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# MURDER ROAD

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An aerial, black and white photograph of a two-lane road winding through a dense forest. The road is marked with white lines and is flanked by thick trees and foliage. The perspective is from above, looking down at the road as it curves through the landscape.

# MURDER ROAD

SIMONE ST. JAMES

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*For anyone who was told they're weird because they read too much.  
Because you're not, and you don't.*



# CHAPTER ONE



**T**hat July night seemed full of possibility, with the empty highway stretching out before us. I had just woken up from a nap in the passenger seat, my head foggy as I remembered where we were. I took off my flip-flops and pulled my bare legs up, crossing them and running my hands through my hair. The digital clock on the dash said it was two in the morning, and the road didn't look like the same road we'd been on when I fell asleep. I wondered where we were going. There was no way I would fall asleep again.

"We're lost," I said.

Eddie glanced over at me from the driver's seat. "I don't think so. We took a wrong exit, that's all. I'll get us back on the interstate."

I looked out the window at the narrow country road, lined with dark trees, and thought we were definitely lost—but the truth was, I didn't care. I was riding at night in Eddie Carter's Pontiac, which had a front seat like a sofa. It was July of 1995 and I was twenty-six years old. I was here because Eddie and I were on our honeymoon. We had been married just over twenty-four hours.

We were headed for a motel that was a cluster of cabins on the shore of Lake Michigan. We'd budgeted enough money to stay exactly five nights. We planned to swim, play Scrabble, barbecue



burger patties on the rusty charcoal grill, drink half-warm beer from a cooler, swim some more, then go to bed.

Repeat five times, and then we'd make our way home to the small apartment we rented together in Ann Arbor, and Eddie would go back to work fixing cars and I'd go to my job at the bowling alley. We'd both go to work every day, then we'd come home and have dinner that was probably one of six kinds of sandwich, and then we'd go to bed. Repeat every day, forever.

I glanced over at Eddie. He was frowning, concentrating on the road. His brown hair had grown out since he left the army, though he still kept it short. He was wearing a light gray T-shirt and worn jeans. He wasn't a huge man, but he was sleekly muscled, and his biceps were hard under the sleeves of his T-shirt, his physical presence at odds with his quiet, studious expression. At twenty-seven he was a year older than me, though he seemed much more mature. As I looked at those biceps, it hit me yet again that I had married a man instead of a boy.

*Married.* I had to toss the phrases around in my head, trying to get used to them. *I married him. We got married. Eddie married me. I am his wife. We are a married couple.*

The words still felt strange.

"Do you want me to pull the map from the glove box?" I asked him.

"I think I know where we are," Eddie said. "Roughly, at least. Something about this is familiar. I think we're heading south. There should be a turnoff to get back on the interstate."

"Are you tired?"

The question seemed to amuse him. "No."

Right. He'd slept in all kinds of weird places, at weird times, while he was overseas. I didn't know the details of what he'd done in Iraq—he didn't talk about it much. But I'd seen Eddie say he was going to sleep for exactly one hour, and then do it, as if his brain had a timer. It was one of his mysteries.

I leaned forward and turned on the radio, twisting the dial and watching the needle move along the numbers. Most of the stations around here were off the air at this time of night, and much of the dial was static. I finally found some country music that wavered in and out of existence, like a ghost passing from room to room. "Haunted cowboys," I said as a man's voice warbled patchily into the silence of the car. "Dead a hundred years, and still trying to drink whiskey and find a woman."

Eddie smiled. He was the only person I'd ever met who liked my jokes.

"Don't worry, April," he said, which was a little strange, because I wasn't worried. Or was I?

I looked out the window again. It was pitch-dark out there, not a streetlight or lit window in sight. A three-quarter moon hung low and crisp in the sky. It was the kind of night that wasn't suffocatingly hot, but if you slept with the window open, you'd wake up with clammy skin and damp, chilled sheets. You'd stay tucked in bed until sunrise, when it started to get hot again.

"There's no one out there," I said. "It's like we launched into space."

"Not true." Eddie pointed. "There's someone right there."

Sure enough, through the trees a light glowed. Low at first, then brighter, lighting in a smooth flow. It wasn't the flip of a switch or a flashlight. It took me a moment to place it, but it seemed more like someone turning up a kerosene lamp, making the flame go higher.

Was it inside a house? Or someone outside in the trees? I couldn't tell. I watched the light as we passed it, turning as it shrank behind us. I should have felt comforted, but I wasn't.

"What was that?" I asked as the country music on the radio changed tunes, then wafted out of range again.

"Beats me," Eddie said. "Look, we'll give it another ten minutes. If we don't see a sign, we'll—Oh, Jesus."

I turned back to face front, and I saw what he saw. In the beam of the headlights was a man at the side of the road. A teenager, maybe. He wore a baggy jacket and was walking slowly, his head down. As our headlights hit his back, he didn't turn.

Eddie slowed the car so we didn't pass him, but kept him in our headlight beams. "Drunk, do you think?" he asked me.

I watched the figure take another slow, careful step. He still didn't turn our way, though we must have been the only car to come down this road for a long time. On second look he was small for a man, and I noticed jeans that flared at the bottom.

"I think that's a woman," I said.

"Could be." Eddie kept the car at a crawl, inching behind her. There was something strange about the way she didn't turn, but there was also something pathetic about it. "She could still be drunk," Eddie said.

"Maybe," I said.

"She might need help. Should we stop?"

I thought about the light we'd passed behind us, and something cold touched my spine. "I think she needs help."

"All right. Roll down your window."

