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Written by Linwood Barclay

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The Accident

LINWOOD BARCLAY



ONE

If I'd known this was our last morning, I'd have rolled over in bed and held her. But of course, if it had been possible to know something like that—if I could have somehow seen into the future—I wouldn't have let go. And then things would have been different.

I'd been staring at the ceiling for a while when I finally threw back the covers and planted my feet on the hardwood floor.

"How'd you sleep?" Sheila asked as I rubbed my eyes. She reached out and touched my back.

"Not so good. You?"

"Off and on."

"I sensed you were awake, but I didn't want to bug you, on the off chance you were sleeping," I said, glancing over my shoulder. The sun's first rays of the day filtered through the drapes and played across my wife's face as she lay in bed, looking at me. This wasn't a time of day when people looked their best, but there was something about Sheila. She was always beautiful. Even when she looked worried, which was how she looked now.

I turned back around, looked down at my bare feet. "I couldn't get to sleep for the longest time, then I think I finally nodded off around two, but then I looked at the clock and it was five. Been awake since then."

"Glen, it's going to be okay," Sheila said. She moved her hand across my back, soothing me.

“Yeah, well, I’m glad you think so.”

“Things’ll pick up. Everything goes in cycles. Recessions don’t last forever.”

I sighed. “This one sure seems to. After these jobs I’m doing now, we got nothin’ lined up. Some nibbles, did a couple of estimates last week—one for a kitchen, one to finish off a basement—but they haven’t called back.”

I stood up, turned and said, “What’s your excuse for staring at the ceiling all night?”

“Worried about you. And . . . I’ve got things on my mind, too.”

“What?”

“Nothing,” she said quickly. “I mean, just the usual. This course I’m taking, Kelly, your work.”

“What’s wrong with Kelly?”

“Nothing’s wrong with her. I’m a mother. She’s eight. I worry. It’s what I do. When I’ve done the course, I can help you more. That’ll make a difference.”

“When you made the decision to take it, we had the business to justify it. Now, I don’t know if I’ll even have any work for you to do,” I said. “I just hope I have enough to keep Sally busy.”

Sheila’d started her business accounting course mid-August, and two months in was enjoying it more than she’d expected. The plan was for Sheila to do the day-to-day accounts for Garber Contracting, the company that was once my father’s, and which I now ran. She could even do it from home, which would allow Sally Diehl, our “office girl,” to focus more on general office management, returning phone calls, hounding suppliers, fielding customer inquiries. There usually wasn’t time for Sally to do the accounting, which meant I was bringing it home at night, sitting at my desk until midnight. But with work drying up,

I didn't know how this was all going to shake down.

"And now, with the fire—"

"Enough," Sheila said.

"Sheila, one of my goddamn houses burned down. Please don't tell me everything's going to be fine."

She sat up in bed and crossed her arms across her breasts. "I'm not going to let you get all negative on me. This is what you do."

"I'm just telling you how it is."

"And I'm going to tell you how it will *be*," she said. "We will *be* okay. Because this is what *we* do. You and I. We get through things. We find a way." She looked away for a moment, like there was something she wanted to say but wasn't sure how to say it. Finally, she said, "I have ideas."

"What ideas?"

"Ideas to help us. To get us through the rough patches."

I stood there, my arms open, waiting.

"You're so busy, so wrapped up in your own problems—and I'm not saying that they aren't big problems—that you haven't even noticed."

"Noticed what?" I asked.

She shook her head and smiled. "I got Kelly new outfits for school."

"Okay."

"Nice ones."

I narrowed my eyes. "What are you getting at?"

"I've made some money."

I thought I already knew that. Sheila had her part-time job at Hardware Depot—about twenty hours a week—working the checkout. They'd recently installed these new self-checkout stations people couldn't figure out, so there was still work there for Sheila until they did. And since the early summer, Sheila had been helping our

next-door neighbor—Joan Mueller—with her own books for a business she was running from her home. Joan’s husband, Ely, had been killed on that oil rig off the coast of Newfoundland when it blew up about a year back. She’d been getting jerked around by the oil company on her settlement, and in the meantime had started running a daycare operation. Every morning four or five preschoolers got dropped off at her door. And on school days when Sheila was working, Kelly went to Joan’s until one of us got home. Sheila had helped Joan organize a bookkeeping system to keep track of what everyone owed and had paid. Joan loved kids, but could barely finger count.

