

## **\*Mobile book\* Watch Your Back by Par Karen Rose EPUB [complete]**

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*Présentation de l'éditeur*When a cold case is reopened, a murderer re-emerges deadlier than ever in this thriller in New York Times bestselling author Karen Rose's Baltimore series. Baltimore Homicide Detective Stevie Mazzetti has suffered losses no woman should have to endure. And, despite it all, she's still a fighter.

When she learns that her ex-partner might have miscarried justice, she's determined to put the past to rights, even when she becomes a target. It's former Marine Clay Maynard's job to see the risk in every situation, but he doesn't have to look hard to find the danger surrounding Stevie. Since the minute he first saw her, Clay has wanted to protect the wounded officer, and he started loving her not long after that. So when Stevie attracts the attention of a vicious psychopath, Clay will do whatever it takes to keep her alive.

That is, if he can stay ahead of a killer with everything to lose—and something terrifying to hide...*Extrait*Chapter OneEight years laterBaltimore, MarylandFriday, March 14, 10:30 p.m.The knock on his office door had Todd Robinette glaring at the dark wood panels. He didn't ask who it was. He knew exactly who was there and why. When Robinette summoned, his staff came running. Fast. On any other day, for any other job, their dedication satisfied him. But not today. And certainly not on this job. Go away, he wanted to snarl. I need to do this myself. Because if you wanted something done right . . . But he knew that wasn't the reason. His employees were the best. They'd go in, do the job, and get out. No mess. No fuss. No nasty clues for bitch cops to find. No worries. So don't lie, asshole. At least not to yourself. He let out a slow breath. Fine. I want to be doing this myself. I want some mess. I want some fuss. I want the bitch cop to beg me for mercy. That was the unvarnished truth. He wanted to see her dead, but that wasn't enough. For eight long years he'd wanted to see her suffer. Because what she'd cost him warranted a hell of a lot more than the simple ending of her life. I could do it. I deserve to do it. Nobody will know. Nobody will suspect. Except that one never knew when someone was watching—and all it took was just one overeager witness to send your world crashing around your ears, forcing a quick repair job. Quick repairs tended to be sloppy. Or, at least, very, very costly. He'd learned that lesson eight years ago when he'd been on his own, just a guy with a job that hardly anyone paid attention to. It would be much truer now. He'd gained power, but with it had come visibility. Now he had board meetings and gave speeches to philanthropists. He couldn't just wander off and kill anyone he wanted to anymore. Which sucked, actually. On the other hand, all that visibility made for an unshakable alibi, and luckily for him, all that power necessitated a staff. He had a public relations director, a security manager, and a director of product development—all experts in their respective fields. More relevantly, he now had a cleanup crew who specialized in eliminating threats. A smart man would let them do what they were paid to do and Todd Robinette was a very smart man. He glanced at the single photograph on his desk. I'm a smart man who's sacrificed far too much to lose it all now. How many nights had he lain awake, worrying that his sacrifice hadn't been sufficient? More than he wanted to remember, especially during that first year. How many times had he fantasized about silencing her permanently? More than he could count, especially during this past year. The past twelve months had been hell on his nerves. But he'd kept his cool, stayed his hand. Because none of those times had been the right time. But this is. This was not just the right time, but the perfect time. He might not get a chance like this again. It doesn't matter who does the honors, as long as she's dead. When the knock came again, Robinette ground out, "Come in." Henderson, the most trusted member of his cleanup crew, closed the door and stood before his desk, eyes gleaming at the prospect of a new adventure. "Robbie, whatcha got for me?" Robinette took a breath. "A new job." He unlocked the cabinet behind his chair, pulled out a folder, and slid it across his desk, which, with the exception of a sleekly modern laptop, the single photograph in the silver frame, and a well-worn Rubik's Cube, was an empty, polished slab of black granite. "Detective Stefania Nicolescu Mazzetti, Homicide. She goes by Stevie." Henderson studied Mazzetti's photo, clipped to the folder. "May I ask why?" She humiliated me. Nearly destroyed me. She taunts me by breathing. And she can bury me. But he'd divulge none of those reasons. Nobody knew how close she'd come to taking him away in handcuffs. No-

