

PROLOGUE

THE CAR WAS OUT OF CONTROL. Tires squealed as the automobile bolted down the road that snaked its way along the Blue Ridge Mountains. No matter how hard she pressed the brake, the vehicle wouldn't stop. Instead, it lunged forward at an even faster pace.

Lightning flashed, momentarily brightened the midnight skies, making the monstrous trees and rocks more ominous.

No matter how hard she prepared herself, she jumped every time the thunder boomed loudly.

Wipers set to the fastest speed were no match to the downpour beating against the windshield.

She gripped the steering wheel; her squinting eyes tracked the double solid line on the road. Fortunately for her, there were no other drivers hogging the road. Probably waiting out the storm either at the top or foot of the mountain.

She should've stopped as well but she couldn't. She needed to keep going or they would catch her. Kill her.

She pressed the pedal again, hoped the brakes had only been wet before and would connect this time. Her foot stomped the floorboard instead.

Panic intensified. Her heart pounded as if she, not the car raced down the mountain. Her stomach was in knots, nauseated by the smell of the rubber on the rain-slicked road, and worried about who, or what, might be on the other side of each curve.

The radio issued a warning of the impending storm, then went static. The storm apparently knocked out the power to the local station.

A sense of urgency cluttered her brain. Not because of the car's inadequate brakes or the hair-raising turns but she desperately needed to be somewhere.

Someone was waiting for her. She needed to tell him what she'd learned.

Danger surrounded her. Outside in the raging storm, inside as she fought to control the car.

As if a time bomb steadily ticked away inside her. Threatening to expose everyone for their crimes and end her peaceful existence that had been so quiet until three months ago.

Lightning flashed once again, and she saw she'd come too close to the edge of the road. There was no shoulder, only the valley below. The tires protested as she turned the wheel and tried to navigate closer to the center of the road, prayed once again no one came from the opposite direction.

She saw a sign up ahead and knew she was nearing the last curve before reaching the straight stretch to the bottom of the mountain. She remembered driving this same road almost every weekend ten years ago when she attended college.

She travelled this same reckless speed, but tonight wasn't as carefree as back then. Not with the failing brakes and impending doom clouding her horizon

Veering to the right and then left, she passed the sand bank for runaway trucks and debated using it. God forbid that a truck should come up behind her.

A sudden sheet of rain pounded against the windshield, forced the car to sway, once again stoking the fear churning inside her. She took a deep breath, tried to remain calm.

Reminded herself that once she got through the next curve, she would be in the clear. If she managed that, she would be on the straight stretch to the base of the mountain, let the car run down and grind to a stop. Then she would relax, go slow, pray the gas station would still be open.

She wished she could pull off on some secluded spot and wait out the storm, but knew she couldn't. They might find her.

As she approached the final curve, a large bright light appeared from nowhere and shattered her concentration. She cried out as the car swerved to the right and then out of control.

Suddenly there was total darkness, silence and a feeling of weightlessness. The car veered off the edge of the mountain like a rocket, leveled and took a nose dive back to the earth below.

CHAPTER ONE

MARGO SOMMERS SHOT UPRIGHT IN HER BED AND SCREAMED as she watched the car dive off the side of the mountain.

Beads of sweat clung to her forehead and upper lip as she listened to the silence and then gasped at the fiery explosion.

Exhausted, she fell back against the pillows, covered her face with shaking hands and tried to ease the pounding headache. Erase that last vision.

It happened again. The dream had returned. But this time it felt so real. So vivid. The pounding rain, the loud thunder and bright bolts of lightning.

This time, she went over the edge. In the past, she always awakened as the cliff's blackness and the feeling of weightlessness jolted her.

She dropped her hands on either side of her head, tried to calm herself, concentrated on the shadows dance across the ceiling of her bedroom. She stared about her, thankful for the familiar dresser and night stand, hand-me-down from her sister.

Turned on her side toward the window that overlooked her courtyard in the center of the complex. Tucked a hand beneath the pillow and gazed into the night sky beyond.