“I know you’ve been making some money,” I said. “Joan, and the store. Everything helps.”

“Those two jobs together don’t keep us in Hamburger Helper. I’m talking about better money than that.”

My eyebrows went up. Then I got worried. “Tell me you’re not taking money from Fiona.” Her mother. “You know how I feel about that.”

She looked insulted. “Jesus, Glen, you know I would never—”

“I’m just saying. I’d rather you were a drug dealer than taking money from your mother.”

She blinked, threw back the covers abruptly, got out of bed, and stalked into the bathroom. The door closed firmly behind her.

“Aw, come on,” I said.

By the time we reached the kitchen, I didn’t think she was angry with me anymore. I’d apologized twice, and tried to coax from Sheila details of what her idea was to bring more money into the house.

“We can talk about it tonight,” she said.

We hadn't washed the dishes from the night before. There were a couple of coffee cups, my scotch glass, and Sheila's wine goblet, with a dark red residue at the bottom, sitting in the sink. I lifted the goblet onto the counter, worried the stem might break if other things got tossed into the sink alongside it.

The wineglass made me think of Sheila's friends.

"You seeing Ann for lunch or anything?" I asked.

"No."

"I thought you had something set up."

"Maybe later this week. Belinda and Ann and me might get together, although every time we do that I have to get a cab home and my head hurts for a week. Anyway, I think Ann's got some physical or something today, an insurance thing."

"She okay?"

"She's fine." A pause. "More or less."

"What's that mean?"

"I don't know. I think there's some kind of tension there, between her and Darren. And between Belinda and George, for that matter."

"What's going on?"

"Who knows," she said.

"So then, what are you doing today? You don't have a shift today, right? If I can slip away, you want to get lunch? I was thinking something fancy, like that guy who sells hot dogs by the park."

"I've got my course tonight," she said. "Some errands to run, and I might visit Mom." She shot me a look. "Not to ask her for money."

"Okay." I decided to ask nothing further. She'd tell me when she was ready.

Kelly walked into the room at the tail end of the conversation. "What's for breakfast?"

“You want cereal, cereal, or cereal?” Sheila asked.

Kelly appeared to ponder her choices. “I’ll take cereal,” she said, and sat at the table.

At our house, breakfast wasn’t a sit-down family meal like dinner. Actually, dinner often wasn’t, either, especially when I got held up at a construction site, or Sheila was at work, or heading off to her class. But we at least tried to make that a family event. Breakfast was a lost cause, however. I had my toast and coffee standing, usually flattening the morning *Register* on the countertop and scanning the headlines as I turned the pages. Sheila was spooning in fruit and yogurt at the same time as Kelly shoveled in her Cheerios, trying to get them into herself before any of them had a chance to get soggy.

Between spoonfuls she asked, “Why would anyone go to school at night when they’re grown up and don’t have to go?”

“When I finish this course,” Sheila told her, “I’ll be able to help your father more, and that helps the family, and that helps you.”

“How does that help me?” she wanted to know.

I stepped in. “Because if my company is run well, it makes more money, and *that* helps you.”

“So you can buy me more stuff?”

“Not necessarily.”

Kelly took a gulp of orange juice. “I’d never go to school at night. Or summer. You’d have to kill me to get me to go to summer school.”

“If you get really good marks, that won’t happen,” I said, a hint of warning in my voice. We’d already had a call from her teacher that she wasn’t completing all her homework.

Kelly had nothing to say to that and concentrated on her cereal. On the way out the door, she gave her mother

a hug, but all I got was a wave. Sheila caught me noticing the perceived slight and said, “It’s because you’re a meanie.”

I called the house from work mid-morning.

“Hey,” Sheila said.

