

Chapter 1

They were arguing in the seconds before impact. Later, Deborah Monroe would agonize about that, wondering whether, had she been focused solely on the road, she might have seen something sooner and been able to prevent what occurred - because the argument had been nearly as distracting as the storm. She and her daughter never argued. They were similar in looks, temperament, and interests. Deborah rarely had to tweak Grace - her son, Dylan, yes, but not Grace. Grace usually understood what was expected and why.

This night, though, the girl fought back. 'You're getting hyper about nothing, Mom. Nothing happened.'

'You said Megan's parents were going to be home,' Deborah reminded her.

'That's what Megan told me.'

'I would have thought twice if I'd known there would be a crowd.'

'We were *studying*.'

'You, Megan, and Stephie,' Deborah said, and, yes, the textbooks were there, damp from Grace's dash to the car in the rain, 'plus Becca, and Michael, Ryan, Justin, and Kyle, none of whom were supposed to be there. Three girls study. Four girls and four boys make a party. Sweetie, it's pouring rain, and even *above* the noise of that, I could hear shrieking laughter all the way from the car.'

Deborah didn't know if Grace was looking guilty. Long brown curls hid broad-set eyes, a straight nose and full upper lip. She did hear the snap of her daughter's gum; its spearmint shrouded the smell of wet books. But she quickly returned her own eyes to the road, or what she could see of it, despite the wipers working double-time. Visibility on this stretch was poor even on the best of nights. There were no streetlights, and moonshine rarely penetrated the trees.

Tonight the road was a funnel. Rain rushed at them, swallowing the beam of the headlights and thrashing against the windshield - and yes, April meant rain, but this was absurd. Had it been as bad on the way out, Deborah would never have let Grace drive home. But Grace had asked, and Deborah's husband - *ex*-husband - too often accused her of being over-protective.

They were going slowly enough; Deborah would repeat that many times in subsequent days, and forensics would bear it out. They were less than a minute from home and knew this part of the road well. But the darkness was dense, the rain an unreckoned force. Yes, Deborah knew that her daughter had to actually drive in order to learn how, but she feared this was too much, too soon.

Deborah hated rain. Grace didn't seem fazed.

'We finished studying,' the girl argued around the gum in her mouth. Her hands were tight on the wheel, perfectly positioned, nothing wrong there. 'It was hot inside, and the AC wasn't on yet, so we opened the windows. We were taking a break. Like, is it a crime to laugh? I mean, it's bad enough my mother had to come to get me - '

'Excuse me,' Deborah cut in, 'but what was the alternative? You can't drive by yourself on a learner's permit. Ryan and Kyle may have their licenses, but, by law, they're not allowed to take friends in the car without an adult, and besides, we live on the opposite end of town from the others - and what's so bad about your mother picking you up at ten o'clock on a week night? Sweetie, you're barely sixteen.'

'Exactly,' Grace said with feeling. 'I'm sixteen, Mom. I'll have my real license in four months. So what'll happen then? I'll be driving myself places all the time - because we don't only live on the opposite end of town from everyone else, we live in the middle of *nowhere*, because Dad decided he had to buy a *gazillion* acres to build a McMansion in the forest, which he then decided he didn't *want*, so he left it *and* us and moved to Vermont to live with his long lost love from twenty-five years ago - '

'Grace - ' Deborah couldn't go there just then. Grace might feel abandoned by her father, but the loss hit Deborah harder. Her marriage wasn't supposed to end. That hadn't been in the plan.

'Okay, forget Dad,' Grace went on, 'but once I get my license, I'll be driving places alone, and you won't *see* who's there or whether there's a parent around, or whether we're studying or having a party. You're going to have to *trust* me.'

'I do trust you,' Deborah said, defensive herself now, but pleading. 'It's the others I don't trust. Weren't you the one who told me Kyle brought a six-pack to the pool party at Katherine's house last weekend?'

'None of us had any. Katherine's parents made him leave.'

'Katherine's *parents*. *Exactly*.'

Deborah heard her growl. 'Mom. We were studying.'

Deborah was about to list the things that could happen when teenagers were studying - things she had seen both growing up, when her father was the only family doctor in town, and now, being in practice with him and treating dozens of local teenagers - when a flash of movement entered her line of sight on the right. In quick succession came the jolt of a weighty thud against the front of the car, the slam of brakes, the squeal of tires. Her seatbelt tightened, holding her while the car skidded on the flooded pavement, fishtailed, and spun, all in the space of seconds. When it came to a stop, they were facing backward.

