



PRESUMPTION OF GUILT

By Terri Blackstock

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Chapter One

The Buick had been tailing Beth Wright for miles. She had first noticed it weaving in and out of traffic too closely behind her on the Courtney-Campbell Causeway, the driver making no attempt to hide the fact that he was after her. Now, nearing St. Clair, they had left most of the traffic behind, but he was still there. She pressed the accelerator harder, checking her rearview mirror.

It didn't take a genius to figure out who it was. She had known that, if word got out that she was doing the story on the St. Clair Children's Home, Bill Brandon would come after her. What he would do once he caught her was open to speculation, but she didn't want to find out.

The Buick sped up and switched lanes, cutting in front of a motorcycle, forcing it to swerve, and then pulled up beside her, as if trying to run her off the road. He must have found out somehow that she had interviewed his sister, and he didn't like it. Marlene had warned her that he wouldn't take it well, but Beth hadn't needed warning.

The Buick swerved sharply to the right, almost hitting Beth's car, and she caught her breath and rammed her right foot to the floor. Her car burst forward, leaving the Buick behind. If he ran her off the road, he would kill her. If he was desperate enough to chase her down on a state highway with other drivers watching, then he was desperate enough to commit murder.

Her hand trembled as she reached for her cellular phone. It had fallen to the floor, so she bent forward, groping for it. The Buick jolted her rear bumper, and she swerved onto the shoulder. Grabbing the wheel, she pulled it quickly back into the right lane. The few other cars on the highway had begun pulling off the roadway to let her car and the Buick go by, probably alarmed by the Buick's erratic driving. Maybe someone had already called this in to the police.

She reached again into the darkness in front of the passenger seat for the phone, and this time her hand touched it. She picked it up and dialed 911 with her thumb.

“911, may I help you?”

“There’s someone after me!” she cried. “He’s trying to kill me!”

“What’s your address?”

“No! I’m in my car! He’s following me. We’re on Highway 19 between St. Petersburg and St. Clair. I just passed the Ship’s End restaurant. Please hurry!”

“What is he driving, ma’am?”

“A dark Buick I’m not sure of the color.”

He bumped the rear corner of her bumper again, and she screamed as her car veered to the shoulder. “He’s ramming my car! Please, have you sent someone?”

“Yes,” the dispatcher said. “We have a car on its way“

But while the woman was still talking, Beth punched the “end” button, cutting her off, so she could pay attention to Bill Brandon’s Buick. The stretch of road between St. Petersburg and St. Clair wasn’t as busy as the others they’d been on. If there was a patrol car in the area, he’d spot them immediately but if not, she might be dead before they showed up. To her right, she could see the beach, the turbulent waves smashing against the sand. If he stopped her, he could easily make her disappear in the Gulf Coast and he wouldn’t think twice about it. She looked in her rearview mirror. There was a car’s distance between them now, but he was gaining. No other cars were in sight behind them. Where were the police?

Nick, she thought. I have to call Nick. He was expecting her to come straight to his house, to let him know what she’d found out from Marlene. But with this maniac following her, she might never get there.

She’d better tell him what she’d learned just in case.

She punched out his number and waited as it rang. “Come on, Nick,” she whispered.

The answering machine picked up. “Hello, you have reached the home of Nick Hutchins.”

The Buick bumped her again, and tears sprang to her eyes. She punched off the phone and tried to think.

Where are you, Nick? You’re supposed to be waiting for me!

A message, she thought. He must have left a message. Maybe he’d called to tell her to meet him somewhere else instead. Her hand trembled, making it difficult, but she managed to punch out her own number, then waited for her machine to answer so that she could punch in her code and get her messages.

“Hello?”

It was the voice of a boy.

Startled, she asked, “Who is this?”

There was a long pause. “Who do you want?”

She turned on her bright lights, looking for a road, any road, that she could turn down in hopes of losing him. “I thought I was calling my own house,” she said.

“You must have the wrong number.”

Confused, she punched the “end” button, and followed the road’s curve along the edge of the beach. The Buick did the same, right on her bumper. Where were the police? And what number had she just dialed? She punched “recall” and saw the digital readout. It was her number. So who had answered the phone at her house?

Her car jolted again, and she saw the Buick in the lane next to her. He was trying to force her off the road now. She had to get help he would kill her if she didn’t lose him.

She pressed “redial” and checked the number on her readout. She had dialed right the first time. She pressed “send” and waited as her own number rang again. This time, it rang on and on. The machine, which normally picked up on the fourth ring, never answered.

What’s going on?

The car edged over, pushing her toward a drop-off. She looked in her rearview mirror and saw that no one was behind her. No witnesses, no one to notice if he sent her tumbling over a seawall.

She saw a road sign up ahead, and quickly breathed a prayer. Then, waiting for just the right moment, she slammed on her brakes until she was behind the Buick and screeched into a left turn, skidding around the corner onto a side street. She stomped on the accelerator and made another turn, and another, until she was completely out of his reach, hidden by trees.

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