“You’re home. I didn’t know whether I’d catch you or not.”

“Still here. What’s up?”

“Sally’s dad.”

“What?”

“She was calling home from the office and when he didn’t answer she took off. I just called to see how he was and he’s gone.”

“He’s dead?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh jeez. How old was he?”

“Seventy-nine, I think. He was in his late fifties when he had Sally.” Sheila knew the history. The man had married a woman twenty years younger than he was, and still managed to outlive her. She’d died of an aneurysm a decade ago.

“What happened to him?”

“Don’t know. I mean, he had diabetes, he’d been having heart trouble. Could have been a heart attack.”

“We need to do something for her.”

“I offered to drop by but she said she’s got a lot to deal with right now. Funeral’ll probably be in a couple of days. We can talk about it when you get back from Bridgeport.” Where Sheila took her class.

“We’ll do something. We’ve always been there for her.” I could almost picture Sheila shaking her head. “Look,” she said, “I’m heading out. I’ll leave you and Kelly lasagna, okay? Joan’s expecting her after school today and—”

“I got it. Thanks.”

“For what?”

“Not giving up. Not letting things get you down.”

“Just doing the best I can,” she said.

“I love you. I know I can be a pain in the ass, but I love you.”

“Ditto.”

It was after ten. Sheila should have been home by now.

I tried her cell for the second time in ten minutes. After six rings it went to voicemail. “*Hi. This is Sheila. I’m either on the phone, away from it, or too scared to answer because I’m in traffic, so please leave a message.*” Then the beep.

“Hey, me again,” I said. “You’re freaking me out. Call me.”

I put the cordless receiver back onto its stand and leaned up against the kitchen counter, folded my arms. As she’d promised, Sheila had left two servings of lasagna in the fridge, for Kelly and me, each hermetically sealed under plastic wrap. I’d heated Kelly’s in the microwave when we got home, and she’d come back looking for seconds, but I couldn’t find a baking dish with any more in it. I might as well have offered her mine, which a few hours later still sat on the counter. I wasn’t hungry.

I was rattled. Running out of work. The fire. Sally’s dad.

And even if I’d managed to recover my appetite late in the evening, the fact that Sheila still wasn’t home had put me on edge.

Her class, which was held at the Bridgeport Business College, had ended more than an hour and a half ago, and it was only a thirty-minute drive home. Which made her an hour late. Not that long, really. There were any number of explanations.

She could have stayed after class to have a coffee with someone. That had happened a couple of times. Maybe the traffic was bad on the turnpike. All you needed was someone with a flat tire on the shoulder to slow everything down. An accident would stop everything dead.

That didn't explain her not answering her cell, though. She'd been known to forget to turn it back on after class was over, but when that happened it went to voicemail right away. But the phone was ringing. Maybe it was tucked so far down in her purse she couldn't hear it.

I wondered whether she'd decided to go to Darien to see her mother and not made it back out to Bridgeport in time for her class. Reluctantly, I made the call.

"Hello?"

"Fiona, it's Glen."

In the background, I heard someone whisper, "Who is it, love?" Fiona's husband, Marcus. Technically speaking, Sheila's stepfather, but Fiona had remarried long after Sheila had left home and settled into a life with me.

"Yes?" she said.

I told her Sheila was late getting back from Bridgeport, and I wondered if maybe her daughter had gotten held up at her place.

"Sheila didn't come see me today," Fiona said. "I certainly wasn't expecting her. She never said anything about coming over."

That struck me as odd. When Sheila mentioned maybe going to see Fiona, I'd figured she'd already bounced the idea off her.

"Is there a problem, Glen?" Fiona asked icily. There wasn't worry in her voice so much as suspicion. As if Sheila's staying out late had more to do with me than it did with her.

"No, everything's fine," I said. "Go back to bed."

I heard soft steps coming down from the second floor. Kelly, not yet in her pajamas, wandered into the kitchen. She looked at the still-wrapped lasagna on the counter and asked, "Aren't you going to eat that?"

