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Alone in the Dark

Written by Karen Rose

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**Karen
ROSE**

**alone in
the dark**

headline

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Prologue

*Cincinnati, Ohio
Tuesday 4 August, 2.45 A.M.*

Where is he? He promised he'd be here.

Controlling her panic, Tala looked around, quick, furtive glances. All she saw were the neighborhood residents, going about their business. Of course, at this time of night, very little of their business was good.

Nobody noticed her. Nobody had followed her. She hoped.

She shrank back into the shadows, deciding to give him another minute. She had to get back before they discovered she'd slipped away. If they hadn't already.

And if they had . . . her life was over. Maybe literally. And not only *her* life. She'd risked the lives of every member of her family too. If she were caught, all of their lives would be forfeit. Yet she'd risked it. Because of the baby.

Everything she did was for that little bundle, who smiled and cooed because she wasn't yet old enough to know how bad the world really was. Tala would sell her soul to keep the baby safe, to keep her from being sucked into this hell – as Tala had been when she was only fourteen years old. That had been three years ago. Three years that had aged her a lifetime. Three years that had stolen the light from her mother's eyes and turned her proud father into a shell of a man. Her parents were frozen, powerless, because they feared for their children. Tala understood that. But she also understood that things couldn't continue as they were. So she'd bided her time, waiting for the perfect moment.

This was about as perfect a moment as she was going to get. *Please come. Please.*

If he didn't come, it would all have been for nothing.

A footstep had her spinning around, her eyes frantically searching the darkness as her pounding heart began to race. A man approached, a large

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man. Tala's fists tightened and she shifted her weight, preparing to flee in the event it was not the man she expected.

His step was slow. Careful. His hands lifted, palms out. 'It's me. I won't hurt you.'

Her heart settled. He had the most beautiful voice. It had been what had drawn her to begin with. She'd heard him singing quietly, sitting by the pond in the park where she was allowed to walk the ridiculous dog whose diamond-studded collar would have fed her family for a year. His voice had been so sweet, it had made her want to weep.

And she had. She'd stood that day listening, the tears streaming down her cheeks. Later, she'd paid for that stolen concert. She'd paid dearly. Still, she'd stopped to listen again when she walked the dog and seen him at the pond. She'd stopped every night for a week. Because that, like this, had been worth the risk. She'd been caught a second time a few nights before. Punished even more viciously.

Still . . . she hadn't been able to help herself. His song had drawn her, making her reckless. But even as her heart sang mournfully along with him, even when he'd turned to see her standing there, tightly clenching the ridiculous dog's leash in her fist, even when he'd asked her why she cried . . .

She hadn't said a word. Not until today.

She hoped she wasn't making the biggest mistake of her life. Because she was putting her life and the lives of everyone she loved in his hands.

'Yes,' she whispered. 'I'm here.'

He came closer, his face still in the shadows. 'I'm Marcus,' he said simply. 'Tell me why you cry.'

Marcus. She liked his name. Trusted his voice. But now that she was with him, her tongue seemed to tie in knots. The secret she'd kept for so long . . . it was stuck deep within her. The words would not come. She backed away. 'I'm sorry. I . . . can't.'

'Don't go. Please.' He took a step closer, keeping his hands in front of him where she could see them. 'What's your name?'

She swallowed hard. 'Tala.'

His lips curved encouragingly. 'It's a pretty name. Why do you cry, Tala?'

'Why do you?' Because he had been. She'd seen his tears when he thought no one was watching.

His faint smile faded. 'I lost my brother. He was murdered. He was only seventeen.'

She swallowed hard. 'My age.'

He nodded. 'Will you let me help you, Tala?'

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'I . . . I can't pay you.'

He shook his head. 'I don't need your money. I don't want it.'

Oh, she thought, suddenly realizing what he did want. Dread overwhelmed her and she took another step back. Then she stopped, lifted her chin. Made her lips curve in what she knew to be a sensuous way. She reached for the waistband of his black jeans, steeling her voice to be as sexy as she could make it. 'I understand,' she purred. 'I can make you feel good.'

