scream.

It hurts. God, it hurts. The pain was shooting from his shoulder, up his neck, to the back of his head now. He hoped he hadn't whimpered.

Taking another look around, he started walking again, slowly. Yeah, it hurt. But he'd suck it up. He'd had worse, after all. Lots of times. Thanks to Brewer.

For a moment he wished the man was dead, then shook his head hard. *No.* Not dead. Just in jail. *Where other bad guys—bigger, meaner bad guys—will hurt him every day of every year for the rest of his miserable life.*

That would be . . . What had his teacher called it? *Oh, right. Poetic justice.*

He came to the edge of the old orchard and peered into the night. He could see the flickering light at the end of the driveway again. He was glad he'd known it had always flickered. Otherwise he might be worried that he had a concussion.

He took a step out of the trees, then froze. *Shit. Oh, shit.*

He scrambled back under cover and lay down out of sight, the pain in his shoulder making his eyes tear up. He blinked the wetness away and stared at the car making its way down the driveway toward the main road. It was too dark to see the make, model, or color, but that didn't matter because Michael already knew it was a 2018 BMW 530i. Alpine white exterior with a tan leather interior. Brewer was very proud of his car.

The car was moving super slowly. Maybe five miles per hour, if that. It stopped, then crawled another few feet forward.

He's looking for us. Oh, God. What do I do? Pulse rocketing, Michael tightened his hold on his brother.

He'll kill me. And then he'll take Joshua. To where, Michael had no idea. But it would be bad.

And then . . . another set of headlights pulled into the driveway from the main road. The vehicle was barely visible in the flickering light, but Michael could make out a dark SUV. Maybe black.

The SUV stopped and a man got out. A big man. A big bald man. The flickering light reflected off his head as he strode from the SUV to Brewer's BMW, now at a complete stop.

Because the SUV had blocked its exit.

The man crossed around to the BMW's door and yanked it open. A second later he was pulling Brewer from his car by the shirt collar and dragging him to the SUV. Once they were on the bald man's driver's side, Michael could see that Brewer was oddly limp.

If Michael hadn't been so scared, he would have cheered. Finally someone was bigger than Brewer and giving him a taste of his own medicine.

Michael frowned when Brewer twisted in the man's grip, because he looked like he was moving in slo-mo. Brewer had reached into his pocket when he was thrown to the ground. The man grabbed something from his hand.

Oh my God. It was a gun. Brewer had brought one of his guns. *He would have killed me with it.*

But now Brewer's gun was in the big man's hand. Michael held his breath, waiting for the man to shoot the monster who'd made their lives a living hell for five and a half years—ever since the day he'd married their mother, Stella.

Who was as useless as spit.

But the man didn't shoot Brewer. He pocketed the gun, then yanked Brewer to his feet and pinned him against the SUV. Then he put his big hands around Brewer's throat.

Brewer struggled.

Until he didn't anymore.

Michael's mouth fell open as Brewer's body went limp once again, falling to the ground in a crumpled heap. The big man took a step back, fists on his hips as he stared down, shaking his head.

Oh my God. He'd killed him. The big, bald man had killed him.

Abruptly aware that he was breathing hard, Michael clenched his jaws closed so that the man wouldn't hear him.

Luckily the man was focused on Brewer. He opened the hatch of the SUV and tossed Brewer in, as if he weighed no more than one of Joshua's action figures.

Slamming the hatch closed, he walked to the BMW's driver's side and leaned in. When he straightened, he tossed something in the air and caught it one-handed.

The keys. He'd taken Brewer's car keys.

The man then opened all four of the BMW's doors and the trunk, searching for something. When he didn't find it, he closed the doors, pocketed Brewer's keys, backed the SUV to the main road, and drove away.

Michael let out a quiet breath. *No keys.* He didn't know how to drive yet, but he could have figured it out. Now the car was no longer an escape option.

But now I don't need to escape. Brewer is gone.

And Michael was so tired. His mother wasn't home tonight. She was out partying with her friends, getting stoned again. Which was probably the reason Brewer had been so bold. He usually snuck around to do his dirty work.

