

Chapter One

All that remained of her nine-year marriage was crammed into her green Toyota Corolla like a hand-packed ice cream cone. Through the thrashing rain and cascading tears, she tried to steady her focus on the road, unable to expel her ex-husband's last words from her mind. They were magnetic, playing over and over. *You're worthless, Shannon. This marriage is worthless. I deserve to be happy. We're done!*

A gray pickup sped by, throwing a pond of water and road debris onto her windshield. The wipers, already at maximum speed, couldn't squeeze off the slimy particles fast enough. Piercing the painful silence, she cried out, "I hate my life! I'll never make it on my own!"

Without conscious thought, she reached up and turned off the windshield wipers. Losing sight of the edge of the road, she spiraled through the breakdown lane.



“Pull the blanket away from her neck a bit, please. Let her breathe.” Slowly the room came into focus, enough that she could see a smiling doctor and a busy nurse. The doctor moved closer. “Well, good afternoon, Miss Shannon. We’re glad to have you back.”

“Where . . . where am I?”

“You’re in Scranton, Pennsylvania. You were involved in a motor vehicle accident last night. I’m Doctor McLachlan. Can you tell me the last thing you remember?”

She pushed words through her cotton mouth. “It . . . was pouring rain.”

“Shannon, apparently you lost control of your car last night in the rain and fog. The driver of an 18-wheeler saw you go flying off the side of the road and into some trees. He called 911 and then ran to help you. EMS and local firefighters had to extricate you from the car, then they transported you here by ambulance. You have two fractured ribs, some head lacerations, and a concussion.”

She raised her hand to her aching head, flinching as she touched the bandage. The doctor nodded at her reaction.

“Yes, we’ll be keeping you until tomorrow to monitor your concussion. Your parents are waiting in the lobby; it’s a good thing you had emergency contact numbers in your phone. Karen is here to help, so let her know if you need anything. You’ll get a meal soon and something to help you relax this evening. I’m happy to see you’re responding well. I’ll check in on you again tomorrow. I’ll let your parents know they can see you now.”

“Thank you, doctor.” Shannon brushed her fingers across her face, feeling for injury. There were bandages in her hairline, but her face seemed untouched. She sighed, relieved that things weren’t worse. Placing her hands on the bed, she attempted to reposition,

but gasped from the sharp pain in her ribs. Slowly, she maneuvered herself into a more comfortable reclining position.

The late afternoon sun kissed the walls and polished the furniture with a golden glow as nurse Karen pulled back the drapes and opened the blinds slightly. Shannon hadn't realized how dark her room had been until that moment. Karen moved the tray closer, filled Shannon's water bottle, and adjusted her bed. Shannon thanked her.

"You're a lucky lady," Karen said, then excused herself as Shannon's parents entered the room.

"Oh, Shannon! Thank the Lord, you're okay. You're a fighter, and we've been praying." Her mother's gentle hug and kiss were good medicine. "I hope I didn't jostle your ribs."

"Hey, sweetie," Shannon's dad took his turn with the hugs. "We were talking to the truck driver last night who saw what happened. I'm glad he was there to call 911 so quickly. It was foggy and already getting dark—you could've been out there all night if he hadn't been there."

An icy reality surged through Shannon's mind as she recalled turning off the wipers. *In that moment, I wanted to die.* It was a sobering realization, but now she was thankful that she was alive.

Dad gave her a quick pat, then added, "Oh, and I called your new boss. I found the number in your phone. I hope you don't mind. He said not to worry and wished you a speedy recovery. Sounds like the kind of boss you want to have."

Karen popped back in and asked if Shannon needed anything else. "No, but I would like someone to fill in the past hours, but I guess the doctor won't have much time to do that, will he?"

Karen smiled as she excused herself to tend to other patients.

Dad filled in a few brief details which the truck driver had reported, but Shannon couldn't remember anything after turning off the wipers.

Several hours of Shannon's life were missing, and that was a

mind-boggling thought. But they were also hours without emotional pain, shame, or anger—and she was alive. *That's a fair trade-off*, she rationalized. *Emotional pain is the worst.*

"I'm going to head back home, honey, since there won't be room for me. Dad will transfer things from your car to a rental and take you the rest of the way to your new place."

"Okay . . ." Shannon still felt a little dazed, and wasn't sure how to react to that. Then the full impact of the words hit her.