He blinked, looking shocked. Then horrified. '*No.*' He took a giant step back. 'Stop. You don't understand. That's not what I want. I don't want anything from you. I just want to help you.'

Tala's hands dropped to her sides. 'Why? Why would you help me? I'm no one.'

He shook his head again, slowly. Sadly. 'Everyone is someone,' he murmured, then exhaled. 'Why do you cry, Tala?'

His voice dipped deep, touched her soul. Made her eyes fill with hot tears. 'It's dangerous,' she whispered. 'They're dangerous. My family will die if I'm found here.'

His dark brows knit together. 'Who are you afraid of?'

'The man. His wife. They . . .' She averted her eyes, ashamed. 'They own us.'

Marcus shifted, jaw clenching, eyes narrowing. 'How? Who?'

At the edge of her vision she saw the glint of moonlight on metal – but she was a split second too late. The flash of fire, the boom of thunder, the burning agony in her stomach, the scrape of asphalt on her face . . .

'Tala!' Marcus was shouting, but his voice was far away. So far away. 'Don't die, dammit. Don't you dare die.'

She didn't want to die. She hadn't yet lived. Her family . . . She needed him to save her family. She opened her mouth to tell him so. 'Help Mala . . .' Her mouth moved, but no sound came out. There was not enough air to carry her voice. *Say it. Tell him.* She forced herself to inhale, forced the word out in an agonized huff. 'Malaya.'

And then a second burst of thunder tore the air, followed by the shock of a great weight crushing her. *Marcus.* He'd been shot too. Suddenly she could no longer draw even the shallowest breath.

I'm going to die. Her family was going to die. And the man called Marcus . . . he'd only wanted to help her. But now he was going to die too.

One

Cincinnati, Ohio

Tuesday 4 August, 2.49 A.M.

Detective Scarlett Bishop left her jacket in her car on purpose. Partly because it was too damned hot and sticky to even consider wearing a stitch more clothing than was absolutely necessary. But mostly so that the weapon holstered under her arm – the Glock she normally kept concealed under a jacket – would be readily seen.

She wasn't in the mood for any shit tonight.

Taking a look around, she frowned at the sight of the nearly deserted street. On any given night, this was where dealers and prostitutes peddled their wares. But nobody was peddling anything tonight, which made Scarlett uneasy. Something had sent them scurrying into their hidey-holes, and whatever that something had been, it wasn't likely to have been good.

There was no evidence of the man who'd called her here – asking her to come alone. Normally she would have been suspicious enough to bring backup. But the man's voice . . . She would admit this to no one but herself, but hearing his voice again after so many months had shaken her soundly. The number on her cell phone's caller ID was unfamiliar, but she'd never forget his voice, no matter how long she lived. When she'd heard it again on the phone tonight, it had stirred her from a sound sleep to full alertness. Nine months had passed without a single spoken word between them. And why would there have been? Her presence would bring him and his family only pain, remind them of their loss.

But tonight he'd said, 'Can you meet me? Alone? Please. As soon as humanly possible.'

'Why?' she'd asked.

'It's . . . important.'

'All right,' she'd said. 'Where?' But he'd already hung up. A second later, a text had popped up, specifying this street corner.

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The last time he'd called her out of the blue, his information had led her to four dead bodies. So, without hesitation, she'd done as he'd asked. But now he wasn't here.

The only visible signs of life on the street were the two homeless people eyeing her with unabashed interest from their spot on the stoop of the boarded-up building nearest to where she stood. She took two bottles of water from the trunk of her car, conscious of three other people peeking out from the windows of the building across the street. She handed a bottle to each of the two elderly people tucked up against the building for the night, their belongings in a shared shopping cart. Tommy and Edna were regulars on this corner. She'd known them for years.

'It's hot,' Scarlett said quietly.

