

# **State of Panic**

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This book is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents, and dialogue are drawn from the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to any actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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DEDICATION

**FOR MY FABULOUS GROUP OF WRITER FRIENDS FOR THEIR AMAZING FRIENDSHIP, SUPPORT,  
AND FOR ENCOURAGEMENT. I COULDN'T HAVE DONE THIS WITHOUT YOU.**

**ORLANDO STEPHENSON, WAYNE C. ROGERS, ELLEN SHAW, DEB DORMITZER  
AND WILLIAM STROUPE.**

**YOU GUYS ARE THE BEST.**

**TO VICTORIA WAGNER FOR CHEERING ME ON AND MAKING ME LAUGH.**

**I COULDN'T ASK FOR A BETTER FRIENDS.**

**WITH LOVE TO MY PARENTS,  
JOHN AND LORRAINE GORDON**

**THANK YOU...**

**...FOR EVERYTHING**

**AND FOR BEING THE BEST PEOPLE I KNOW.**

## CHAPTER ONE

Sierra writhed beneath him. Her nails dug into his arms, urging him to go faster. His body was slick. A bead of sweat dropped onto her cheek. Her back arched, she was so close.

“Quiet.”

At first she thought he was kidding. He froze above her, body rigid with tension. She groaned thrusting her hips against his, trying to pull him closer.

He was off her in an instant.

She opened her eyes, blinking in confusion. Her hand groped in the dark for the sheet. The air conditioning was a blast of ice against her overheated skin. “What’s the matter?”

“I said, quiet. Don’t you understand what quiet means?” He sat perched on the edge of the bed. His head was cocked, like he was listening for something.

An angry flush stained her cheeks. She loved him. *She was about to marry him for Christ’s sake*, but there were times he tried her patience. It had been a long day and she was exhausted. She was tempted to roll over and go to sleep, but she was getting tired of his strange outbursts. It would serve him right if she got dressed and went home.

“Are you going to tell me what’s wrong or not?”

He ignored her. *The hell with him*. Sierra reached down and grabbed her clothes off the floor. His hand clamped down around her wrist before she could reach them. “Go to the kitchen. *Now*.”

“What for?”

“Fix us a snack. I need something to eat.”

That wasn’t like him. In all the years she’d known him, he never once ordered her to do something. She studied his face. He looked tense, haggard; his face drawn, lines of worry creasing his brow. A chill ran up her spine. *Something wasn’t right*.

“Please,” he begged, “You know what I like. Fix us something to eat.”

She was too tired to argue, but she was damned sure going to let him know she wasn't happy. She wasn't his servant. Her voice was cold and tight. "Fine."

His hand loosened on her wrist. He leaned over and kissed her forehead, "Thank you, Sweetheart. Wait for me in the kitchen, okay. Please?"

"Why?"

He ran his hand through his hair, "Will you stop with the questions already?" He snapped. "I'll be there in a bit."

Sierra pursed her lips and yanked on her bathrobe. He could be a real sonofabitch at times. When she reached the bedroom door, she stopped to glare at him.

"Please, don't be like that," he pleaded. "I love you."

Tension snaked through her. Something was definitely wrong. *But what?* One minute he'd be fine, the next he was on edge, cranky. Her stomach growled. She hadn't realized how hungry she was until she reached the refrigerator door. Hunger could put anyone in a foul mood, herself included. She exhaled in an effort to calm down. They'd missed dinner. Maybe the evening — and the mood — could be salvaged if they ate something.

It was a hot night and she opted to fix a cool snack. She grabbed a plate from the cabinet and loaded it with goodies from the fridge. Melon, prosciutto, swiss, and cheddar. A bit of salami to add some bite. At the last minute, she reached for the bottle of pinot grigio chilling in the fridge. Maybe the wine would help settle him down.

She rummaged through a drawer to find the corkscrew. He never put it back in the right place. Things would have to change after they were married. She reached for the wine glasses, and they clinked together as she removed them from the cabinet.

*Click. Boom.*

Something exploded.

Sierra jumped. The edge of kitchen counter dug into the small of her back as she slammed against it. The wine glasses slipped from her fingertips, tumbling down to the carpet. An ungodly shriek split the air,

sending tremors of terror through her. She raced towards the hallway, heart slamming inside her chest. A thought stopped her cold. *Neil's odd behavior, the way he'd sent her to the kitchen, telling her to wait there for him. He'd known something was wrong, and had been trying to protect her.*

She forced herself to slow her pace. Running straight into danger wouldn't help anyone. It might even get her killed. Instinct kicked in. She flattened her back against the wall and crept towards the doorway, then offered up a silent prayer and peered around the corner.

The stench of burning flesh assailed her nostrils, hitting her hard. Bile splashed the back of her throat. She gagged, struggling to make sense of the horror in front of her. Disbelief chugged through her mind. Neil's body, engulfed in flames. She could hear the hiss of fire licking the flesh from his bones.

He fell to the floor, screaming in agony. Her hands flew to her face. It was already too late; there was nothing she could do to help him. No way he could survive. He rolled, an angry ball of fire, hurtling towards the front door.

*Someone set him on fire.* She looked up. A stranger stood framed in the doorway, face impassive, watching her fiancé burn. He had cold, dead eyes. Their black depths seared into her mind and she knew she'd remember them forever.

Sierra stumbled back in shock, breaking out in a cold, clammy sweat. *I have to get out of here.* Her stomach cramped. She clutched her belly, fighting the urge to vomit. Her mind splintered in a thousand directions. *If he sees me, he'll kill me too.* Panic washed over her, rooting her in place. If she ran, she could wind up a suspect. If she stayed, she could end up dead.