"Hands off," I said, thinking maybe I'd get my appetite back once Sheila was home. I glanced at the wall clock. Quarter past ten. "Why aren't you in bed?"

"Because you haven't told me to go yet," she said.

"What have you been doing?"

"Computer."

"Go to bed," I said.

"It was homework," she said.

"Look at me."

"In the *beginning* it was," she said defensively. "And when I got it done, I was talking to my friends." She stuck out her lower lip and blew away some blonde curls that were falling over her eyes. "Why isn't Mom home?"

"Her thing must have run late," I said. "I'll send her up to give you a kiss when she gets home."

"If I'm asleep, how will I know if I get it?"

"She'll tell you in the morning."

Kelly eyed me with suspicion. "So I might never get a kiss, but you guys would say I did."

"You figured it out," I said. "It's a scam we've been running."

"Whatever." She turned, shuffled out of the kitchen, and padded back upstairs.

I picked up the receiver and tried Sheila's cell again. When her greeting cut in, I muttered "Shit" before it started recording and hit the off button.

I went down the stairs to my basement office. The walls were wood-paneled, giving the place a dark, oppressive feel. And the mountains of paper on the desk only added to the gloominess. For years I'd been intending to

either redo this room—get rid of the paneling and go for drywall painted off-white so it wouldn't feel so small, for starters—or put an addition onto the back of the house with lots of windows and a skylight. But as is often the case with people whose work is building and renovating houses, it's your own place that never gets done.

I dropped myself into the chair behind the desk and shuffled some papers around. Bills from various suppliers, plans for the new kitchen we were doing in a house up in Derby, some notes about a freestanding double garage we were building for a guy in Devon who wanted a place to park his two vintage Corvettes.

There was also a very preliminary report from the Milford Fire Department about what may have caused the house we'd been building for Arnett and Leanne Wilson on Shelter Cove Road to burn down a week ago. I scanned down to the end and read, for possibly the hundredth time, *Indications are fire originated in area of electrical panel.*

It was a two-story, three-bedroom, built on the site of a postwar bungalow that a strong easterly wind could have knocked down if we hadn't taken a wrecking ball to it first. The fire had started just before one p.m. The house had been framed and sided, the roof was up, electrical was done, and the plumbing was getting roughed in. Doug Pinder, my assistant manager, and I were using the recently installed outlets to run a couple of table saws. Ken Wang, our Chinese guy with the Southern accent—his parents emigrated from Beijing to Kentucky when he was an infant, and we still cracked up whenever he said “y'all”—and Stewart Minden, our newbie from Ottawa who was living with relatives in Stratford for a few months, were upstairs sorting out where fixtures were going to go in the main bathroom.

Doug smelled the smoke first. Then we saw it, drifting up from the basement.

I shouted upstairs to Ken and Stewart to get the hell out. They came bounding down the carpetless stairs and flew out the front door with Doug.

Then I did something very, very stupid.

I ran out to my truck, grabbed a fire extinguisher from behind the driver's seat, and ran back into the house. Halfway down the steps to the basement, the smoke became so thick I couldn't see. I got to the bottom step, running my hand along the makeshift two-by-four banister to guide me there, and thought if I started spraying blindly from the extinguisher, I'd hit the source of the fire and save the place.

Really dumb.

I immediately started to cough and my eyes began to sting. When I turned to retreat back up the stairs, I couldn't find them. I stuck out my free hand and swept it from side to side, looking for the railing.

I hit something softer than wood. An arm.

"Come on, you stupid son of a bitch," Doug growled, grabbing hold of me. He was on the bottom step, and pulled me toward it.

We came out the front door together, coughing and hacking, as the first fire truck was coming around the corner. Minutes after that, the place was fully engulfed.

"Don't tell Sheila I went in," I said to Doug, still wheezing. "She'd kill me."

"And so she should, Glenny," Doug said.

Other than the foundation, there wasn't much left of the place once the fire was out. Everything was with the insurance company now, and if they didn't come through, the thousands it would cost to rebuild would be coming out of my pocket. Little wonder I'd been staring at the

ceiling for hours in the dead of night.