'A real scorcher,' Tommy agreed, his teeth flashing white against his dark skin as he struggled with the bottle's cap, crowing when he twisted it off. 'Whatchu doin' here this time of night, Miss Scarlett?' he asked, exaggerating his deep drawl as he said her name.

'Tommy,' Scarlett chided gently, glancing up and down the street. Still no sign of her caller. 'Whatchu doin' out here in this heat? You know it's not good for your heart.'

Tommy sighed dramatically. 'My heart's done for already. It got all trampled on by you, Miss Scarlett, when I asked you to marry me for the very last time.'

Scarlett's lips curved. Tommy was a rascal, but she genuinely liked him. 'If I'd said yes, that really would be bad for your heart. You couldn't handle me.'

Tommy's laugh was raspy from a lifetime of smoking. 'You're right 'bout that.' He lifted a finger in warning. 'And don't be telling me to go the Meadow. I been there three times this week. That pretty Dr Dani says I'm right as rain.'

The seventy-year-old woman next to him snorted. Edna had lived on the streets of Cincinnati for as long as Scarlett had been a cop. 'He's full of shit, that one is, but he's telling the truth about the Meadow. He did go this week. Once.'

Scarlett lifted her brows. 'And did Dr Dani say he was right as rain?'

Edna shrugged. 'Acid rain, maybe.'

The Meadow was the local shelter, and 'that pretty Dr Dani' was Danika Novak, ER doc and sister of Scarlett's partner, Deacon. Dani volunteered most of her free hours to the shelter, and had roped most of their circle of friends into helping her, Scarlett included.

Scarlett shook her head, but didn't push. It wouldn't do any good. She'd

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found permanent housing for both Edna and Tommy a couple times over the years, but they always came back to the street. Which was bad for their health but, at times, beneficial to Scarlett's investigations. The two were a reliable source of information about the neighborhood.

She looked around again, but there was still no sign of the man she'd come to meet. 'Have you two heard any trouble tonight?'

Edna hid her water bottle in the deep pocket of the smock she never seemed to be without, then pointed to her left. 'You wanna look maybe three alleys down that way, honey. Gunshots. Three of 'em.'

Scarlett's heart stuttered. 'Why didn't you say so before?' she demanded.

'Because you didn't ask,' Edna said with a shrug.

'Gunshots happen 'round here,' Tommy added. 'We got to the point where we don't pay them no never-mind unless they're shootin' at us.'

Scarlett shoved her temper down. 'When was this?'

'A few minutes ago,' Tommy said, 'but I don't know 'xactly when. Don't got no watch,' he added in a yell, because Scarlett had already started to run, her dread building.

Her phone had rung thirteen minutes ago. If he'd been shot, he could be dead by now. He couldn't be dead. *Please don't let him be dead.*

She skidded to a stop when she got to the alley, her vision drawn first to the motionless body on the ground. *It isn't him.* The victim was far too small to be him.

She drew her weapon with one hand, holding her Maglite in the other as she cautiously approached. She swept the beam of her light over the victim, a female who appeared to be of Asian descent. Who was she? And where was *he*? Another sweep of her light up and down the alley revealed no one else.

Scarlett crouched next to the body, her heart sinking. The victim, who appeared to be in her late teens, lay on her back, dark brown eyes staring up at the sky, wide and unseeing. *So young*, she thought. Setting the Maglite on the asphalt so that it illuminated the victim's face, she pulled a glove on to her left hand, keeping her weapon firmly gripped in her right.

Pressing her fingers to the victim's throat, Scarlett found no pulse, which was no surprise. But the young woman hadn't been dead long. Her skin was still warm.

Her lower torso was bare, her white polo shirt cut away to just below her breasts.

A bullet had entered three inches below her sternum, but based on the amount of blood on and around the body, it had probably not been immediately fatal. Cause of death was far more likely to have been the small

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hole in the victim's left temple. The exit wound behind her right ear was the size of Scarlett's fist.

The girl had been pretty before someone had taken out a chunk of her head.

Not him. It couldn't have been him. Scarlett couldn't believe it. *You just don't want to believe it.* Which was fair enough, she supposed. Where was he?