*Get. Out. Now.*

She peaked around the corner one last time. A sob welled up in her throat, almost choking her. Neil, or what was left of him, was melting into the floorboards. *The very last thing she had done was glare at him. Oh God! Would she ever be able to forgive herself?*

*No time for that now. She had to pull herself together.*

The stranger's eyes remained fixed on Neil. This might be her only chance. She hugged the wall, moving towards the back of the house, darting into the bedroom to grab her purse. Neil's laptop sat beside

it. All her contact information was stored in his computer. Under the circumstances, she didn't want to leave it behind. She shoved the laptop inside her bag, praying she wouldn't be caught.

A quick glance down the hall told her it was safe. She hugged the purse against her body and dashed into the kitchen. Her hands were shaking so hard the doorknob rattled when she eased open the back door. One step closer to safety. She slid through the crack into the stuffy night air. Fear pumped inside her; she started to hyperventilate the moment she shut the door behind her. Fighting back tears, she stumbled, falling headlong into the grass. She knew she was going to be sick and scrambled behind a bush, terrified the killer might hear her retching. Her body heaved; the contents of her stomach splattering the ground. She couldn't stop shaking.

Her mind clicked away at warp speed. Her first instinct was to flee, to run to her car and tear through the night. What if the killer chose that exact moment to leave? She'd be setting herself up as bait. She should call 911, but she knew enough to realize she was an automatic suspect. Her face would be plastered all over the news, alerting the killer to her identity. She couldn't run, not dressed in a bathrobe. She'd stick out like a sore thumb on the deserted streets. Best to sit tight. With any luck, the killer had no idea anyone else had been in the house.

A chill prickled the back of her neck. *He would know. Her clothes lay scattered in the bedroom; two wine glasses were on the kitchen floor. He was going to come looking for her any minute now. Oh God, she had to get away.* Her eyes darted around the yard, desperation reared up inside her. There had to be a place to hide. *The garage. She had a set of Neil's keys.* Her legs went weak with relief. She dug inside her purse, crying when her fingers closed over them. She stayed in the shadows until she reached the garage, and then made a quick run for it.

She could see the house through the small garage window. Lights blazed inside. The killer was on the hunt, turning on light in every room. *He's looking for me.* Her palms were sweaty. The key slipped twice when she tried to fit it in the ignition.

The minute the garage door opened, she gunned the engine. Her heart skipped a beat. She was safe. For now.

With the immediate danger behind her, a combination of shock and grief exploded inside her. *Who would want to kill Neil? And why?*

It made no sense. He was an average guy. There was nothing in his past that would make him a target. *At least nothing she knew of.*

The image of him rolling on the floor, unable to escape the flames torching his body, sent a fresh wave of pain ripping through her. The scent of burning flesh lingered in her nostrils. She would never forget the smell. The horror of what she witnessed gurgled inside her. She was shaking so hard, she had to pull over. There was no way she could drive in her current state.

She found a side street, far enough away from Neil's house that she felt safe, and gave into the sobs racking her body. Her nerves tingled, and her head pounded with questions.

Neil had been afraid. Even making love, he was attuned to danger. He'd been listening for it, damn it. It took a moment before the implication set in. He knew he was at risk, and he hadn't told her. Worse yet, he'd exposed her to danger. He had gambled with her life by having her with him. *What kind of man would do such a thing to the woman he loved enough to marry?*

Sierra slumped back against the seat. Her life had blown apart in an instant, but at least she was still alive. She needed time to process everything. When she got home, she'd pour herself a stiff drink and try to put the pieces together.

Home. *Dear God*, she thought, *I can't go home. The police will want to question me. Whenever there's a murder investigation, they look at the loved ones first.* She'd fled the scene, which meant she already had one strike against her. She had to give herself a fighting chance and calling the police wasn't an option. There was no way in hell she'd give the killer a roadmap to find her.

She felt better for half a second and then her stomach sank. Neil's killer knew someone else had been in the house. Her clothes were a dead giveaway. Once he found them, it wouldn't be too hard for him to connect the dots. They'd been finalizing their wedding plans. Taking the computer had been useless. Her name was everywhere. So was her address. He'd been doing a sweep of the house when she drove away. If she went home, she was a dead woman.



A car turned onto the street where she'd parked. Headlights glared in her review mirror. Sierra shrank down into her seat, terrified the killer was on her trail. She held her breath until the car passed.

She plunged into a state of panic, finding it impossible to separate logic from raging paranoia. Nothing had ever prepared her for this type of life or death situation. There had to be somewhere she could hide, someone she could call for help.

Grace was the logical choice. *Which, she realized, meant she had to stay as far away from her best friend as possible.* Sierra knew in her gut that Neil's death hadn't been random. The monster who'd killed him wouldn't leave loose ends. There was a fifty-fifty chance the killer was lying in wait for her at her house. When she didn't come home, he would look through her contacts. She couldn't risk putting her friends in danger.

There was only one person she could call, one person who could help her.

## Chapter Two

Considering the way things ended between them, would he even take her call? There was a good chance he wouldn't. It had been years since they last spoke.

He still kept in touch with Grace; her friend had inherited him after the break-up. Following in his father's footsteps, he'd joined the FBI straight out of college. He was a rising star in the bureau, quickly climbing the ranks. According to Grace he lived in Washington now, was something of a big deal. There was even talk of him running for political office in the not too distant future.

Their relationship had been messy, the break up complicated. He'd never forgiven her for choosing Neil over him. Now Neil was dead and he was the only one she could turn to. It was an ugly twist of fate.

Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath, blowing out a long stream of air. Her heart was doing crazy little palpitations in her chest, her palms slick with sweat. She wiped them on her robe and grabbed her cell phone before she lost her nerve. It was insane to be this nervous. They were all adults and she was in trouble. He wouldn't turn his back on her once he heard her story.