But now there would be no one in the house to hurt them.

Besides, Michael knew where Brewer kept the rest of his guns and he knew how to use them to keep his

little brother safe. *I'll take Joshua home. Get some sleep. And in the morning I'll figure out what to do next.*

He'd made it back through the orchard when Joshua's eyes blinked open. His mouth curved when he saw Michael's face.

"Hi," Joshua said.

Or at least that's what it looked like he'd said, and Michael was pretty good at guessing people's speech. Especially Joshua's. Michael had been watching his brother speak since he'd uttered his first words.

Michael smiled down at him, despite the pain in his shoulder. "You okay?" he voiced, because his arms were full and he couldn't sign.

Joshua nodded sleepily, his eyes closing once again.

Michael shuddered with relief. They'd dodged a bullet tonight and Joshua seemed none the wiser.

And Brewer? *Good riddance. I'm glad he's dead.*

||| CINCINNATI, OHIO
SATURDAY, MARCH 9, 2:15 A.M.

The river is high tonight, Cade thought as he watched the churning water flow past his vantage point above the bank. Nowhere near flood stage, but the current was still fast and deadly. Perfect for his needs.

Turning from the river, he stared down at the body in the back of his SUV, glad the miserable SOB was dead. *Good riddance.*

It had been close tonight. Too close. He'd assumed the asshole had been incapacitated by the Taser that he'd fired into the back of his neck, but somehow John Brewer had managed to move his arm enough to draw a weapon.

That hadn't happened before, not in the four years that he'd been performing this service for the community.

He drew the Taser from his coat pocket and held it up to the rear hatch light, studying it. It looked okay. Maybe it hadn't been fully charged? Or maybe it was broken. That did happen from time to time. He'd read the news stories of police being forced to shoot a suspect with their gun after the Taser didn't work, but he'd always figured it was the cops making excuses.

He pressed it to Brewer's chest and squeezed the trigger, causing the body to twitch.

"Well, fuck." The Taser *did* function. At least some of the time. Maybe Brewer had been on something. That might account for it. However he sliced it, Brewer's response had thrown him off his game.

He hadn't planned to kill the bastard in his own driveway. He'd planned to wait. To do it here, on the riverbank, miles from the nearest neighbor, where no one would hear his screams.

He scowled at John Brewer's handsome face. *Son-ofabitch got off too damn easy*. Too many people had been taken in by his fake charm.

My boss included. Normally Richard was a shrewd judge of character. *Me excluded, of course*. Cade was pretty sure that Richard wouldn't condone his extra-curricular "service" to the community, were he to find out. Although, who knew? Stranger things had happened.

He'd never considered that Richard would engage in human trafficking, but that was exactly what his boss had done earlier that evening. Brewer had been trying to win back the property title he'd lost before, and Richard had allowed the slimy bastard to add his five-year-old stepson to his stake, when the small stash of heroin he'd brought to the table didn't meet the minimum table requirements.

The super-secret game which Richard hosted allowed no actual currency to be wagered. Instead, a constant flow of unique and valuable items—some

legal but most black market—changed hands from week to week. Cade had often wondered what winners did with some of the stuff that had included land, luxury vehicles, stolen masterpieces, and exotic animals—live ones and parts.

He'd concluded that the participants often had their eye on a specific prize and that they probably sold off the rest of what they won as quickly as possible. Usually through Richard.

In addition to running a successful gambling operation on the Ohio River, his boss was also a "procurer" for the wealthy in the Midwest and beyond. Richard knew what some people wanted and what others had. He brought them together, enabling them to trade in a civilized fashion.

Before tonight, Richard had never included people among the prizes to be won. A few times there had been offers of human organs brought to the table, which had shocked him enough. But never people. *At least to my knowledge.*

That was a troubling thought. Cade wondered how many times items had been traded under the table while he'd stood guard outside the door. He wondered if Richard had allowed Brewer to participate tonight because he'd known one of the others at the table would want the boy.

He wondered if he'd have to kill Richard, too.