body that was still alive, anyway. Robinette turned the silver frame so that Henderson could see the face in the photograph and gave the one reason that was no secret. "She killed my son." "Ah. So she's the one who killed Levi." Eyes narrowing with undisguised malice, Henderson committed Mazzetti's personal profile to memory. "Anything else I should know?" "Yeah. She's on her guard. She's been physically threatened three times in the last week. The first was an attack with a knife, the second, a big guy with an excellent right cross. This afternoon someone shot at her. They missed." "All of them missed? Were the attackers ours?" Robinette snorted. As if he'd allow such incompetence. "Hell, no. This cop has more people mad at her than a gator has teeth. They fall down fightin' and more pop up to take their place." "So our hit will be blamed on the other 'gator teeth,' " Henderson said dryly. "Exactly." Which was why now was the perfect time. "Did any of the three attackers escape?" "The third one did, the shooter." Which was to Robinette's advantage. "She disarmed the man with the knife, then pinned him till the cops came. She did the same with the second guy, the fighter. The shooter ducked into a white Camry and drove away." Henderson looked reluctantly impressed. "She's only five-three. She must be very skilled." "Unfortunately, yes. Which is why I picked you to go after her. You have better skills." Specifically an Army sharp-shooter badge, amazing recall, a robotic ability to focus, and a cold-blooded tenacity that would put a dog with a bone to shame. Back in the day, Henderson had been one of the few soldiers Robinette had trusted to watch his back. That hadn't changed. What had changed was the flag they fought under. Long ago and far away it had been red, white, and blue. Now it was a hundred percent green. Benjamins, Lincolns, even Washingtons. Cold. Hard. Cash. It was the only thing that really mattered. "I need Mazzetti taken care of," he continued. "And you're the best marksman I have." Henderson nodded once. "True. Why is everyone else after her?" "Her old partner was on the take, paid by rich parents who wanted the crimes committed by their misunderstood darlings to disappear. He'd plant evidence against innocent people and arrest them for the crimes. He was damn good at it—until he got caught. Now he's dead." "And she was in on it, too?" "I think so," he lied, "but nobody else seems to." His life would have been so much easier had she been. "They're after her because she's trying to 'right' all of Silas Dandridge's wrongs." Cold blue eyes flickered in recognition. "Silas Dandridge? I remember that name. An article about him came through my news feed when I was in the Sudan, so that would have been March, last year. He worked for that lawyer who controlled a whole team of dirty cops." "And ex-cons. Stuart Lippman was an equal opportunity employer, now equally dead." Henderson frowned, pondering. "The article said Lippman had it set up that if he died under 'suspicious or violent circumstances,' a record of all his operatives and the crimes they'd committed would be sent to the state's attorney." No, not all, Robinette thought, but he nodded. "That record was Lippman's life insurance. Kept his operatives from killing him and kept them watching each other, too. If one turned the boss in, all of them suffered." "Clever. So why does this one cop have so many enemies if she wasn't in on it?" "Because she's been investigating the Lippman cases. She's closed four in the last month—three rapists and an armed robber who had innocent men sitting in six-by-eights, paying for their sins. Some folks aren't happy to see this particular beehive disturbed." "Guess not. Three rapists and an armed robber. Busy lady." Robinette shrugged. "She's had some time on her hands." "She got fired, then. Guilty by association." "I wish. "No. There was an IA probe after Dandridge was exposed, but she passed." With flying colors, none of which were cold-hard-cash green. She was a cop who couldn't be bought. "She's on disability leave, shot by one of those crazy Millhouse KKK groupies outside the courthouse." "I saw that story on TV. It made international news when I was in Madrid, between assignments. That