No one could be *that* unforgiving.

*Just make the call and get it over with.* Deciding she'd have a better chance of reaching him if she blocked her number, she swallowed her pride and dialed.

A woman answered. *Shit.* She hadn't expected that.

"I'm looking for Donovan St. James."

"Van isn't here right now. May I ask whose calling?"

*Van?* The implied intimacy rattled her. The cool, cultured voice set her teeth on edge. This was not a woman to whom she could blurt out her problems to.

"Hello? Are you there?" the woman asked, haughty and impatient.

Sierra scrambled for something to say that wouldn't make her sound like a complete idiot, "I have information on one of his cases. Do you know how I can reach him?"

"He's out of town until tomorrow. If you'd care to leave your number, I'll be sure to give him a message when he checks in."

A rock formed in Sierra's stomach. Waiting for a call back wasn't an option. She hung up and tossed the phone in her purse.

There was no choice. She had to run.

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She'd been driving for hours. It would be dawn soon and she needed a plan. It was hell not knowing how much of a head start she had on the killer. The police might already be swarming over Neil's property. They would find her things, notice his missing car, put out an APB.

Or not.

She thought about the last thing she'd witnessed. Neil *melting* into the floor. The flames from his body should have ignited a blaze. *But they hadn't.* The house wasn't on fire when she escaped. Then again, she hadn't hung around long to watch. A fire took time to smolder. The house could have turned into an inferno *after* she drove away. It was possible evidence of her presence went up in flames. If the killer was smart, he'd torch the place to cover up the murder. *Wouldn't he?*

Then again, given the coldness in the stranger's eyes, he might have simply walked away from the crime scene. Maybe Neil's death was meant to send a message. *But to whom?* She ran her hands through her hair. There were too many questions. Trying to guess at the answers would make her crazy. If she had any chance of remaining sane, she had to focus on what she did know.

It was Friday night. Neil didn't have any weekend plans, so no one would report him missing. Neil's remains could conceivably lie undiscovered until Monday when he didn't show up for work.

*Unless the house caught fire and they'd already discovered what was left of his body.*

“Damn it.” She banged the steering wheel with the palm of her hand, reminding herself that speculation was pointless. Going back and forth over every possible scenario wasn’t going to do her any good. It was impossible to know whether she had hours or days to vanish.

The sick feeling in the pit of her stomach leapt into her throat, leaving her with a sour taste in her mouth. Not too many hours ago, she’d been in bed with her fiancée, pissed off at his inattentiveness. Now she was thinking of him in terms of his remains.

Sierra pulled over and threw up again on the side of the road.

Cars whizzed past her, people going about their business, like it was an ordinary night. There was nothing ordinary about it. Her life was falling apart, her mind frayed. She slammed shut the car door, collapsing in her seat. If she didn’t get a grip soon on her situation soon, Neil wouldn’t be the only casualty tonight. Her life was on the line too.

Back to square one. She frowned, fingers tapping the steering wheel. She needed a plan...getting rid of Neil’s car and finding a rental would be a good place to start. She had credit cards and cash. Hysterical laughter bubbled up inside her. How the hell was she going to rent a car clad only in a bathrobe?

*Holy shit.* A new set of worries blindsided her making her head spin. Rent a car? Why not go ahead and paint a bull’s-eye on her back? Even if she paid in cash, she’d have to provide the rental company with identification. Tracking her would be easy. Heart thundering, she checked Neil’s GPS. It was off. Thank God she hadn’t turned it on without thinking. Her cell phone was a dead giveaway to her location too, wasn’t it? She shoved her hand inside her purse, searching for it. The phone slipped between her trembling fingers three times before she managed to fish it out it. The last call she made was to Donovan, which could work to her advantage. If she were guilty, would she seriously be calling an FBI agent?

Sierra glanced down at her phone. She couldn’t bring herself to toss it out the window. Her life was on it. She pressed the off key praying that was good enough.

Her mind raced as she retraced her steps. She’d taken the skyway out of Chicago. Toll booths were equipped with cameras; there was a record of her crossing the state line into Indiana. If she used an ATM or a credit card anywhere along the way, she was screwed.

*How the hell did people vanish?*

A horrid gasp echoed in her ears. At first, she didn't realize it came from her. For a terrifying moment, she couldn't breathe. She could feel her chest tightening. In a corner of her mind, she realized she was hyperventilating again. Clutching the wheel for support, she warded off the anxiety attack.

The dark road stretched out before her. She'd been driving blind through the night, desperate to put as many miles as she could between her and the killer. She couldn't think straight and it was getting harder and harder to focus. No surprise since she was operating on fumes and adrenaline. She needed food and sleep, but rest wasn't an option — not until she was certain the imminent danger was behind her.

The gas gauge veered towards empty. She couldn't stop for gas in a bathrobe and bare feet. Even out here in the middle of nowhere, her appearance would raise eyebrows. It would also make her easy to remember.

*What the hell am I going to do?* She had to get off the highway. Even in the pre-dawn hours, rest stops and main exists would be crowded with tourists and truckers. Too much of a risk. Elwood, Indiana was two miles ahead. She would take her chances there.

It was a ghost town. All the gas stations had shut down tight for the night. She banged her head against the steering wheel, tears trailing down her face. *Something* had to be open. She was about to give up when a distinct shape caught her eye. At the back of a gas station was a dark green charity bin, where people dropped off used clothes. It was overflowing.

“Thank you, God,” she whispered, pulling up alongside it. There was no time to be fussy. Anything would be better than a bathrobe. Luck was on her side. She found a couple pair of worn out jeans that looked close to her size, a few t-shirts, two plaid shirts, and an oversized denim blouse. She changed in the car. The pants had to be rolled up at the waist and the shirts were a few sizes too big for her small frame; she wanted to hug the person who had dropped them off. Now she could blend in.