Picking up the flashlight, she ran the beam over the body. Blood had been wiped from the exposed skin of the victim's midriff, the balled-up and blood-soaked remnant of her torn shirt lying on the ground next to her hip. Someone had attempted first aid.

'He tried to save you,' Scarlett murmured aloud.

'Tried. Failed.'

Her head jerked up. He was here. The man who'd dominated her thoughts, her dreams. For months. The man who once again had called her out of the blue to the scene of a homicide.

Marcus O'Bannion.

The voice she remembered so well had come from behind her, deep in the shadows. Holding her weapon at her side, she rose, turned and aimed the Maglite at the alley wall, illuminating long legs, a broad torso and wide shoulders, all clad in black. He leaned against the brick, shoulder to the wall, arms crossed over his chest. He was looking down, his face obscured by a dark baseball cap.

He lifted his head and her heart stuttered again. His skin was ashen, his expression grim. He didn't blink at the bright light.

She hadn't heard him approach, wouldn't even have known he was there had he not spoken. He'd been quiet in a way that few men could manage. He'd been army at one time, she knew. Now she also knew that whatever he'd done for Uncle Sam, he'd been very well trained.

'Where did you come from?' Scarlett managed to ask calmly, despite the fact that her pulse pounded wildly in her throat.

'The street,' he said, indicating the way she'd come with a jerk of his head.

'Why?'

'I was chasing the guy who did that,' he said flatly, nodding at the body with another jerking motion.

He hadn't moved his arms, not once. Scarlett crossed the alley, stopping a foot from where he stood. Now she could see that his shoulders were hunched, his back curved unnaturally. She could also see the little lines bracketing his mouth. He was in pain. 'Were you hit too?' she asked.

'No. Not like her.'

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‘What happened?’

He still didn’t blink. Kept his gaze fixed on the broken young body. ‘You got here fast.’

‘I don’t live far.’

He met her gaze then and she drew a breath, instantly riveted. Just like the first time she’d seen him. He’d been on a stretcher that day, his wounds nearly fatal. Wounds he’d received saving the life of a woman he didn’t even know. But his eyes – and his voice – had made everything inside her wake up and take notice. Tonight it was the same.

‘I know,’ he said quietly.

She blinked, surprised. They’d never discussed anything as personal as her home address during their brief conversations in his hospital room all those months ago. ‘What happened, Marcus? Who is she?’

‘I don’t know. Exactly. Her name is Tala.’

‘Tala what?’

‘I don’t know. We didn’t get that far.’ He tilted his head, listening as the sound of sirens filled the air. ‘Finally,’ he muttered.

‘You called them?’

‘Five minutes ago. She was still alive then.’ Pushing away from the wall, he straightened carefully, and Scarlett was surprised once again. At five-ten in her bare feet, she rarely had to look up to meet a man’s eyes, but she had to lift her chin to meet his.

She realized that she’d never seen him standing. She’d seen him lying down, first on a stretcher and then in a hospital bed – and then sitting in a wheelchair at his brother’s funeral.

The sirens were getting louder. ‘Quickly,’ she said. ‘Tell me what happened.’

‘She asked me to meet her.’

Scarlett’s brows shot up. ‘She asked you to meet her? In the middle of the night? *Here?*’

His nod was curt. ‘I was surprised too. This isn’t where I’d met her in the past.’

Okay . . . ‘Where had you been meeting her, Marcus?’ she asked softly. Warily.

His eyes narrowed dangerously, his jaw clenching. ‘It wasn’t like that.’

She’d angered him with her insinuation. Too damn bad. He was a grown man meeting a young woman in the dead of night. A young woman who was now dead. ‘Then tell me what it *was* like.’

‘I’d see her when she walked her dog in the park near my place. She was always crying. I asked her what was wrong – several times – but she never

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said a single word, even though I could tell she desperately wanted to. Then tonight I got a text, asking me to meet her at the same corner I texted to you. I called you because I thought she might need . . . protection. I knew you would help her.'