Why? She asked herself for the thousandth time. Why wouldn't they go away?

And why did each one get worse? Tonight's dream was the bleakest one yet.

Was it a premonition?

Was she going to die?

Had she experienced this in another life?

Was something terrible about to happen? Or had it already happened? The dream seemed real enough.

They started three months ago but never progressed this far. Why now?

Had she exhausted herself to the point she was seeing her demise?

She loved the challenge of being a television news reporter but uncovering the child prostitution ring two months ago triggered a need to educate the public on preventing the abuse and offering closure for the victims.

There had been endless weeks and weekends researching and interviewing victims and their parents, police, social services workers and professionals; days planning a series of segments to broadcast, then hours writing, editing and packaging the segments to be aired next week.

That in addition to any stories the news station threw her way.

With the story, ready to be aired, now might be a good time to take a short vacation. Spend some quality time with Dianne.

Margo smiled as she thought of her older sister. Five years older, Dianne had always been the constant one in her life – from the time there were orphaned after their parents' untimely death. GrandmaAnna accepted them into her home but then there had been the fire and GrandmaAnna's accident.

Dianne had always been the solid one.

Margo decided she would give Dianne a call in the morning, tell her to put clean sheets on the spare bed. Her baby sister would be coming to pester her for a few weeks.

A sudden loud knock at her front door brought Margo to a sitting position once more. Her heart jumped into her throat, her quivering hands gripped the mattress as flashbacks of the nightmare haunted her thoughts.

Had they found her?

She glanced at the clock when the second knock shattered the quiet. Four o'clock. Who would be knocking at her door at this hour?

She shrugged the covers aside and reached for her trusty baseball bat she kept next to her bed. A drunk?

Sticking to the shadows, she made her way across the living room, but kept an eye on the window in case someone should be watching from outside.

She glanced through the peephole and blinked when she saw the policeman. Why would a cop be knocking at her door at this hour of the morning?

Had her car been stolen? She stared through the blinds of the window near the door and found her Honda parked where she left it a few hours ago.

Could he be one of those bad cops? She recalled the story she wrote several years ago of a rapist who dressed like a cop to gain the trust of his victims. Could the guy be out of prison already?

Margo left the chain on the door and spoke to the officer through the narrow crack.

"Yes, Officer, what can I do for you?"

"Are you Margo Sommers?" A deep voice spoke from the other side of the door.

"Yes."

"I'm Officer Mike Samuels and I need to speak with you."

"Not before you show me some identification, Officer Samuels." She looked for his name tag in the dim lighting of the hallway,

"I'm sorry," he apologized. "I started last week." He pulled out a small flashlight, so she could read his police ID.

Legit, Margo thought. "Just a minute," she said.

Margo shut the door, set the baseball bat beside the sofa and sprinted toward her bedroom.

Shoving an arm through a sleeve of her robe, she turned on the lamp as she made her way back to the front door. Picked up the bat before unchaining the door.

"Please, come in," she said.

Officer Samuels stepped inside, eyed the baseball bat Margo held in her hand.

"What brings you knocking at my door this early in the morning? Has there been an emergency at the station? I typically get my calls from our station manager."

The policeman shook his head. "Do you have a sister named Dianne Masters?"

Margo's heart sank. She sucked in a breath and gripped the bat even tighter. "What's happened?"

"I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but there's been an accident."

"What kind of accident?"

"Vehicular. Your sister...Dianne...she was killed earlier this evening out on Route 33."

Margo felt her knees go weak and put her free hand on the wall for support.

"When?" She whispered. "When did it happen?"

"Several hours ago. Around midnight, I believe." He reached for her. "Here, let me help you to sit down."

"What happened?" Margo asked. Visions of a car going off a cliff and exploding into a fiery ball played back in her mind.

The officer studied his notes. "There was a bad storm, and it appears she lost control of the car. They veered off the side of the mountain and died on impact."