I'd never been hit with anything like this before. It hadn't just scared me, losing a project to fire. It had shaken my confidence. If I was about anything, it was getting things right, doing a quality job.

"Shit happens," Doug had said. "We pick ourselves up and move on."

I wasn't feeling that philosophical. And it wasn't Doug's name on the side of the truck.

I thought maybe I should eat something, so I slid my plate of lasagna into the microwave. I sat down at the kitchen table and picked away at it. The inside was still cold, but I couldn't be bothered to put it back in. Lasagna was one of Sheila's specialties, and if it weren't for the fact that I had so much on my mind, I would have been devouring it, even cold. Whenever she made it in her brownish-orange baking pan—Sheila would say it was "persimmon"—there was always enough for two or three meals, so we'd be having lasagna again in a couple of nights, maybe even for Saturday lunch. That was okay with me.

I ate less than half, rewrapped it, and put the plate in the fridge. Kelly was under her covers, her bedside light on, when I peeked into her room. She'd been reading a Wimpy Kid book.

"Lights out, sweetheart."

"Is Mom home?" she asked.

"No."

"I need to talk to her."

"About what?"

"Nothing."

I nodded. When Kelly had something on her mind, it was usually her mother she talked to. Even though she was only eight, she had questions about boys, and love,

and the changes she knew were coming in a few years. These were, I had to admit, not my areas of expertise.

“Don’t be mad,” she said.

“I’m not mad.”

“Some things are just easier to talk to Mom about. But I love you guys the same.”

“Good to know.”

“I can’t get to sleep until she gets home.”

That made two of us.

“Put your head down on the pillow. You might nod off anyway.”

“I won’t.”

“Turn off the light and give it a shot.”

Kelly reached over and turned off her lamp. I kissed her forehead and gently closed the door as I slipped out of her room.

Another hour went by. I tried Sheila’s cell six more times. I was back and forth between my office basement and the kitchen. The trip took me past the front door, so I could keep glancing out to the driveway.

Just after eleven, standing in the kitchen, I tried her friend Ann Slocum. Someone picked up long enough to stop the ringing, then replaced the receiver. Ann’s husband, Darren, I was guessing. That would be his style. But then again, I was calling late.

Next I called Sheila’s other friend, Belinda. They’d worked together years ago, for the library, but stayed close even after their career paths went in different directions. Belinda was a real estate agent now. Not the greatest time to be in that line of work. A lot more people wanted to sell these days than buy. Despite Belinda’s unpredictable schedule, she and Sheila managed to get together for lunch every couple of weeks, sometimes with Ann, sometimes not.

Her husband, George, answered sleepily, "Hello?"

"George, Glen Garber. Sorry to call so late."

"Glen, jeez, what time is it?"

"It's late, I know. Can I talk to Belinda?"

I heard some muffled chatter, some shifting about, then Belinda came on the line. "Glen, is everything okay?"

"Sheila's really late getting back from her night class thing, and she's not answering her cell. You haven't heard from her, have you?"

"What? What are you talking about? Say that again?" Belinda sounded instantly panicked.

"Has Sheila been in touch? She's usually back from her course by now."

"No. When did you last talk to her?"

"This morning," I said. "You know Sally, at the office?"

"Yeah."

"Her dad passed away and I called Sheila to let her know."

"So you haven't talked to her pretty much all day?" There was an edge in Belinda's voice. Not accusing, exactly, but something.

"Listen, I didn't call to get you all upset. I just wondered if you'd heard from her is all."

"No, no, I haven't," Belinda said. "Glen, please have Sheila call me the minute she gets in, okay? I mean, now that you've got me worrying about her, too, I need to know she got in okay."

"I'll tell her. Tell George I'm sorry about waking you guys up."

"For *sure* you'll have her call me."

"Promise," I said.

I hung up, went upstairs to Kelly's door and opened it a crack. "You asleep?" I asked, poking my head in.

From the darkness, a chirpy "Nope."