The clothes gave her confidence. She got back on the highway and had just enough gas to make it to the next rest stop. While the gas was pumping, she headed into the mini mart. A tiny bell announced her arrival.

A tired looking man glanced up at her from behind the counter, a newspaper spread out in front of him. His eyes followed her long enough to make her want to bolt. She snuck a look at him when she passed by, telling herself to calm down. There was no way Neil's murder would be in the paper yet, and it wouldn't have made national news. *This was Indiana, close enough for his death to be newsworthy*, she reminded herself.

She wasn't sure what to do. *Murders might be a dime a dozen in Chicago, but most were a result of gunshots, stabbing or the occasional strangulation. Neil's death would certainly make the local news.*

The bell jangled. She almost jumped out of her skin, afraid the police had found her. What if the clerk pushed a panic button hidden beneath the counter? Her eyes darted towards the door. It was a young couple, giggling, and holding hands. She winced, fighting back tears. *She and Neil had been the same way once, goofy with love.* Things had grown tense between them in recent months. It seemed they were always at each other's throats. She'd hoped it was a phase, and that they'd get back to normal. Now they'd never have the chance.

She realized she was staring when the girl looked in her direction and blushed. Sierra quickly turned away, noticing the clerk was watching them with the same dull-eyed stare he'd focused on her. She trembled with relief. The attendant viewed all his customers with suspicion; he hadn't singled her out.

Still, she'd need a better disguise. The clothes were good, just not good enough. Keeping one eye on the security mirror mounted high overhead, she roamed the aisles, picking up a couple of baseball caps and two pairs of sunglasses. Her eyes lingered on a package of scrunchies. She'd never been a pony-tail girl, but what the hell. It would add to her disguise.

The young couple stepped up to the counter to pay. Condoms and Pepsi. The girl fidgeted with embarrassment, her boyfriend draped his arm over her shoulder and told her to relax. It was a wakeup call for Sierra. The teen-age girl was trying too hard to be inconspicuous; her nervous energy drew attention to her. She might as well have stood under a spotlight.

Sierra murmured a silent thank you to the girl. No doubt Sierra's fears were making her stand out. No wonder the clerk had been eyeballing all of them. He'd picked up on their weird vibes.

Sierra took her purchases up to the counter.

“Disgusting,” he said, his lip curling up in a sneer that revealed yellowed, rotten teeth

Her cheeks flamed. *Was he referring to her?*

“Damn kids now-a-days. All they do is get hopped up on caffeine and fornicate. What’s this world comin’ to?”

She searched her mind for an appropriate response. The man had a good twenty to thirty years on her. His generation hadn’t been any better behaved; they’d just been less brazen. *Remember*, she warned herself, *blend in, don’t say anything to stir up trouble*. “There’s no discipline anymore. Parents let their kids run wild,” she replied, matching his tone.

“Damn straight. If my sister had been caught buying rubbers, our Pa would have tanned her hide but good.”

“Yup, I hear ya. If I missed my curfew by a minute, there was hell to pay.” This time she wasn’t lying.

“The world’s going to hell in a hand basket,” he growled with a shake of his head. “It’s a damn shame these kids ain’t got no value’s.

“Ain’t that the truth.”

He nodded and smiled, revealing a mouthful of broken teeth, “Haven’t seen you around before. Are you new to town?”

“Just passing through.”

“Too bad. We could use more of you around these parts.”

She thanked him and hurried from the store. *Please God, let this get easier*. She pulled her hair back into a high ponytail and plunked the baseball cap on her head. Funny how a small change could make such a big difference. She’d chosen sunglasses big enough to swallow her face. Add the rolled up jeans and huge flannel shirt and all, in all, it wasn’t bad, for a makeshift disguise. She’d pass the first glance test.

Sierra tossed the empty bag onto the passenger seat and started the car. She still needed a different vehicle. It felt like there was sign slapped on the hood of the car, screaming, *here I am, come get me*. At least in a city, she could get lost. Out here on the Indiana Highway, there wasn't much action. It was all fields and farms on either side of the road, and the exits came at long intervals. Outside of the semi's, she was pretty much alone, making her a moving target.

She clicked on the radio and surfed for an all-news station. The tension in her body was tight enough to bounce coins off. Her heart jumped every time they announced local news on the eight's. The tears came out of nowhere. Her future was gone, her present, uncertain. She needed time to grieve; instead, she was stuck in a no man's land of emotion.

*Emotion was the devils handiwork.* She half- laughed, half- sobbed. *Where had that come from? Talk about a bastardized phrase.* She was slap happy from lack of sleep. It made a strange kind of sense though. Emotions had a way of clouding perspective, making it easier to over-react instead of thinking things through.

*Oh, Jesus, was that what she'd been doing? Reacting? Survival mode had kicked it, her fight or flight instincts engaged. It was burn and die or run. She ran. But where was she running to?*

The sound of brakes squealing snapped her back. The semi's surrounding her screeched to a halt. It was like being in a metal cave. She couldn't see what was going on. Her eyes slid to the clock. 6:00 AM. Too early for rush hour but traffic was at a standstill. Her stomach chose an inopportune moment to growl, reminding her how long it'd been since she'd last eaten. It was suicide to keep up at this pace. Time to make a list and formulate a plan.

She needed food.

A car.

Money.

Disposable cell.

Sleep.

Somewhere to stay.



She needed a town large enough to accommodate those needs, big enough for her not to stand out. Banks didn't open till nine. She'd have to bide her time until then. Indianapolis was her best bet.