"They? You mean Damon was with her?"

"No ma'am. They've been unable to determine the identity of her companion."

"Then how do you know it was Dianne?"

"The car was registered to your sister and her husband identified some of the items found among the remains."

"Remains?"

"Yes, there was an explosion. Both your sister and her companion were burned."

"And so, we say our final goodbye to Dianne Masters."

Margo heard the minister but saw the car going over the cliff. Her foot pressed tightly against the ground as visions of the failed brakes played back in her mind.

It had been three days since Officer Samuels' early morning visit, and Margo still couldn't believe Dianne was gone.

Although Damon identified the car and personal belongings, Margo had yet to see the actual vehicle or autopsy report. The other body still rested in the morgue, awaiting the results of tests to determine the identity.

The gossip was it was Stan Newberry, a history teacher at Brownsville High.

Margo shivered when a brisk breeze whistled across the freshly mown grass and newly turned earth. She inhaled the scent of the sprays of white carnations, roses and lilies and glanced at the colorful bronze, yellow and purple mums people sent.

She took a succession of short breaths. Everyone knew Dianne's passion for flowers.

"She will be missed," the minister's voice brought her back to the present, echoed the mourners who paid their last respects during the family visitation the night before.

Margo glanced towards the crowd, recognized some who returned for the service and recalled bits and pieces of their condolences.

Samantha Young and Jackie Wingfield, Dianne's closest friends were the quietest. They called themselves the *Golden Girls* in high school and Margo knew not a day went by they didn't touch base with one another.

Thomas Cooper, the son of Dianne's neighbors, was sorry his parents were unable to attend. They were on a well-deserved vacation cruising the Caribbean and he was sure they would stop by for a visit as soon as they returned.

She recognized Albert Smith, the retired insurance agent who commented he would be giving her a call in a couple days to discuss some important business.

Many people praised Dianne because of her work with a shelter for battered women and abused children. She was renovating GrandmaAnna's old home and Margo assured everyone Dianne's dream would be completed.

She recalled Damon's frustrated look when he overheard her comment and promptly stepped across the chapel room to speak to some of his friends. He was aware she never approved of his marriage to Dianne and fueled the dislike by keeping to his office while offering no words of consolation.

They argued when she complained about the rumors that Dianne ran off with her lover. He shrugged a shoulder, stated Dianne avoided him and stayed away for periods of time. What was he supposed to think?

Maisy squeezed her hand and Margo gave a half-smile to her childhood mentor. Her mother's best friend, Maisy helped GrandmaAnna to care for her and Dianne then became their second mother when their grandmother died.

She moved into the mother-in-law suite when Dianne married Damon and took care of the house for them.

Margo's mind wandered as the service progressed. It didn't seem possible her sister was inside the casket. She hadn't been able to say good-bye as Dianne's charred remains had been released just yesterday afternoon.

While the nightmare played through her mind, she recalled the looks and remembered the whispers everyone traded last night. Whispers that stopped whenever she or Damon or Maisy were within earshot.

Margo hated gossip and yet it played such a vital part of her job. As a television reporter, she lived with it daily. She learned to put the sensational into perspective, research the possible truths, then report the facts. She usually managed to handle it with a sense of professional detachment, but this time, it hit too close to home.

This time it involved her sister.

And with Damon being so unfeeling with his closed mouth and cold emotions, she wondered if there might be some truth to the rumors.

Had Dianne finally seen Damon for the cold creep she herself knew him to be? She had no proof, only a reporter's gut instinct.

Margo stared out across the cemetery, past the hearse and line of cars to the mountains where her sister died. The mountain covered with the colorful autumn blanket of death.

Once again, Margo tasted the fear that overwhelmed her during the recurring nightmare, recalled the terror of swerving to avoid the blinding light before nosediving over the cliff.

Sweat trickled down her back as she re-experienced the final chill of death. It felt so real, she had to restrain herself from crying out as she did several nights ago.