would have been in December, right before Christmas. Sixteen-year-old girl got pissed because her baby-daddy was found guilty of murder, so she started shooting everyone on the courthouse steps. She shot a couple cops. Which one was Maz-zetti?" "The one that killed her." "That was Mazzetti? She nailed the kid right between the eyes, even though she was bleeding like a stuck—" Henderson abruptly halted. "I'm sorry, Robbie. That was insensitive." Robinette shrugged. "Just because it was insensitive doesn't make it less true. We'd already established that Mazzetti's got skills," he added bitterly. After all, Mazzetti had nailed his son right between the eyes as well. "Two of the three recent attacks were commissioned by rich folks annoyed that she's making their offspring pay for their sins. The shooter wasn't caught, but I assume the same motive. The attacks will likely continue. Until she's put down for good." "Which is where I come in." "Yeah. You need to strike before the cops hide her away in some safe house. If that happens, we'll have lost our opportunity. I won't be happy." "Don't worry. You'll be happy." "Good. Now, to make your job a little easier, she'll be at the Harbor House Restaurant tomorrow afternoon at three." Henderson frowned. "How do you know that?" "Because tomorrow is March fifteenth. For the past seven years she's gone to that same restaurant at three o'clock on March fifteenth." Which he knew because he'd had her under surveillance all this time. "She'll be meeting a psychologist visiting from Florida, Dr. Emma Townsend." Henderson thumbed through

the pages in the folder. "There's no photo of Townsend here." "Google her. You'll find her photo on her page. She writes self-help books on dealing with grief. Try not to shoot her, too, but do what you have to do to get Mazzetti." Henderson looked up from the file, eyes gone flat and calculating. "Mazzetti has a kid." Cordelia," Robinette said. "She's seven years old. If Mazzetti is a no-show at the restaurant, you can get to her through the kid. She goes to ballet class on Saturday afternoons." "I see that here. Stanislawski's Studio. Okay, then. I'll call you when the job's done." "No, you won't. I'll take that folder back." Henderson handed it over, and Robinette fed the contents through the shredder under his desk. "I want no trail, paper or electronic. Nothing for the cops to find. When you're successful, I'll hear all about it on CNN. That'll be all." Dismissed, Henderson left, but Robinette's office door didn't close completely. Another head appeared in the gap. "Got a minute, Robbie?" "Sure." Robinette waved for his head chemist to enter. "Not like I'm getting any work done." "When do you ever?" Fletcher's teasing grin abruptly faded at the sight of Levi's photograph out of place. "So. You're finally gonna do it." "It" didn't need specification. Fletcher had been there for him at Levi's funeral, along with Henderson, Miller, and Westmoreland. His friends. His trusted team. It had been an open-casket funeral, because Stevie Mazzetti really was a damn fine shot. The hole her bullet had left in Levi's head was neat and clean, easily camouflaged by the funeral parlor's makeup artist and hairstylist. Lying there . . . It had been the most at peace his son had looked in years. Robinette returned the silver frame to its original position. "Yeah. I'm finally going to do it. Henderson is, anyway." "It's about time," Fletcher said roughly. "We would have done it for you eight years ago, but I understand why you waited. You're more patient than we are." "No, not really." Just less willing to go to jail. "But, speaking of patience, how are the tests coming? You get any benefit from that obscenely expensive equipment you insisted we needed?" Fletcher slid a single sheet of paper across the black granite. "You be the judge." The plain white paper bore no company logo on its letterhead. There would be no connection of Fletcher's pet project to Filbert Pharmaceutical Labs. Or to its president. Which would be me. Or to the chairman of the board. Which would be me, again. Because all the other officers of the company were dead. Robinette shot a quick, satisfied glance at the Rubik's Cube. May they all rest in peace. Robinette read the summary, handwritten in Fletcher's precise script. The news was good. Very good. He lowered the paper, gave Fletcher a hard nod. "You're a fucking genius." "I know," Fletcher said serenely, then grinned. "It's not as good as we can eventually make it, but it's stable twice as long as anything else out