A horn blared, demanding her attention. The trucker next to her was making lewd gestures, and wiggling his eyebrows at her. She shivered in disgust. He probably had a wife and four kids at home, and she sure as hell wasn't looking particularly good in her charity clothes. What was he thinking? Pig. She pitied his poor wife, slaving away at home, while her husband looked to get lucky on the road. *How many men kept secrets from the women they claimed to love?*

*Like Neil. Why had he become standoffish and irritable? He'd been hiding a secret, a secret big enough to get him killed.* He'd been willing to risk their relationship to guard it. They'd always told each other everything, what made this different?

He'd shut her out, leaving her angry and frustrated. If she wanted to be brutally honest with herself, she'd been sharing a stranger's bed for months. He'd kept her close physically, while he pushed her away emotionally. Had she been so desperate that she'd ignored important signs and hadn't known when to walk away? She twisted the engagement ring on her finger. A pledge to stand by each other, for better or worse. It didn't get much worse than this.

There was a break in the traffic. She edged forward. Her heart jumped into her belly. She caught the reflection of flashing strobe lights against the trucks up ahead. *The State Police. Jesus, God,* she prayed, *please don't let them be looking for me.* Sierra looked around in desperation for an escape route. There was no way to slip into the right lane. The tuckers were lined up nice and tight. She mumbled The Hail Mary under her breath and pulled the cap lower to hide her face.

Sierra died by inches. She craned her neck, wishing she could see what was going on. The sea of brake lights ahead of her blurred into a giant red, hot mess. She gripped the steering wheel hard, thinking of Neil swallowed by angry red fire, pictured him writhing on the floor, desperate to douse the flames. The chilling look on the dead-eyed killers face. Her eyes burned, she couldn't cry, not now. She had to stay strong — her life depended on it.

There was a box of tissues on the back seat. They were useless, she couldn't reach them. Keeping her eyes on the road, she fumbled with the glove compartment, praying Neil stashed some napkins inside.

The truck in front of her moved forward. Her hand rummaged inside the glove box, closing around anything she could grab. She spotted flares up ahead. The knot in her stomach loosened. The two right lanes were shut down; everyone was being forced into the left lane. *It was an accident. No one was looking for her. Thank God. She'd dodged another bullet. Her nerves couldn't take much more.* She dumped the contents of the glove compartment onto her lap, glancing down for napkins, papers, anything she could use. A picture stared up at her. She couldn't look at it, she couldn't risk seeing Neil's face or a reminder of happier times. It would be too damn painful. She sifted through the stack by touch. At the bottom were a few crumpled paper towels. She reached for them, and dabbed at her eyes, wishing for a bottle of water to wash the taste of tears from her mouth.

A cop stood several feet ahead, using a glow light to direct the flow of traffic down to one lane. She averted her eyes; she didn't want to look at the accident sight. Didn't want to think of another tragedy. Not today. She picked up the pile resting on her lap. Curiosity would make her go through it eventually; for now, she'd dump it on the passenger seat.

She flipped on her turn signal and turned the wheel to the left. While she waited for her turn to merge into the left lane, she glanced at the stack. A face in the picture jumped out at her. *Grace McGinley.* Her best friend. *Grace.* With Neil. They had their arms around each other. Grace's head was nestled against Neil's chest and there was an implied intimacy in the pose; enough to make her wonder if something had been going on between them.

A sharp wrap on the car window made her jump. A state trooper, barely old enough to shave stared inside the car. *Shit. What else could go wrong?* The picture slid to the floor. *God Damn it. She couldn't ignore the photo or the possible implications. If Grace and Neil were having an affair, the police could view that as a motive for murder.* Ironically, that had been her one saving grace in this whole mess. There was no reason for the police to believe she wanted her fiancée dead. Until now. This changed everything.

The trooper motioned for her to roll down the window. *Great. Fine.* This was it. There was an APB on the car and they'd run the plates. She was screwed. Less than twenty-four hours ago, she'd awoken to a perfectly normal life. Since then, she'd witnessed the man she loved murdered in cold blood, the killer almost certainly knew her identity, and her best friend and her fiancée might have been hitting the sheets. She was running for her life, and a baby-faced cop was about to arrest her.

She searched the car for the right button. The window glided down. Her throat tightened again. The trooper bent at the waist, staring inside the car.

"Mornin', Ma'am. Don't know if you're aware of this, but your left rear wheel is pretty low. Drive too fast on that thing and you'll be risking a blowout. We already have one bad accident to deal with tonight. Don't need us another."

Nervous laughter bubbled up inside her. *A low tire? He was stopping her for a low tire?* She sucked in her cheeks, giddy with relief. It wouldn't do for her to laugh in his face. She schooled her features into a smile. "Thank you, officer. I'll get the tire taken care of right away."

He studied her face a moment too long. Sweat broke out beneath the baseball cap. *Good Lord, I can't risk any trouble.* She took off her sunglasses and batted her lashes, "I'm very grateful, Officer. It's been a bad night. My grandma took ill, and I'm on my way to the hospital."

He patted her door, "I know you gotta take care of your grandma, but take care of you too. Don't you go driving back into Illinois with that tire."

"I won't. Thank you again. You're most kind." She treated him to a flirtatious smile. He blushed.

"You be safe, now," the cop said, his voice an octave higher than it had been earlier. If she wasn't mistaken, he was blushing

"Thank you. Don't you work too hard." Despite her turmoil, she was flattered by his response. It took the edge off her nerves and she was able to breathe easy for the first time since she'd seen Neil burn to death.

He grinned like a schoolboy. "I'll try not to. Hope your Grams is all right."

She nodded. "Say a prayer."

“Will do.”