“Throw on some clothes. I’m going to look for Mom. And I can’t leave you alone in the house.”

She flicked on her bedside lamp. I thought she’d argue, tell me she was old enough to stay in the house, but instead she asked, “What’s happened?”

“I don’t know. Probably nothing. My guess is your mom’s having a coffee and can’t hear her phone. But maybe she got a flat tire or something. I want to drive the route she usually takes.”

“Okay,” she said instantly, throwing her feet onto the floor. She wasn’t worried. This was an adventure. She pulled some jeans on over her pajamas. “I need two secs.”

I went back downstairs and got my coat, made sure I had my cell. If Sheila did call the house once we were gone, my cell would be next. Kelly hopped into the truck, did up her belt, and said, “Is Mom going to be in trouble?”

I glanced over at her as I turned the ignition. “Yeah. She’s going to be grounded.”

Kelly giggled. “As if,” she said.

Once we were out of the driveway and going down the street, I asked Kelly, “Did your mom say anything about what she was going to do today? Was she going to see her parents and then changed her mind? Did she mention anything at all?”

Kelly frowned. “I don’t think so. She might have gone to the drugstore.”

That was only a trip around the corner. “Why do you think she was going there?”

“I heard her talking to someone on the phone the other day about paying for some.”

“Some what?”

“Drugstore stuff.”

That made no sense to me and I dismissed it.

We weren't on the road five minutes before Kelly was out cold, her head resting on her shoulder. If my head was in that position for more than a minute, it would leave me with a crick in my neck for a month.

I drove up Schoolhouse Road and got on the ramp to 95 West. It was the quickest route between Milford and Bridgeport, especially at this time of the night, and the most likely one for Sheila to have taken. I kept glancing over at the eastbound highway, looking for a Subaru wagon pulled off to the side of the road.

This was a long shot, at best. But doing something, anything, seemed preferable to sitting at home and worrying.

I continued to scan the other side of the highway, but not only didn't I see Sheila's car, I didn't see any cars pulled over to the shoulder at all.

I was almost through Stratford, about to enter the Bridgeport city limits, when I saw some lights flashing on the other side. Not on the road, but maybe down an off-ramp. I leaned on the gas, wanting to hurry to the next exit so I could turn around and head back on the eastbound lanes.

Kelly continued to sleep.

I exited 95, crossed the highway and got back on. As I approached the exit where I thought I'd seen lights, I spotted a police car, lights flashing, blocking the way. I slowed, but the cop waved me on. I wasn't able to see far enough down the ramp to see what the problem was, and with Kelly in the truck, pulling over to the side of a busy highway did not seem wise.

So I got off at the next exit, figuring I could work my way back on local streets, get to the ramp from the bottom end. It took me about ten minutes. The cops hadn't set up a barricade at the bottom of the ramp, since no one

would turn up there anyway. I pulled the car over to the shoulder at the base of the ramp and got my first real look at what had happened.

It was an accident. A bad one. Two cars. So badly mangled it was difficult to tell what they were or what might have happened. Closer to me was a car that appeared to be a station wagon, and the other one, a sedan of some kind, was off to the side. It looked as though the wagon had been broadsided by the sedan.

Sheila drove a wagon.

Kelly was still sound asleep, and I didn't want to wake her. I got out of the truck, closed the door without slamming it, and approached the ramp. There were three police cars at the scene, a couple of tow trucks and a fire engine.

As I got closer, I was able to get a better look at the cars involved in the accident. I began to feel shaky. I glanced back at my truck, made sure I could see Kelly in the passenger window.

Before I could take another step, however, a police officer stood in my way.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said. "You have to stay back."

"What kind of car is that?" I asked.

"Sir, please—"

"What kind of car? The wagon, the closest car."

"A Subaru," he said.

"Plate," I said.

"I'm sorry, sir?"

"I need to see the plate."

"Do you think you know whose car this is?" the cop asked.

"Let me see the plate."

He allowed me to approach, took me to a vantage point that allowed me to see the back of the wagon. The

license plate was clearly visible.