It was with disgust that Cade realized that Brewer had wanted his house back enough to sacrifice his own stepson. It hadn't even been Brewer's own house. Up until a week before the game, the house had belonged to his wife. Richard nearly hadn't allowed it, but then Brewer had wagered something else that technically belonged to his wife—her little boy.

Richard always said that desperate men played lousy poker, and Brewer proved that to be true. He'd lost big and left the game shaking and pale.

The winner of tonight's game had gleefully arranged to meet Brewer to take possession of the boy, but the exchange wasn't going to happen, because that man was currently . . . indisposed.

Cade yanked away the blanket covering the man lying in the back of his car. Eyes that were wide and full of horror stared back at him. And perhaps a little defiance? *If it is, I'll get rid of it with my first slice.*

He was always glad to rid the world of a pedo. Seeing the pure fear in their eyes, hearing their screams? It made his chosen crusade all the sweeter.

He smiled down at Blake Emerson, the pedophile who'd been bold enough to buy a little boy at a poker game. "Hi," he said to the appropriately terrified man, then pointed to Brewer's dead body lying beside his captive. "You two have already met, so I won't bother introducing you. Not that he'll say much, because, y'know, he's dead. It's true that Brewer had a less painful death than you'll have, but that isn't my fault." He shrugged. "That's sometimes how it goes. But please know that if he'd lived, I would have given you both equal torture. It doesn't really matter at the end of the day, though. You'll both be equally dead."

And Brewer's five-year-old stepson would be safe, as would the other kids who might have been future victims of the monster who was bold enough to buy a little boy at a poker game.

On the other hand, the boy hadn't been in Brewer's car, so maybe the asshole hadn't been planning to make the transfer after all. Maybe Brewer had been planning to make a quick getaway. Which didn't matter because he'd made the offer in the first place.

Cade frowned. Or maybe Brewer had already taken the child. Maybe he'd hidden him somewhere he could easily retrieve him. Maybe Brewer had been on his way to retrieve the boy so that he could give him over to his new "owner."

Bile burned his throat.

“Shit,” he muttered. He needed to make sure the kid was okay, but he couldn’t drive back to Brewer’s house with a live prisoner and a dead body in the back. It was too risky. He pulled the Sawzall from its box in the back of the SUV and waved it in front of the pedophile.

“You want me to saw off a piece of you first? No?” he answered for the man, who couldn’t speak through his gag. “Good choice. Now you can see exactly what’s going to happen to you. And you’ll still be alive to feel every slice.”

He dragged Brewer’s body from the back of the SUV to the ground and fired up the saw, making sure the bound pedophile had a clear view.

“First his fingers,” he explained to his terrified audience, “then his dick, because he was willing to sell his kid to you. I’ll start with your dick, though. Because you would have taken that little boy and destroyed his life. From there on, it’s pretty standard. Arms and legs. Then, his head. That’s where it gets nasty, especially if you’re still alive, like you will be. Really a shame that Brewer’s dead. I would have liked watching him struggle and squirm. You’ll give me that, though.”

And when they were through, Cade would check on the boy. Just to make sure he was okay.

||| CINCINNATI, OHIO
SATURDAY, MARCH 9, 5:40 A.M.

Michael shifted in the chair in the corner of Joshua’s bedroom, trying to get comfortable as he kept watch over his little brother, who slept peacefully, unaware that anything had happened tonight. At least there was that. Joshua wouldn’t have the memory of being drugged by their stepfather. Of their escape through the old orchard.

Michael had tried to sleep in his own bed. He truly had. God only knew that he was exhausted enough. But every time he closed his eyes, he saw Brewer jabbing Joshua with a syringe and carrying him away. He'd tried to force his brain to see Brewer going limp under the big bald man's hands, but his brain kept seeing the bastard getting up and walking away. That wasn't what had happened, but until Michael knew for sure that Brewer was really dead, he'd be on pins and needles, waiting for his mother's husband to come home.

And watching over Joshua. It wasn't like anyone else was going to. Their mother had never been what anyone would call maternal, but she'd gotten much worse since Brewer had entered their lives.