She could use a prayer. She'd take as many as she could get. He stopped the slow flow of traffic and motioned her through. Her hands shook on the wheel. This was the strangest day ever. *What else could go wrong?*

## Chapter Three

A sharp pain on the left side of her neck woke her. After she'd maneuvered her way through the rest of the traffic jam, her nerves screamed for sleep. Knowing she had a long road ahead to safety, she listened to her inner voice and pulled off at a rest stop. She didn't think she'd be able to sleep, but she drifted off as soon as she turned off the car.

Sierra rubbed the stiffness in her neck, shifting into a sitting position. The sun was blazing overhead, it was going to be another scorcher. Her whole body ached from a combination of stress and the cramped position she'd slept in. Her bladder throbbed. It was going to be a hell of a day.

She grabbed her purse and headed to the restroom. While she washed her hands, she glanced at herself in the mirror. She barely recognized herself. The sunglasses covered half of her face, but she couldn't wear them at night. She'd have to pick up a pair of lightly tinted glasses for later. She removed her sunglasses, splashed cold water on her face and blinked at her reflection. She looked horrible. Her make-up streaked across her face. Deep bags and dark shadows made her red-rimmed eyes look sunken in. Her cheekbones were hollowed out, and she was pale as a ghost. Using her hands, she scrubbed off the remaining make-up off. She tilted her head to the side; without all the gook on her face, she looked younger. Considering her outfit, all she needed was a backpack and she might be able to pass herself off as a college student if no one looked at her too closely.

Time was wasting. She dried her hands and headed back out to the car. Her stomach reminded her she needed food. Counting calories wasn't a priority anymore. Her eyes watered. She didn't have to worry about fitting into her wedding dress now that her fiancée was dead. *Would he have gone through with the ceremony while sleeping with Grace?* She bit her lower lip... maybe she was jumping to conclusions. There could be a reasonable explanation for the picture — one that didn't involve a tawdry affair behind her back.

A McDonalds loomed ahead. The pull on the steering wheel when she made sharp turn into the drive though reminded her the back tire was low — a small problem in a sea of big ones. She ordered two sausage McMuffins with egg, a hash brown, two large coffees, and parked under a tree to enjoy her meal.

The first bite was pure greasy bliss, reminding her how much she loved junk food. She dumped a packet of salt over the hash browns, and closed her eyes, chewing slow enough to savor each decadent bit. Good food, hot coffee, a beautiful summer day, for a minute she was able to fool herself into believing life was normal. Amazing what sleep and fast food could do for the soul.

The sullen clerk had only included one tiny napkin in her bag. The kid was probably on the fast track to management, looking out for bottom line. She tossed the useless napkin onto the floor and wiped her hands on her jeans.

Sierra knew she couldn't stall any longer. She drained the last of the first large coffee, picked up the stack of pictures, and felt a fresh stab of betrayal slice her heart. The picture was recent. Neil wore the shirt she'd bought him last month for his birthday, and Grace's hair was styled in the new bob cut she'd debated over getting. For a moment, Sierra couldn't breathe. Betrayal cut through her heart. The picture was proof they'd been doing *something* behind her back. Something they wanted to keep from her. She gnawed on the side of her cheek, searching for a reason they might be together, and came up empty. *How dare they do this to her? Was this the reason for Neil's recent short temper and odd behavior? Was he hiding an affair?*

No. That didn't quite jell. It had to be something else. She flipped through the other pictures; there were more of Neil and Grace, wearing different clothes, taken at different times. Some of the photos were group shots, which only confused her more. She scrutinized each one, looking for any small clue, which might provide an answer.

The group shots were too blurry. Sierra couldn't make out the faces of the other people. She skipped back to the pictures of Neil and Grace, focusing on them. They had their arms around each other in a couple of the shots, but in each one, they were staring into the camera, robbing her of the chance to see how they looked at each other. Their eyes might have revealed if they were friends or lovers.

*Who was she kidding?* She was grasping at straws. Neil and Grace were friends, but she'd never known them to get together without her. If their meetings were innocent, why keep it a secret? Her emotions were a mess. A caldron of emotions boiled inside her; she was pissed off, heartbroken, terrified, and alone. She didn't suffer well in silence. There had to be a way to confront Grace; otherwise, suspicion would fester inside her, clouding her judgment. Her mind needed to be sharp, not muddled with thoughts of how they'd made a fool of her. Grace had some serious explaining to do.

Sierra slammed down the pictures beside her and started the car. She couldn't bear to look at them again, not now. Turning her head, she backed out of the parking space. When she glanced to the right, something caught her eye. Something was written on the backs of the pictures. She swung into traffic and grabbed the stack again.

A single word.

*Foxtrot.*

*What the hell did that mean?* Dance lessons? She quickly discarded the idea. Neil was an excellent dancer; he wouldn't have wasted time or money on lessons. The word had to refer to something else. *But what?* She picked up the stack again, and skimmed through the others. One of the group photos had something written on it as well. *The First Wave.* Great. Now she had two clues, and, neither of which made any sense. The perfect chaser for her morning coffee.

She rammed the pictures into her purse and threw them on the backseat. Out of sight, out of mind. She didn't have time for distractions — not if she wanted to stay alive.

When she hit Indianapolis, she glared at the GPS. Great technology at her fingertips and she couldn't use it because it could pinpoint her location. For the first time in her life, she felt Big Brother peering over her shoulder. *It might be a free country,* she thought, *but we're turning into a society so eager to protect ourselves that we're handing over our privacy and our freedom.*

Frustration ticked inside her. She wanted to get in and out of the city in a hurry, a difficult task with the odds stacked against her. She knew what she needed; where to find it was another matter altogether.

She drove around until she spotted several satellite branches of her bank within reasonable proximity from each other. Back home in Chicago, there were banks on every other corner.