Maisy squeezed her hand a second time as if sensing her distress. Margo returned the gesture, pushed away the anguish of unanswered questions.

No, everything was too hushed. She'd been denied the chance to view her sister's remains and Sheriff Anderson ignored her calls. Damon's refusal to talk fueled her suspicions much more was involved.

Margo pinched her lips together, clenched her jaw. Something didn't feel right.

She continued to stare at the mountains, determined to find answers. She was convinced more than ever her sister was not inside that coffin.

She raised her chin and squared her shoulders, anxious for the service to be over so she could begin her investigation.

Her eyes settled on a lone figure standing on the hill beyond the wrought iron fence that bordered the cemetery. The bright red leaves of the oak tree contrasted with the tall man dressed in black. He was too far away to distinguish any facial features, but close enough for her to observe he wore a leather jacket and sunglasses. Although the glasses shielded his eyes, she shivered at the intensity of his stare.

She frowned. Who could he be, she wondered. She didn't recall seeing him last night. And why hadn't he mingled with the crowd? Why would he want to remain separate?

Her view was suddenly blocked when the minister bent before her, offering his condolences.

Margo squirmed. She had been so engrossed in the man, she forgot her reason for being here and the minister had finished the service. She nodded, waited while he spoke to Maisy and Damon.

Soon, she thought to herself. Soon, everyone would leave.

Margo stood, spoke to a few of her classmates who attended out of respect, but death combined with time and distance eliminated any common bond for conversation. Within minutes, people scattered, made their way to their cars.

Maisy stepped towards her.

"You go ahead," Margo said. "I'd like some time alone, if you don't mind."

Maisy frowned but nodded her understanding as she followed Damon to the black limousine.

Margo stared at the onyx rose casket, overwhelmed with sadness. She touched it, hoped to capture a sense of loss, but experienced no feelings of finality or goodbye. Her suspicions escalated as she became more and more convinced this was all a mistake.

She heard the truck doors, watched the grounds crew pause when they realized she was still there. Gave her some time, waited for her to leave before lowering the casket into the ground.

Margo sighed. So many emotions and doubts in just a few days, no time to think them through. For the moment, there was little she could do.

But tomorrow, she would put her investigative skills to work and begin her search to discover what happened to her sister.

She left a single red rose atop the coffin, stepped away from the present, walked towards the graves of the past that filled the cemetery.

She stopped beside her parents' tombstone. They had been killed in a plane crash when she was five. GrandmaAnna rested next to them. Margo smiled as she lovingly touched the marker, remembered the old lady who took them in. Wrapped her arms around them, gave them the love she and Dianne so desperately needed.

She and Dianne lived with their grandmother for two years before a fire shattered their lives. They said GrandmaAnna knocked the candle off the table when she fell. She remembered waking to the fire, discovering her grandmother in the sitting room and calling out to Dianne. They managed to pull GrandmaAnna to safety, but not before she succumbed to smoke inhalation.

There were two more markers. One for her Uncle Travis who died in action during World War II. The second displayed a name and birth date but no death date. She vaguely remembered her Uncle Marcus who disappeared after the fire.

Mindful of the myth about walking on graves, Margo meandered further, browsed the inscriptions on the tombstones, noted the names and dates of the people buried beneath the ground. Some old, some young. Some died long ago, some last month.

A cold chill crept up her back. She looked up and discovered the mystery man still watched her from atop the hill. He no longer faced Dianne's grave, but seemed to be concentrated on her.

She slipped a hand in her shoulder bag, clutched her car key.

She was closer, and her reporter's skills noted his attire. Black jacket, white shirt, black jeans and boots. She couldn't detect any facial features, only that he had a high forehead and short beard. The wind blew through black hair that looked like it needed a trim.

He leaned against the oak tree plumed in bright red leaves.

She shivered, not from the nip in the Autumn air, but because of the intensity of his gaze. She might not be able to see his eyes still hidden behind sunglasses, but she felt them as he followed her every move.