He shifted again, then froze as a familiar rumble beneath his feet sent an even more familiar bolt of fear through his body.

The garage door. Someone had opened it.

Someone is here.

Michael shot to his feet, fumbling for the gun he'd taken from Brewer's safe. Tucking it into the waist of his jeans at his back, he looked around the room wildly, nearly scooping Joshua up into his arms.

But again he froze. There was no time. Someone was coming.

Brewer? Or . . . He remembered the big bald man tossing Brewer's keys into the air. Had the man come back? Had he killed Brewer and come back? *For us?*

Oh, God. He saw me. He knows I saw him kill Brewer. He thinks I'll tell. He'll kill me, too.

Michael's brain told him to *run*, until his gaze fell to his little brother, still asleep. *I'll keep you safe. I won't let him touch you. I promise.*

Stepping back, Michael hid behind the chair and drew the gun. He'd kill whoever walked through that door. Unless it was his mother. Her, he'd let live. Although she didn't deserve to.

He'd gone to her, terrified and bleeding. Scared. He'd told her what her husband had done, the first time it had happened more than two years ago. And the second. And the third. But she hadn't believed him. Or she'd claimed as much.

You're lying, she'd told him. Michael could still feel the sting of her slap across his face. It was a wonder she hadn't broken any of his teeth. But he hadn't been lying about all the things her husband had done to him.

He shuddered, pushing those thoughts from his mind. *Not now*. He couldn't lose it now. Later, he'd fall apart. Later, when Joshua was safe.

Joshua, the only reason he'd stayed in this house. This hell.

Michael clutched the gun in both hands, willing them not to shake. Willing his eyes to stay open even though he wanted to clench them shut and pretend that none of this was happening. Because the door was opening. Slowly.

He held his breath, his heart hammering in his chest. *No, no, no*. It couldn't be Brewer. Brewer was dead. *Please let him be dead. Please let this be Mom. Please.*

A shadow appeared in the doorway. Big. Hulking.

It was the man. The bald man. The man who'd killed Brewer with his bare hands. He was here. He stepped into the room, the moonlight from the window reflecting off his head as he stopped at the foot of Joshua's bed.

Michael could see his face clearly. Memorized his features. Every detail, so that he could tell the police.

No, no you won't. You can't tell the police. Because they wouldn't believe him. His mother would tell them that he was a liar. Just like she'd done when he'd told her that her new husband came to his bed at night.

She'll find a way to blame me. That's the way it's always been.

He glanced at the gun he held in his shaking hands. *I won't need to tell the police because I'm going to kill him.*

Except the man didn't touch his brother. He simply stood there, his gaze fixed on Joshua. There was no anger on the man's face. None of the lustful leering that Michael had seen so often in Brewer's eyes. Actually the man looked . . . relieved. And that didn't make sense.

The man's gaze jerked up and Michael wondered if he'd made a sound. But he didn't come closer. He just turned on his heel and left the room.

Michael sagged back against the bedroom wall, letting out the breath he'd been holding. A few minutes later he felt the rumble of the garage door going back down.

He crept to the window and peeked out into the night. And sucked in a breath when he saw the big man running down the driveway, toward the flickering light at the road, a suitcase in his hand.

He was gone.

Michael and Joshua were alone again.

Michael's entire body began to shake. He stumbled to the chair just as his legs gave out. He didn't have to wonder what would have happened if the man had discovered him there. He'd have put his hands on Michael's throat and choked him until he'd gone limp, just as he'd done to Brewer.

Oh, God. Oh, God. I would have been dead. And Joshua would be all alone, unprotected. Michael glared at the gun in his hand. He'd frozen. He should have shot the man as he'd stood next to Joshua's bed, but he'd frozen.

I won't freeze next time. If he comes back, I'll be ready.

The book cover features a close-up of a woman's face on the left side, showing her eye, nose, and red lips. The background is a gradient of dark blue and teal. The author's name 'KAREN ROSE' is in large pink letters at the top right. The title 'INTO THE DARK' is in large white letters in the center. A quote from The New York Times is at the bottom left of the cover.

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