She struggled not to let his words affect her. 'But things obviously went very wrong.'

'Obviously,' he said bitterly. 'She wasn't at the corner, but I saw her peeking out from this alley, so I followed her here. As soon as she started talking, the first bullet hit her.'

'The one in her gut.'

'Yes. I ran to the end of the alley.' He pointed to the end opposite from where Scarlett had entered. 'But the shooter was gone. I called 911, then ran back to her and tried to stop the bleeding.' His jaw clenched harder, a muscle twitching in his cheek. 'I hoped you'd get here before the cops. I was going to tell you what I knew and then leave her with you.' He hesitated. 'I figured everyone would jump to the same conclusion you just did.'

'Was she a prostitute, Marcus?' she asked levelly.

He looked her in the eye. 'I don't know. I only knew she was in trouble of some kind.'

That was the truth, Scarlett thought. But not the whole truth. He was holding something back. Something important. She wasn't sure how she knew. She just did. 'How did she know how to reach you?'

'I left her my card on the park bench. Stuck it between the wood and the iron frame.'

She frowned. 'Why did you leave it for her? Why not just give it to her?'

'Because she never came close enough. Not once. She always stayed at least twenty-five feet away.' His mouth tightened, his eyes growing dark with fury. 'And because the last time I saw her, she was limping.'

She was wearing sunglasses – with big frames. But not big enough to hide the bruise on her cheek.'

Scarlett got the picture. 'She was being terrorized by someone.'

'That was my take. The last time I saw her, I didn't say a word. I just held up my card, then stuck it in the bench and walked away.'

'When was that?'

'Yesterday afternoon. Around three.'

'All right. After she was shot in the stomach, you started first aid. What happened then?'

He looked away. 'I didn't hear him. He must have circled around. Came up behind me. I was talking to her, telling her to hold on, not to die. That help was coming. I wasn't paying attention.' His throat worked as he

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swallowed hard. 'I should have been paying attention. He shot me, then . . . her. In the head.'

Scarlett drew a careful breath. 'He shot you? Where?'

'In the back.' His lower lip curled in disdain that seemed self-targeted. 'But I'm wearing a vest.'

'A vest? Why?' she asked coolly, even as her heart thumped in relief. The size of the exit wound in the victim's head indicated a very large-caliber weapon shot at close proximity. Had Marcus not been wearing a vest, Scarlett knew she'd have come across a very different scene. 'Did you expect violence?'

'No. Not like this. Never like this. But I always wear the vest now.'

'Why?' she asked again, watching in wary fascination as twin flags of color stained his cheekbones.

'My mother made me promise.'

That Scarlett could believe. Marcus's mother had lost her youngest son nine months before and had very nearly lost Marcus too. Scarlett could understand a mother's demand for that promise.

Except . . . why would his mother believe that Marcus would be targeted again? Instincts prickling to alertness, Scarlett left the question for later. 'And then?'

'The hit knocked me flat. On top of her.' He touched his finger to his chest, then held the finger up for Scarlett's inspection. It was dark red. The black fabric of his shirt had hidden the stain. 'Hers. When I got my breath back, I pushed off her. Then I saw . . . I saw what he'd done. I tried to go after him, but by the time I got out of the alley, he was gone again. I circled the block, but everyone had scattered, including the shooter.'

'So then you came back to meet me?'

A one-shouldered shrug. 'To meet someone. Either you or the first responders.'

Who'd now arrived, a cruiser coming to a screeching halt at the far end of the alley.

Scarlett glanced at the cruiser, then looked back at Marcus's face, needing the answer to one last question before the officers arrived. 'You said you were going to leave once I got here, when she was still alive. Once she was dead, why did you come back? There was no need to continue first aid, and the shooter might have come back again. Might have realized you were still alive. Might have tried to shoot you again. Why did you come back?'

He looked down at the dead girl, his expression stark. 'I couldn't leave her alone in the dark.'