there. Which is good enough for now." "Do they know?" "Oh, yeah. I've received confirmation from three groups that took demo packages. When deployed, the payload was as potent as the day it was made, as promised. They were impressed." Robinette frowned. "Who did they test it on?" "Do we care? Nothing's made the news. I've been watching and listening." "Good. The last thing we need is an incident drawing attention." "I wouldn't worry. Our clients have always been discreet. Plus, they know if they get caught with it, we won't sell them any more." Fletcher's brows lifted. "And they want more. As much as I can make. As fast as I can make it." Robinette did a quick mental calculation as to what their profit would be and nodded, satisfied. "How quickly can you have the first shipment ready to go?" "Already boxed up. We're waiting on the next batch of vaccines to be ready to ship next Friday. Westmoreland and Henderson are on rotation next week, so they'll escort the shipment." Henderson should have completed Robinette's special project by then. "That's good. We don't want our shipment to fall into the wrong hands." Fletcher's eyes lit up with greedy glee. "The wrong hands being those not holding money." "You got that right." Robinette fed the single sheet of paper into his shredder. "Take the weekend off. You've earned it." "A few of us are going into town tomorrow night. A few beers, a little . . . companionship. You should come with us. It'll be like old times." "I can't. Brenda Lee says I can't drink in public anymore. It's bad for PR, considering the work I do for teen drug and alcohol rehab." Fletcher was a genius with the chemicals, but Brenda Lee Miller was a spin master. "Plus she's still mad about that little beer-fueled 'disagreement.'" Having spun Robinette from a murder suspect into a pillar of the damn community, she'd been none too pleased about having to make a bar brawl disappear last year. She'd been right—Robinette could have ruined eight years of hard work beating up that meathead. Luckily, Brenda Lee was also his attorney and she settled the matter quietly, discreetly, and confidentially. Robinette had only wished his wife had been as quiet and discreet as Brenda Lee. Lisa had been irate and still brought it up from time to time. Fletcher shrugged. "So, don't drink. You can still find companionship. I know I need some. It'd be good for you, too, if you don't mind my saying so." "I think Lisa might mind you saying so," Robinette said dryly. He expected Fletcher's eyes to roll and was not disappointed. "She is my wife, Fletch." "Yeah, I remember. I was at the wedding. She's . . . I'm sure she's got some good points, like . . ." Fletcher feigned deep thought, then shrugged again. "I got nothin'." Robinette snorted. "She's rich, well connected, and beautiful." And she makes everyone forget my unfortunate past. "Think of her as a business accessory. Like a power tie." "More like a damn noose." "Fletch." Robinette

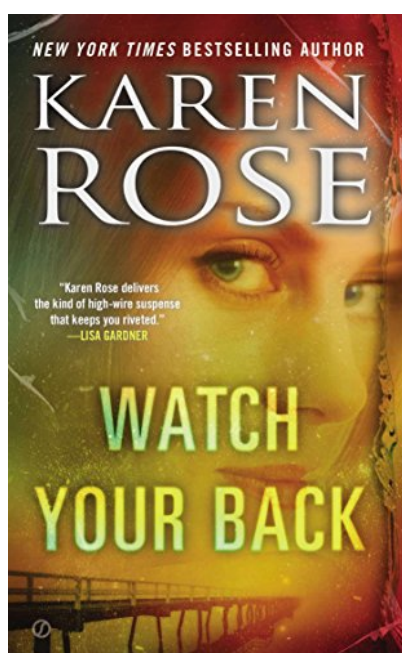
murmured the warning. "I allow you leeway because we're friends." "And because I'm the fucking genius that's making you richer than God." "That, too. But be careful. She is my wife, whether you like her or not. Besides, I couldn't go out with you anyway. Lisa and I have an event tomorrow night." Fletcher frowned. "Another 'Humanitarian of the Year' award? Didn't you just get one?" "Brenda Lee's got them set up like dominoes. This one goes with the opening of another teen rehab center, which she scheduled to coincide with the anniversary of Levi's murder." His son had been high as he'd fled Mazzetti and her so called investigation. After accusing Robinette of killing his second wife, she'd changed her mind, accusing Levi. Robinette's son had been terrified and disoriented and he'd run. Mazzetti had mowed his boy down like a dog. "Well, have fun," Fletcher said, still out of sorts over Lisa. "I have to go." When Robinette was alone, he leaned back in his chair. Closed his eyes. This time tomorrow his troubles would be over. Thanks to Henderson, Stevie Mazzetti would be dead. And then, thanks to Fletcher, Robinette's personal coffers would be running over for some time to come. Saturday, March 15, 1:59 p.m. Stairs. Shit. She hadn't remembered stairs. Detective Stevie Mazzetti paused to stare, glare, and consider the four steps she'd need to climb to get into the front door of the Harbor House Restaurant. In all the years she'd come here, she'd never even noticed the stairs. Now they seemed like a damn mountain. She gripped the handle of her cane