Why was he still here? Was she supposed to know him? Did he know Dianne?

She should go over and say something to him, but he spooked her. She turned away and concentrated on the new grass growing over a recent grave.

Simon Cauthorne was engraved on the headstone and she calculated he was only sixteen years old when he died. What could possibly have caused such an early, untimely death, she wondered.

"Suicide." A male voice answered behind her.

Margo jumped, worried the mystery man decided to join her. She turned to find the minister instead.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you," He stared at the marker. "I often visit those I've helped put to rest."

"I'm sure it is very difficult," Margo said softly.

"Sometimes. But this was one of the hardest sermons I've had to do. Simon was so young and seemed most unlikely to take his life."

"What happened?"

The minister sighed. "Shot himself."

"Do you know why?"

"Nobody knows for sure. He left no note and I often wonder if he understood the finality of what he was doing."

Margo shivered, thought about the girls lured into prostitution. "Young people have no fear. They don't understand the consequences until too late. I can't imagine anyone trying to end their life."

"Unfortunately, another boy did the same thing a week later."

Margo stared at the minister in shock while her journalistic curiosity churned into action.

"Were they friends? Could it have been a secret pact?"

The minister nodded. "They went to school together but," he paused when someone signaled from across the way, "Excuse me, I need to go. Are you going to be okay?"

Margo smiled, thanked him again for the sermon. She reached for her cellphone, checked the time. Four o'clock.

She should get back to the house. She was sure Damon and his entourage of mourners were waiting for her.

But the thought of putting up with their superficial sympathy sickened her.

Not yet, she decided as she turned to leave.

She peeked up the hill and breathed a sigh of relief when the man in black was no longer there.

She stepped across the paved driveway, noticed more fresh graves.

She glanced at the tombstones and noted they too were young boys. Everyone died within the last six months. What happened? Were they suicides as well?

Once again, her recent story on youth prostitution haunted her. The death of so many boys triggered her curiosity.

She reached for her cellphone again and took pictures of the graves determined to research what caused such a rash of young deaths.

FAR – Facts. Answers. Research. The core of her job. Her passion in life. She always applied two of the three to everything. Oftentimes, she used all three.

Just like Dianne, these young boys would be her new project. She would look for any common link that might cause them to take their lives.

She would also prove her sister had not been in that car. It was a huge mistake.

And if it wasn't a mistake, she would find out what caused the accident. If it happened like her dream, there were answers to be sought.

Since her boss gave her some time off, she had a whole week to investigate.

She glanced around, realized she was stranded in the middle of a cemetery with dusk approaching. The cemetery was on the outskirts of town and a brisk walk would do her good. Her daily jog had been put on hold these past few days.

Since the Sheriff's office was on her way back to her car parked at the funeral home, she might as well start with Sheriff Anderson.

Main Street always amazed her in autumn when the hundred-year-old trees competed to outshine each other with their bright orange, yellow and red leaves.

October was her least favorite month of the year. She called it the month of death. Just as Spring symbolized new growth and the birth of young animals, Fall meant the death of leaves, time and people.

Her parents were killed on an October morning, twenty-two years ago. The fire that killed her grandmother also occurred during October. And now her sister had been killed on a dark and stormy October evening.

She shivered, tried to shake off the gloom as she approached the brick building that served as the Sheriff's office. Brownsville was a small town that also served as the county seat. The town Sergeant worked out of the small office on one side of the station, the county sheriff and his deputies occupied the larger portion of the building.

The courthouse was down the street.

Except for newcomers, there were no strangers in Brownsville. Everyone was cognizant of who was related to whom, who had secrets to hide.

Since Dianne died on the mountain on the outskirts of town, the Sheriff's office handled the case.

Used to the chaos in the Richmond precincts, Margo appreciated the quiet nod from the young girl at the front desk. She appeared to be fresh out of high school and Margo smiled, hoped it would be to her advantage. Sheriff Anderson hadn't been too cooperative yesterday.