For the first time she was glad she'd never gotten around to investing the bulk of the insurance payout she'd received after her parent's death. The settlement may have left her a wealthy woman, but dealing with the money was a painful reminder of the accident. Everyone she knew kept telling her she was crazy to let so much cash sit in a savings account, turns out she wasn't so crazy after all.

Her hand froze when she reached for her purse. Her plan was simple enough. Empty her accounts by visiting several banks, withdrawing enough at each to not raise eyebrows, or be stuck waiting while they requested more money from the safe. She hoped to do it fast enough for the withdrawals not to have posted to her accounts by the time she hit the next bank. All it would take was one overly curious self-important, bank manager to question why someone from out of town was taking out large wads of cash and she'd be toast.

She remembered how freaked out she had been by the gas station attendant and the cop. Bank tellers back home had a way of making her feel like a criminal every time she withdrew more than a few hundred dollars. Up until now, she'd been lucky. Luck had a way of holding so long before it turned. She needed a cover story.

Sierra leaned back against the seat. She unconsciously twisted her engagement ring around her finger. "Think," she whispered, trying to come up with a plausible reason for needing large amounts of cash. Her lips curved in a slow smile. She scrounged around on the floor for the discarded napkin. When her hands closed around it, she felt like she'd won the lottery. It took her a minute to locate the ashtray. Using the lighter, she set the napkin on fire and let it burn in the tray.

The flames, small as they were, jarred her. A chill ran up her spine at the memory of the heinous way Neil had died and why she was on the run. She folded her arms against the steering wheel, and buried her face in them as a gut wrenching sob tore through her. A part of her agonized over whether he had cheated on her; another part of her hated herself for being angry with a dead man. *The emotion was wrong on so*



*many levels.* In the end, it didn't matter what Neil had done, no one should suffer such a horrendous death.

She wiped away her tears and glanced down at the ashtray. The napkin burned itself out. She dipped her fingers inside and smudged the ashes across her face beneath the sunglasses. For good measure, she added a second slash of soot across her chest. Steeling herself, she went inside.

Keeping her head down to avoid surveillance cameras, she filled out a withdrawal slip and made her way to the window. She wordlessly slipped her ID and piece of paper through the window.

The teller studied the withdrawal slip for a good long time. "You want to take all this money out?"

Sierra fought her anger. What gave tellers the right to question people? It was her God Damn money. She repressed her anger and let the tears flow. "My poor sister. Her house burned to the ground last night. Her husband lost his job a while back. He worked for GM. They don't have no insurance. I wish she would have told me they'd fallen on hard times. They've got three kids. I would have paid the insurance for them. Now I just got to help. Do you have a sister?"

The teller's face turned cherry red. "I do. My baby sister makes a habit of doin' all the wrong things, for the right reasons, God help her."

Sierra leaned over the counter, nodding. "So you know what I'm going through."

The teller reached out and patted her hand, "I sure do."

"I could have given them a couple thousand or so each year for insurance. She was too proud and headstrong to ask."

It worked like a charm. The teller scurried over to the pregnant manager. They couldn't have been nicer. Sierra brushed her hand over her tears. "You know what? Maybe I should take out a little bit more. Just in case."

She walked out of the first bank twenty two thousand dollars richer, breaking into a wide smile when she reached the car. *What an adrenaline rush.* She hadn't done anything wrong, yet it felt like she had gotten away with something. Confidence bolstered, she drove to the next bank. When all was said and done, the nice people in Indianapolis were a hell of a lot more compassionate than Chicago folk. Six

banks later, she drained everything except her 401k and CD's. She thanked the Lord for her inheritance money. Next stop, discount stores.

There was a Wal-Mart right around the corner. She picked up a couple pillows, blanket, backpack, small suitcase, disposal cell, undies, clothes and snacks. Then she hit the ATM's and maxed out her available cash advances.

The next town up was Terra Haute. She found an internet café, and checked the Chicago papers online, biting her fingernails while she read. Every muscle in her body tightened. She had one ear cocked, expecting to hear sirens racing in her direction any moment. Wiping out her bank accounts left a major trail. It was like painting a big red X on her back, screaming come get me. She scrolled through each article, terrified of finding her name or her photo splashed across the page. She sagged with relief when she finished. There was nothing about Neil. No one had found him, no one reported him missing. Thank God. She felt a pang of remorse at her relief. This wasn't how things were supposed to be. Under any other circumstances, she would be beside herself with grief. Instead, she was running from a killer. The whole situation reeked of insanity.

Her gaze scanned the café. Satisfied that no one was paying attention to her, she did a Google search for The First Wave. *A dead end*, she thought, quickly typing in Foxtrot. No double meaning for the scribbled word jumped out at her. She knew the pictures were going to gnaw at her until she had answers. Her neck was in knots. She rolled her head, and heard her muscles crick. This line of thought wasn't doing her any good. Self-preservation first, everything else had to wait.

Sierra logged off the computer and bought a coffee, sitting back down at another table, there was no need to leave a trail in a single computer's history. If anyone was following her, she planned to make it as difficult as possible to find her. She went on Craig's list, and scribbled a list of phone numbers. There were quite a few used cars for sale; buying one was going to be tricky.

She headed back to the car and started dialing, hitting pay dirt on the fifth call. A seventeen-year-old kid who rebuilt cars was trying to earn cash for college. She begged him to meet her outside a local diner. When he hesitated, she realized she'd made a mistake by sounding too desperate. Afraid that he was

about to hang up, she turned on the waterworks to help convince him. It took some doing but he finally agreed to meet her in forty minutes.