so hard her knuckles ached. It's just four steps. You can do four tiny little steps. But could she do them quickly? She cast a look around her to ensure no knife-wielding assholes lurked about, waiting for her to display a moment of vulnerability. She could hold her own—and had—against an idiot with a knife and a thug with hams for fists. All in the last week. She could do it again. Of course, if it was a gunman, she was a sitting duck. Yesterday she'd been lucky. The gunman hadn't had a clear shot and was foolish enough to chance a bad angle. So he'd missed. But this downtown street offered a lot more places to hide, and a lot more good angles. Under most other circumstances she would have avoided walking out in the open like this, at least until the ongoing investigations wound down. But today was March 15. Eight years ago today, her life had been irrevocably changed, her heart had been broken into a billion little pieces. Eight years ago today, her husband and her son had been ripped away from her, murdered in cold blood. Stevie had found her way out of the darkness and the depression with the help of the woman waiting for her inside the restaurant and the friendship they'd forged. For the past eight years this lunch with her old friend Emma was a date Stevie never missed, no matter what was going on in her life. No matter who might be lurking, waiting to catch her unaware. Stevie refused to hide, no matter how much her family and friends nagged at her to do so. This is my life. I'm not living it as a prisoner in my own home. Gratefully, she didn't see anyone lurking. What she did see was a sign pointing to the handicapped entrance, but at the speed she walked these days, getting there would take her ten times longer than just dealing with the damn stairs. She'd be exposed far longer that way. Plus, I'm late. Of course. Everything took her so much longer since she'd been wounded on the courthouse steps the day the jury had returned the verdict in a controversial murder trial. She'd expected guarding the prosecutor to be dangerous. She hadn't expected to wake up in ICU with a bullet hole in her leg. Three months later she was still struggling to find normality. Whatever the hell that is. Tensing every muscle, she grabbed the rail and hoisted her body up the stairs as fast as she could. When she got to the landing, she used her momentum to keep moving forward. A few more awkward steps put her under the porch gable. She leaned against one of the supports, out of sight of the street. She needed the cover to . . . recover. Because she was breathing like she'd run a marathon instead of having climbed four tiny stairs, goddammit. She was sweating, trembling. And then came the pain, shooting up her hip and down her leg. Gritting her teeth, she clenched one hand into an impotent fist and, with the other, held on to the cane for dear life, riding the excruciating wave until the worst of it passed. The fury that simmered at the back of her mind exploded, sparked by frustration and pain. Fuck you, Marina Craig. Like it wasn't bad enough that the little bitch's bullet had almost killed her? Here she was, crawling up stairs like a . . . cripple. Cripple. It wasn't the PC term and Stevie didn't care. It was her body. Her ruined leg. I can use whatever god-damned word I want to use. Stop it. The voice of reason sliced through her silent, childish tirade. You're better, and every day you do more. At least you're alive. That last one always got her attention. She'd lived. Others hadn't been so lucky. Including Marina Craig. Because after Marina's bullet had lodged in her leg, Stevie had returned fire. Marina was dead before she hit the courthouse steps. The girl had only been sixteen years old. But she'd also been a stone-cold killer who'd have loved nothing better than to murder every last person gathered in front of the courthouse that day. Marina had been furious at the judicial system that had "persecuted" her lover, an eighteen-year-old white supremacist convicted of a double homicide. She'd also been well-armed, her modified Glock capable of creating mass casualties. I did the right thing. I saved lives, including my own. I'm alive. And she was grateful for that. Truly. But she was also tired of being . . . less than she'd been before. Soon. Just a little more time, a little more rehab. Soon she'd be back to normal. "And