"Would it be possible to find where the Masters automobile was towed?" Margo asked.

The girl frowned. "I'm not sure," she said as she looked at the In and Out stack of files on the corner of the desk. "Let me go ask Sheriff Anderson. He just stepped out for an early dinner."

"Take your time," Margo said. "I'll wait here."

Margo kept an eye on the girl as she headed across the street to the diner. She might wait, but not idly.

She had asked the same question of Sheriff Anderson yesterday and he had been very closemouthed. She doubted he would be any more helpful today.

If she wanted to find any answers, she needed to dig for them herself.

"Hello," she called out as she stepped around the desk. "Is anyone here?"

She smiled when no one answered and moved quickly. She had a narrow window of time before the girl would be back.

She opened the drawer, rifled through the files but nothing with her sister's name on it. The clean desk offered no answers either.

Margo scanned the files in the tray of work to do and found nothing.

Her heart raced, her time was almost up. She frantically looked for any other place to search and spotted the clipboard in the corner near the radio.

She dashed around the desk, reached for it and smiled when she noted the name of the junkyard and garage in town.

A slamming car door had her squatting for cover. She peeked through the miniblinds and watched a couple head toward the local hardware store.

She scanned the page and located Dianne's name.

"*Mad Dog's Junk Yard*," she spoke out loud. The sign for the new service station caught her eye yesterday. It was within walking distance, on the outskirts of town.

She returned the clipboard to its original spot and stepped towards the door, met the young secretary as she came up the steps to the office.

"I'm sorry, ma'am but Sheriff Anderson says that particular vehicle is off limits. It's part of an investigation and he can't divulge where it is being stored."

Margo smiled, thanked the girl for her trouble, then headed up the street toward the service station.

Two blocks away, Margo paused outside the service station and debated what to do next. There were no cars that resembled Dianne's beige BMW on the front lot but spotted another lot behind the building. Hopefully, she would find it there.

Since it was part of an investigation, it stood to reason it would be parked out of sight.

Should she ask questions, or just look around on her own? Would they help her or be as closemouthed as Sheriff Anderson?

Country music blared from inside the garage. The sound of a wrench falling on the concrete floor echoed throughout the building and Margo decided not to interrupt the guy. Sprinted to the back of the building.

Minutes later, Margo had walked the lot twice and found nothing resembling her sister's car.

She almost stomped her boot in the mud. Where was the car, she wondered? She did not imagine Dianne's name on the log. With the name, make and year of the car beside her name. Someone obviously removed the car.

She thought she found it near the front of the lot, but it turned out to be a faded mustang. Gray marks scarred the side and she wondered if the driver lost control when she noted the front bumper and shattered windshield.

Margo headed back toward an empty spot near the front gate. Could Dianne's car have been here? She squat down to run a finger across a fresh spot of oil and footprints on the muddy ground. These were obviously made after the storm.

She was sure Dianne's car had been here. But why had they moved it?

Rumbling skies and black clouds warned another downpour was imminent and she was on the wrong side of town. Her car was six blocks the other way, and unless she wanted to be drenched, she needed to hustle.

Trees and leaves swished as the wind picked up. Margo shivered, wished she had listened to Maisy when she suggested she take a sweater to the funeral.

She started back towards town.

Unlike Richmond, with it bustling city hours, Brownsville shut down at the stroke of five. Businesses closed, people headed for home leaving the streets bare. The impending storm apparently sent a lot of people home early.

She never realized how the town became deserted in a matter of minutes.

She raced toward the hardware store stepped around the corner, struck with how the darkened clouds, deserted streets and sudden quiet made the town seem sinister.

Maybe she should have an early dinner at the restaurant up the street and let the storm pass.

Out of the blue, Margo glimpsed a shadow to her left and felt two strong hands grab her. One covered her mouth, the other hugged her to a hard chest as he lifted and carried her into the dark niche at the entrance of the hardware store.