"Oh! My car. Is it bad? Did everything get ruined?"

"Well." Dad's face was grave. "I called the garage, and your car is totaled. I took care of the claim with your insurance company. We should be able to fit everything that's not broken into my rental. It's larger than the Corolla, anyway."

"Oh my gosh. What am I gonna do?" Shannon couldn't help the moan that left her lips. Like her life hadn't been in enough of a mess before today.

"I know this sounds bad, honey." He gently squeezed her arm. "But let's focus on the fact that you're okay. It could have been so much worse."

If you only knew! Shannon shuddered as she remembered that brief moment in the rain.

"I can stay as long as you need me to help get your apartment set up. You won't be doing much until those ribs heal. And we'll get you a rental car when we get to Loughton Valley till the insurance settlement comes through."

"Okay." She yawned, the deep breath making her flinch again. "I'm still feeling a little loopy. Hopefully, it's just the pain meds. I'll try to stay awake in the car, Dad." She smiled, trying to reassure her parents.

After dinner, Shannon said goodbye to her mom and watched the news with her dad for thirty minutes before he returned to his hotel room. Once she was alone, she turned off the TV and tried to get comfortable in the bed. It was hard to concentrate, but as she

dozed off, questions filled her mind with worry. *Is starting late going to impact my job? How much was damaged in the accident? What kind of car should I get? I hope the insurance is going to cover this. Oh, gosh! What about my medical bills? I should have just stayed home!*



The next morning, Shannon awoke to find her dad resting in the recliner by her bed. When Dr. McLachlan came in, he reviewed the scan, procedures, surgery, and medications, and then approved her discharge. “When the wheelchair arrives, you’re all set to go, Shannon. You should follow up with a doctor to monitor the effects of your concussion when you get to your new location. It was nice to meet both of you. Have a safe trip, now.” With that, he shook her hand, her dad’s hand, and left the room.

The nurse helped her get dressed and gather her things, then an orderly wheeled her down to the exit and waited with her while Dad pulled the rental car around. Within minutes, Shannon was settling into the car. Gingerly, she adjusted the pillows and the blanket her mom had left for her. *Sunglasses*. She didn’t know where her sunglasses were . . . probably still in the Toyota.

As they pulled into the mechanic’s lot, she spotted her car. She gasped aloud. “How could I not remember *that* happening?”

Dad nodded. “Your guardian angels got squished in that one, didn’t they? We are so thankful you don’t have serious injuries.”

“Would you take a photo?”

“Already did, for the insurance company. That’s a good reminder to be thankful, isn’t it?”

You have no idea, Dad.

He parked next to her car, and Shannon watched as he started transferring boxes. He was right—everything fit in the rental with room to spare. Several boxes rattled when they shouldn’t have, but

they'd have to explore that later. Before long, they were back on the road to her new apartment.

Despite her efforts, Shannon dozed off for what she thought were a few minutes. She awoke to see a sign announcing, LOUGHTON VALLEY, CONNECTICUT, 20 MILES.

Twenty miles to a new life. What kind of life she wasn't sure, and now she feared the worst. This accident was a bad start. She sighed. *What kind of future do I have?* Inside the city limits, another sign: LOUGHTON VALLEY, INCORPORATED 1654.

"Look, Dad. Geez, that's ancient!"

The GPS announced their destination. The Oak Crossing apartment complex was one mile ahead. It was 6:00 p.m. Traffic seemed heavy for such a little town, but people were arriving home from work. Shannon spotted the apartment directory sign in the parking lot and located the building for apartment 305. She'd chosen the third floor because it seemed safer and the stairs would be good exercise. With her painful ribs and headache, she was now regretting that decision. They checked in with the building manager, got the key, and found a parking spot close to the entrance.

At least there are trees and flowers around the building. I miss my flower gardens. I took so much for granted. Fresh flowers almost every day? That's a luxury I won't have now.

Dad was already pulling boxes from the back seat by the time Shannon eased her way into the open. She was surprised when a couple approached.

"Hi, my name's Jennifer," the blonde announced. "This is my husband, Kevin. We're in building two, next door. Can we give you a hand with unloading? We moved in a few months ago, and our backs have finally recovered." She chuckled.