everything will be fine," she whispered aloud. "It'll all be fine." It had to be true, because she'd never lied to her daughter. "Everything will be fine" was what she'd whispered in Cordelia's ear twelve hours before as she'd held her, rocking them both until her daughter's shudders stilled. It was what she whispered every night that Cordelia woke from a nightmare. Which, thankfully, seemed to be happening less frequently. Those sessions with the child psychologist were finally bearing fruit. Soon Cordy would be back to normal, too. And every-thing will finally be fine again. Because everything sure as hell wasn't fine now. How long had it been since they'd been normal? How long had it been since her daughter had slept through the night? The answer stung. It had been a year. An entire year. The last time we were normal was when I stood here. On this very spot. It had been only a few weeks after her last annual lunch with Emma that everything went to hell in a handbasket, courtesy of Silas Dandridge, retired homicide detective. Her old partner. Stevie had considered him her mentor, her friend. She'd trusted him to watch her back. She'd trusted him with her child. Instead, he'd threatened Cordelia, shoved a gun into her ribs. He'd betrayed her trust. He'd betrayed them all. So fuck you, too, Silas Dandridge. I hope you're finding hell to your liking. It was because of Silas that Stevie was hiding behind a damn post this very moment, worrying that one of his old clients—or, even worse, one of his old accomplices—was out there, waiting to shut her up for good. Which pissed her off. But at least I can take care of myself. Her daughter was a different story. Cordelia was only seven years old. Silas was her daughter's nightmare, a nightmare that was finally fading. As had Stevie's trembling. But she was still on edge, the events of the week having a cumulative effect. She couldn't go into the restaurant a bundle of nerves. Emma would notice. Psychologists tended to be annoyingly observant about things like that. Gathering herself together, she pushed the restaurant door open, determined not to waste this time with Emma, who'd seen her through Paul's death in a way no one else could have. For seven years, Stevie had left this lunch feeling better. Renewed. She wasn't sure "feeling better" was a reasonable expectation today. She'd settle for a little peace. Saturday, March 15, 2:02 p.m. Well, shit. Passing the restaurant, Henderson turned right at the end of the block, watching Stevie Mazzetti in the rear-view mirror, seeing her just as she entered the building. The only things Robinette had gotten right were the day and the restaurant. All of the boss's other information was dead wrong. Mazzetti wasn't supposed to arrive until three, but there she was, a full hour early. Had she arrived at three, she would be dead. Because I would have been set up on the roof of the building across the street, waiting to pick her off as she'd climbed the stairs. Had Mazzetti arrived when expected, killing her would have been the easiest job ever assigned in the history of mankind. The cop had taken the better part of a minute to climb the stairs. She'd been a damn fish in a barrel. But no. She was early. A fucking hour early. Henderson still might have been on time to set up on the roof before her arrival, but double-checking the where-abouts of her daughter had taken longer than it should have as well. Because little Cordelia wasn't at ballet class as Robinette had promised. She and her aunt had ended up at a destination a good twenty minutes farther away. So technically I'm still early, but I'm still too late. Blaming failure on Robinette's bad information was an exercise in futility. Henderson had learned that lesson the hard way, the memory a sour one. Dammit. The car swerved a little. Henderson glanced at the steering wheel in surprise. My hands are shaking. This assignment had become more stressful than anticipated. A drink would settle the shakes. Not until you're finished. Celebrate when you're finished. Plan now. Celebrate later. Henderson parked the white rental Camry behind the building across from the restaurant. A morning scouting trip had identified this building as providing the best angle. And should anyone see me, they'll tell the cops they saw a white Camry—the same make and model that yesterday's would-be assassin escaped in after taking a shot at Mazzetti. Yesterday's assassin would be blamed, diverting any suspicion from Robinette. Or from me, of course. Anticipation was a palpable presence in the air. It was time to get to work. Time to avenge the murder of Levi Robinette. It was time to give Robbie some long-overdue peace. *Revue de*

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