. Sierra shoved a few things in the backpack and ripped the plaid shirt she was wearing. Gritting her teeth, she opened her car door, and slammed it into her chin. *Damn, that hurt.* If she was going to play a role, she was going to own it. Method acting. Who could have predicted her high school drama classes were going to pay off after all? She banged the door into her forehead too, and with a grunt of satisfaction felt a bump start to rise.

She stuffed six thousand dollars into her jeans pocket and buried the car keys in another. Then she went to sit on a curb, rubbing her already reddened eyes to make them look worse. A quick look around told her no one appeared to be paying attention to her and her cell phone burned a hole in her hand. Before she could talk herself out of it, she hit star sixty-seven and dialed Grace's number. It went to voice mail.

Odd. Grace should have been home. Sierra screened her calls. Grace always picked up, no matter what she was in the middle of doing. The unanswered call fed her paranoia. She imagined Grace pacing in a motel room waiting for Neil to arrive and warned herself she was jumping to conclusions. The truth was it was far easier to feel betrayed and angry, than to give into grief.

Two cars pulled up alongside her. The 2002 black Honda Accord gleamed from a recent polishing. She could care less about the dings and dents riddling the back door. The kid burned rubber squealing into the parking lot. The motor hummed, that was only the sales pitch she needed.

A pimply faced teen tumbled out of the Honda. His buddy, a bit cooler in a souped-up Camero, followed. Sierra felt old looking at them.

The kid thrust his chin at her, "You the lady lookin' to buy?"

"Yeah," Sierra used her sleeve to wipe her tears and hurried over to them.

"Whoa." The kid eyed her battered face, backing away. "What happened to you?"

She cast a furtive glance around her. "Hey, listen, I want the car okay? I came here to get a soda after class. And what do I see? My fiancée with the local rich bitch. I confront him. He pulls me outside,

threatens me, smacks me in the face and takes off with my car. His Daddy is some big shot with the Chicago police. He dumped me, right on the spot. Said if I caused a scene or messed things up with his new girlfriend, he'd make all kinds of trouble for me. He would too, he's that mean. I don't even want to go home and get my stuff. I just want a car so I can go back to my family in Illinois. I don't want trouble."

The kid looked at his buddy. "Neither do I."

She batted her lashes, "Please, help me. You're asking five grand for the car. I'll give you six, if you can promise if anyone ever comes asking, you've never seen me. No matter what."

The buddy nudged pimple face, "An extra thou, man. Ain't nothin' to sneeze at."

The kid shifted from foot to foot. "You know what you gotta do, right? With the plates and title and all?"

"Yeah, of course."

"You wanna have it checked out or take it for a ride?"

"No. I just want to get far away from the asshole before he comes after me again."

"You wanna buy it? Just like that?"

"Yeah, just like that. If we have a deal. You've never seen me. I'm scared he might kill me...or worse. You don't know his temper."

"And you'll pay an extra grand?"

She shoved her hand into her pocket, and pulled out a wad of cash. "It's right here."

"Well." He looked at his friend again.

"Well?"

He eyed the bills in her hand. "All right then, you got yourself a deal."

"Even if the cops starts talkin' trash about me?"

"Hey, I ain't never seen ya."

Sierra shoved the money into his hand before he could change his mind. "Thank you. You saved my life." The teen had no idea how true that was.

“Shit, for a thousand bucks, it’s the least I can do.” He handed her the keys and the title. “Get that taken care of okay? Like, right away?”

“You bet. Thank you.”

“Anytime. She’s all yours.” He started to walk away, and then turned back. “You know, maybe I should go with you for the title exchange.”

*Shit*, this was a complication she didn’t need.

“My fiancée is probably gonna be lookin’ for me. He’s a big guy who thinks with his fists. I promise, I’ll take care of it right away. I don’t want him giving you any trouble.”

The kid hesitated before he nodded. “All right. Just don’t mess me up, okay?”

“Okay.” Poor guy, she *was* going to mess him up. She should have given him more than an extra thousand for his troubles.

He scuffed the tip of his gym shoes on the pavement, deep in thought. He was probably remembering all the good advice his parents gave him about what *not* to do when selling a car. Her heart stood still. She needed the Honda.

The buddy poked him. “A grand, man. Let’s book.”

“Yeah.” He raised trusting brown eyes to hers. *She would remember those eyes*. “Good luck.”

Sierra forced a smile and a waved. She waited until they were out of sight before tucking the title into her back pocket, and transferring her belongings to the new car. *Now what to do with Neil’s car?*

There were woods within walking distance. She gnawed on the side of her cheek, thinking. Sierra drove in as deep as she could and pulled over. There was a tool kit in the trunk. She located the VIN number, and hacked away at it with a screwdriver. If anyone were looking for her, they’d have figured out by now that she’d taken Neil’s car. The longer they thought that the better. Squatting down, she removed the license plates. She sat back on her heels, tracing the numbers with her finger. Whenever Neil picked her up, she’d watch for the familiar plate number. Another thing she’d never do again. She sighed, shuddering with emotion. This wasn’t the time to break down, not if she wanted to outwit the killer.

Sierra steeled herself to take last look through the car; she didn't want to leave any of his personal items behind. One day, she might look back and regret it. She emptied out the glove compartment, it contained mostly junk, nothing worth keeping. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed something sliver glinting under the driver's side seat. She stretched forward to reach it, surprised when she found a netbook, one of those small mobile laptops that allowed instant access to the internet. Neil never mentioned owning one. It was becoming apparent there was a lot she didn't know about her fiancée.

For good measure, she left the driver's side window open, and the keys in the ignition. If Indiana were anything like Chicago, someone would steal the car or chop it up for parts. Abandoning Neil's car to be picked clean by scavengers felt like a second death.

Sierra wrapped her arms around her body. "Good-bye, Neil."

With a final nod, she turned ready to face the unknown.