Shannon smiled back. They certainly gave a good first impression of the neighborhood. Jennifer was probably in her early thirties. A bit older, Kevin appeared attentive to Jennifer. *Looks like she married the right guy . . . but who knows what really goes on in a*

relationship. First impressions can be deceiving. She shook her head, determined not to get lost in negativity.

“That would be awesome. Thank you, Jennifer. I’m Shannon Enright, and this is my father, Riley Sweeney.”

“Pleased to meet you both,” Kevin replied. “Show us where to begin.”

“Very nice to meet you also.” Shannon’s dad opened the trunk. Kevin helped place suitcases and boxes on the sidewalk and offered to carry the heavier items. Jennifer picked up one suitcase and a lightweight box. Shannon’s dad hoisted two larger boxes and instructed Shannon to carry only her purse.

“Shannon was in a car accident and is still recovering. It’s a blessing that she has such nice neighbors.”

“Shannon, I’m so sorry to hear that. We’ll help get you settled tonight and check in on you sometime tomorrow, if that’s okay.”

“That would be wonderful. Thank you for helping us move these things into the apartment.”

Kevin brought the last box upstairs, then he and Jennifer said goodbye.

Shannon moved slowly through her new home. She had rented the furnished apartment online, and she was eager to see if the photos had been accurate. She wasn’t disappointed; natural light permeated the space. It was clean and pleasant, decorated in neutral tones. She opened the sliding door for some fresh air, then turned slowly to sit down on the couch.

Dad looked in on her from the kitchen. He had just opened a box labeled “kitchen” and found two glasses still intact. “Your mom packed some snacks and iced tea mixes,” he called. “I see there’s already ice in the freezer.”

Emotions took hold, and Shannon fought for control. “Dad, my life is so screwed up. I still can’t even say I’m divorced. I never wanted this. Losing the house, saying goodbye to family and friends, leaving the job I loved, and now this accident? I can’t imag-

ine how things could get much worse!” Tears of pain, grief, loss, disbelief, discouragement, and sadness began to fall. “I’m so glad you’re here. Things always seem better when you’re around. Thanks for dropping everything and coming to help.”

“That’s what dads do, baby. I’ll always be here for you. Nothing’s going to change that, Shannon. Life is often unfair—it throws curve balls at everyone, the most unexpected, unimaginable things. You’ve had more than your share recently,” he said, handing her a glass of sweet tea as he sat next to her. “But we know you better than anyone else. You’re brave and full of life. Don’t let Andrew change who you are; don’t give him that power. His choices are hurtful, yes, but you had a good life before him, and you’ll have a good life without him. I don’t pretend to know how you’re feeling, honey, but you have a good head on your shoulders. You will get through this, I promise. But he’d better not show his face around here!”

A grin lifted the corners of Shannon’s mouth. She had wondered when his Irish temper would show up. He caught the look and gave her a gentle hug.

“Those two chairs on the deck look pretty inviting,” he said, sipping the tea. “Why don’t we go outside?”

“They do look comfy, don’t they?” she responded. “The fresh air would be good for both of us.”

Dad helped her to her feet, and they stepped onto the deck. Dad sat down while Shannon stood at the railing, looking out. “It really is pretty here.” Light bounced from something in the distance, and she leaned forward to investigate. “Oh, look, Dad! I see a lake. Way out past those trees. Can you see it?”

“Yep. This is a beautiful place. It seems nice and peaceful too.”

“Looks like there’s a trail that leads to it. I’ll enjoy taking that trail around the lake once my ribs are healed.”

Dad nodded. “Well, you be smart about that. I’d worry about you out there alone after your head injury if you go too soon.” He

finished his tea and stood up. “I’m going to get back to work. What can I take into your room for you? Tell me what to put where, and I can start opening boxes and unpacking.”

“Thanks, Dad.” Shannon followed him back inside. “Just the blue suitcase and the box marked linens for now. We can sort everything else out tomorrow. Seems like all I’ve done today is sleep, but I’m getting drowsy again. Hope you don’t mind if I turn in early. I’m sorry you have to sleep on the couch; I wasn’t expecting company so soon.”

“It’s okay, don’t worry about it. Things will get better. Here, I found the linens. I’ll go make up the bed for you, and then I’ll catch up on the news.”

After a quick shower and her evening pain meds, she crawled carefully into bed, trying not to jostle her sore ribs. Thoughts were swirling, but she was determined not to dwell on them. Worries past or future—not tonight. One day at a time. Or maybe just one minute at a time.