I recognized the combination of numbers and letters.

“Oh Jesus,” I said, feeling weak.

“Sir?”

“This is my wife’s car.”

“What’s your name, sir?”

“Glen Garber. This car, it’s my wife’s car. That’s her plate. Oh my God.”

The cop took a step closer to me.

“Is she okay?” I asked, my entire body feeling as though I were holding on to a low-voltage live wire. “Which hospital have they taken her to? Do you know? Can you find out? I have to go there. I have to get there right now.”

“Mr. Garber—” the cop said.

“Milford Hospital?” I said. “No, wait, Bridgeport Hospital is closer.” I turned to run back to the truck.

“Mr. Garber, your wife hasn’t been taken to the hospital.”

I stopped. “What?”

“She’s still in the car. I’m afraid that—”

“What are you saying?”

I looked at the mangled remains of the Subaru. The cop had to be wrong. There were no paramedics there; none of the nearby firefighters were using the Jaws of Life to get to the driver.

I pushed past him, ran to the car, got right up to the caved-in driver’s side, looked through what was left of the door.

“Sheila,” I said. “Sheila, honey.”

The window glass had shattered into a million pieces the size of raisins. I began to brush them from her shoulder, pick them from her blood-matted hair. I kept saying her name over and over again.

“Sheila? Oh God, please, Sheila . . .”

“Mr. Garber.” The officer was standing right behind me. I felt a hand on my shoulder. “Please, sir, come with me.”

“You have to get her out,” I said. The smell of gasoline was wafting up my nostrils and I could hear something dripping.

“We’re going to do that, I promise you. Please, come with me.”

“She’s not dead. You have to—”

“Please, sir, I’m afraid she is. There were no vital signs.”

“No, you’re wrong.” I reached in and put my arm around her head. It nodded over to one side.

That was when I knew.

The cop put his hand firmly on my arm and said, “You have to move away from the car, sir. It’s not safe to stand here.” He pulled me forcibly away and I didn’t fight him. Half a dozen car lengths away, I had to stop, bend over, and put my hands on my knees.

“Are you okay, sir?”

Looking down at the pavement, I said, “My daughter’s in my truck. Can you see her? Is she asleep?”

“I can just see the top of her head, yes. Looks like she is.”

I took several shaky breaths, straightened back up. Said “Oh my God” probably ten times. The cop stood there, patiently, waiting for me to pull it together enough for him to ask me some questions.

“Your wife’s name is Sheila, sir? Sheila Garber?”

“That’s right.”

“Do you know what she was doing tonight? Where she was going?”

“She has a course tonight. Bridgeport Business College. She’s learning accounting and other things to help me in my business. What happened? What happened

here? How did this happen? Who the hell was driving that other car? What did he do?"

The cop lowered his head. "Mr. Garber, this appears to have been an alcohol-related accident."

"What? Drunk driving?"

"It would appear so, yes."

Anger began to mix in with the shock and grief. "Who was driving that car? What stupid son of a bitch—"

"There were three people in the other car. One survived. A young boy in the back seat. His father and brother were the two fatalities."

"My God, what kind of man gets behind the wheel drunk with his boys in the car and—"

"That's not exactly how it looks, sir," the cop said.

I stared at him, trying to figure out what he was getting at. Then it hit me. It wasn't the father driving. It was one of the sons.

"One of his boys was driving drunk?"

"Mr. Garber, please. I need you to calm down for me. I need you to listen. It appears it was your wife who caused the accident."

"What?"

"She'd driven up the ramp the wrong way, then just stopped her vehicle about halfway, parking it across the road, no lights visible. We think she may have fallen asleep."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"And then," he said, "when the other car came off the highway, probably doing about sixty, he'd have been almost on your wife's car before he saw it and could put on the brakes."

"But the other driver, he was drunk, right?"

"You're not getting me here, Mr. Garber. If you don't mind my asking, sir, did your wife have a habit of drinking

and driving? Usually, by the time someone actually gets into an accident, they've been taking chances for quite some—”

Sheila's car burst into flames.