

New York Times Bestselling Author

SHARON
SALA

OUT OF
THE DARK



RosettaBooks®

“Here, pretty lady... have a toke.”

Margaret shivered as she put the marijuana cigarette into her mouth. She inhaled sharply, held her breath for a moment to let the drug cycle through her brain, then exhaled through her nose. The kick of the drug silenced her conscience as competently as if she'd put a gun to her head and pulled the trigger. Two more pulls from the joint and she knew that she was right where she wanted to be.

Jade whimpered. One of the men pulled the covers up over her shoulder, then shifted her to the back of the van as the other man reached for the joint dangling between Margaret's fingers. He took a long drag, then put the vehicle in gear and sped away.

Inside the house, Sam Cochrane rolled over in bed, felt the empty pillow beside his head and sat upright with a jerk. His wife's absence wasn't unusual. She often got up in the night to check on Jade. But there was

something about the silence of the house that felt different. There was a vacuum in the space where love was supposed to be.

“Maggie?”

No one answered.

He got up out of bed and hurried next door to their daughter’s room. The room was dark, the door ajar. He shoved it aside and walked in, only to find the bed empty and his daughter gone. When he saw the pink blanket lying on the floor next to the bed and Jade nowhere in sight, his heart skipped a beat. Jade never slept without it. This time, when he called his wife’s name, he was yelling.

“Maggie!”

Still no answer.

He turned on lights as he ran through the house, running up to the third floor, then back through the second, before going down the stairs to the main floor. It wasn’t until he got to the foyer and found the door standing open

that reality hit.

They were gone, and while the possibility of foul play couldn't be ruled out, in his heart, he knew what she'd done. The signs had been right in front of him for weeks, but he'd ignored them, refusing to believe Maggie was that unhappy, unwilling to admit that any part of it was his fault. He'd seen the love beads lying on her dresser, noticed the changes she'd made in her hairstyle and clothes. Last week he'd come home early and seen what society called a "hippie" van pulling out of the driveway. When he'd questioned Maggie about it, she'd shrugged it off by saying it was only people asking for directions. He hadn't believed her, but he'd been unwilling to broach the subject. And now it was too late.

He ran out onto the lawn and then down the driveway just in time to see a pair of taillights disappearing down the street.

"Maggie! Come back! Come back! For

God's sake... come back!"

His screams shattered the silence of the night as he raced down the street chasing the taillights, but it was no use. The vehicle disappeared. She was gone, and she'd taken their baby with her.

1997

Pink and green reflections from the flashing neon sign outside the bedroom window painted the couple sleeping on the bed in eerie, garish flashes of color, giving their faces a harlequined appearance.

Outside the hotel, a police car sped past with sirens screaming. At the sound, the woman flinched and then started to moan, which quickly roused the man sleeping beside her.

His name was Raphael, and for as long as he could remember, Jade had been the only

person he had ever loved. He rose up on one elbow to look at her, wincing as movement caused the room to tilt. Ignoring a slight wave of nausea, he swiped a shaky hand across his face, then looked down at Jade.

She was dreaming again. He could see it on her face. The hell of their childhood had scarred them both in ways no one could know. If he had believed in God, he would have prayed for peace in their hearts, but the way he figured it, God was just a myth. If He had existed, He would never have let happen what had happened to them. So it was up to him to ease Jade's nightmares.

He bent down until his mouth was only inches away from her ear, then whispered softly, "Jade... Jade... it's all right, baby... it's all right. No one's going to hurt you... not anymore."

Then he slipped his arm beneath the curve of her neck and pulled her close against his