I cranked the window down as Eddie pulled up beside the figure. He leaned across me as the car slowly rolled, his voice sounding friendly and authoritative. "Hi there. Do you need help?" he called out my window.

For the first time the figure paused and lifted her head. It was a woman with brown hair cut short, exposing her ears and the back of her neck while bangs fell over one eye. Her skin was pale, and I could see a faint spray of freckles across the bridge of her nose.

She stopped walking and turned our way, squaring her shoulders as if she'd just noticed us. She didn't speak.

"Do you need some help?" Eddie asked again. "We can drop you somewhere."

The woman looked at me. I gave her a smile and a wave. I hoped it made her feel better. A lot of people thought I was pretty—they used the word *pretty*, not *beautiful*. I was high school yearbook kind of pretty, not the kind of beautiful that made men crazy. Still, before Eddie I'd been asked out all the time. There's no accounting for taste.

"You can get in," I told the woman. Or girl? It was hard to tell in the dark. "We're nice people, I promise."

The girl had fixed her gaze on me, as if Eddie wasn't there. "I shouldn't," she said. Her voice was soft and low, like she was making an effort.

Of course she was wary. It was the middle of the night. The girl wove in place, and I put my hand on my car door handle, thinking I might get out and help her. Eddie put his hand on my knee, halting me.

I looked at him. He shook his head.

Staying where I was, I turned back to the girl. "We're heading for the Five Pines Resort," I said, giving the name of the cheap motel Eddie and I were going to. "We took a wrong turn off Interstate 75. I'm April and this is Eddie. Eddie Carter. We're married. Just married."

Whether the girl took all of this in or not was anyone's guess. She was still looking at me—as if she'd seen me before, or maybe as if she was memorizing me for later. She was wearing a jacket that was too big for her and fell past her hips, the sleeves too long. It might have been Army green. She pulled it tighter around her and looked down the road behind us.

I followed her gaze, leaning my head out of my window. There was no one else on the road, but I thought I heard a soft sound. Leaves shuffling along the ground. The air was oddly cold. I blinked into the darkness, trying to match a movement to the sound. There were leaves stirring, lifting as if in a breath of wind. And yet there was no wind that I could feel.



"Are you okay?" Eddie asked the girl as I stared at the leaves. "Are you sick?"

The girl kept her gaze fixed on the road. Maybe she was watching the leaves; I couldn't tell. Her voice sounded like it was coming from the other end of a telephone line. "No, I'm not sick."

The leaves settled, and I turned back to her. "What's your name?"

The girl paused again. She still seemed reluctant, but it would be wrong to just drive away and leave her. She was all alone and it was the middle of the night. Where was she going?

I thought I heard the shuffle of leaves again, faint on the road behind us. I was suddenly glad I hadn't gotten out of the car. Stranded girl or not, I felt the urge to leave, to drive as fast as possible. I wanted to get out of here.

The girl's fingers curled into the fabric of her coat, clutching it tighter. She bit her bottom lip briefly, still looking down the road, and then she seemed to come to a decision. "I'll take a ride. Thank you."

She opened the door to the back seat and got in. She moved slowly, like an old lady, and I wondered if she was hurt. She didn't have a bag or even a purse. She leaned into the back seat and briefly closed her eyes, as if she'd been on her feet forever.

"What's your name?" I asked her again as Eddie pulled off the shoulder and onto the road again.

"Rhonda Jean."

"That's a nice name. Where are you going?"

Rhonda Jean seemed to pause, as if thinking about this or changing her first answer. "Coldlake Falls." She closed her eyes again, resting her head against the back of the seat. "It's a few miles ahead."

"I've heard of that place," Eddie said. "I have no idea where, though."

I opened the glove box and pulled out the map, folding and refolding the complicated squares and squinting at it in the

darkness. "Is it on the way to the Five Pines Resort?" I asked Eddie.

"No idea, but I'm sure there will be someone there to ask for directions."

"Depends how big a town it is," I said to Eddie, still turning the map in my hands. "It's late. Maybe nothing's open. If we get lucky, we'll find a gas station."

"I don't think it's that small," Eddie said. "There has to be something."

"There's a hospital there," Rhonda Jean said.

Eddie and I both went silent. I felt a trickle of alarm move up my spine.

I looked at the girl in the back seat. She was motionless, her eyes still closed. Her hands clutched her jacket shut.

"Did someone hurt you?" I asked her, my voice low.

Rhonda Jean winced at that, though she didn't open her eyes. "I'm sorry."

In the driver's seat, Eddie's voice was as low and calm as my own. "Do you need a doctor, Rhonda Jean?"

"I don't know." Rhonda Jean's eyes blinked open, and for a second they were unfocused. "I don't think a doctor will help."

I let the map slide from my hands, down to my feet. I kept my gaze on the girl in the back seat. Everything became clear and still in my head. I knew now that this was why she had looked at me at first like she recognized me. It was because she did. We'd never seen each other before, but we recognized each other. Women like us recognized each other all the time.

Two things happened at once. When I thought about it later, I was sure about it. The timing was very clear. Both things happened at the same time, like a switch had been flipped in my life, changing it forever.

The first thing was that I reached into the back seat and touched the edge of Rhonda Jean's jacket. I gently pulled it open. It was

unfastened, only wrapped around her like a robe, and her grip was limp now and unresisting.

Inside the jacket, on the front of her shirt, I saw the black wetness of blood.

At the same time, a pair of headlights appeared out the back window, a car on the road a mile behind us, light pinpoints in the dark.

I looked from the back window to Rhonda Jean's face. Her eyes were open, focused now, and she was staring at me.

"I'm sorry," she said again. "He's coming."