For a minute, Deborah didn't hear the rain over the thunder of her heart. Then, above it, came Grace's frightened cry. '*What was that?*'

'Are you okay?'

'*What was that?*' the girl repeated, her voice shaking this time.

Deborah was starting to shake, too, but her daughter was upright, belted in, clearly okay. Scrabbling to release her seat belt, Deborah hiked up the hood of her slicker, and ran out to search for whatever it was they had hit. The headlights reflected off the wet road, but beyond that paltry light, it was totally dark.

Ducking back into the car, she fumbled through the glove box for a flashlight. Outside again, she searched the roadside, but saw nothing that remotely resembled a downed animal.

Grace materialized at her elbow. 'Was it a *deer*?' she asked, sounding terrified.

Deborah's heart continued to pound. 'I don't know. Sweetie, get back in the car. You don't have a jacket.' It was a warm-enough spring night; she just didn't want Grace seeing what they had hit.

'It *had* to be a deer,' Grace cried, 'not even hurt, just run off into the woods - what else could it be?'

Deborah didn't think a deer wore a running suit with a stripe up the side, which was what she swore she had seen in the split second prior to impact. A running suit meant something human.

She walked along the edge of the road, searching the low shrubs with her light. 'Hey,' she called out to whoever was there, 'are you hurt? Hello? Let me know where you are!'

Grace hovered at her shoulder. 'Like, it came from *nowhere*, Mom - no *person* would be out here in the rain, so maybe it was a fox or a racoon - or a deer, it *had* to be a deer.'

'Get back in the car, Grace,' Deborah repeated. The words were barely out when she heard something, and it wasn't the idling car. Nor was it the whine of wind in the trees or the rain splattering everything in sight.

The sound came again, definitely a moan. She followed it to a point at the side of the road and searched again, but it was another minute before she found its source. The running shoe was barely visible in the wet undergrowth some four feet from the pavement, and the black pants rising from it, half-hidden under a low branch of a hemlock, had a blue stripe. A second leg was bent in an odd angle - broken, she guessed - and the rest of him was crumpled against the base of a tree.

Supine, he ran no risk of suffocation in the forest undergrowth, but his eyes were closed. Short dark hair was plastered to his forehead. Scrambling through a clump of wet ferns, Deborah directed her flashlight to his head, but didn't see any blood other than that from a mean scrape on his jaw.

'*Omigod!*' Grace wailed.

Deborah felt for a pulse at his neck. It was only when she found it that her own began beating again. 'Can you hear me?' she asked, leaning close. 'Open your eyes for me.' He didn't respond.

'*Omigod!*' Grace cried hysterically. 'Do you know who that is, it's my history teacher!'

Trying to think quickly, Deborah pulled her daughter back onto the road and toward the car. She could feel the girl trembling. As calmly as she could, Deborah said, 'I want you to run home, honey. It isn't more than half a mile, and you're already soaked. Dylan's alone. He'll be scared.' She imagined a small face at the pantry window, eyes large, frightened, and magnified behind thick Harry Potter glasses.

'What'll *you* do?' Grace asked in a high, wavery voice.

'Call the police, then sit with Mr. McKenna until an ambulance comes.'

'I didn't see him, I swear, I didn't see him,' wailed Grace. 'Can't you do something for him, Mom?'

'Not much.' Deborah turned off the engine, turned on the hazards. 'I don't see any profuse bleeding, and I don't dare move him.'

'Will he *die*?'

Deborah grabbed her phone. 'We weren't going fast. We couldn't have hit him that hard.'

'But he got way over there.'

'He must have rolled.'

'He isn't moving.'

'He may have a concussion or be in shock.' There were plenty of worse possibilities, most of which, unfortunately, she knew.

'Shouldn't I stay here with you?'

'There's nothing you can do here. *Go*, sweetie.' She cupped her daughter's cheek, frantic to spare her this, at least. 'I'll be home soon.'

Grace's hair was drenched, separating into long, wet coils. Rain dripped from a gentle chin. Eyes wide, she spoke in a frightened rush. 'Did *you* see him, Mom? Like, why would *anybody* be walking on the road in the rain? I mean, it's dark, how could I *possibly* see him, and why didn't *he* see *us*? There are no other lights here.'

Deborah punched in 9-1-1 with one hand and took Grace's arm with the other. 'Go, Grace. I need you home with Dylan. Now.' The dispatcher picked up after a single ring. Deborah knew the voice. Carla McKay was a patient of hers. She worked as the civilian dispatcher several nights a week.

'Leyland Police. This call is being recorded.'

'Carla, it's Dr. Monroe,' she said and shooed Grace off with a hand.

'There's been an accident. I'm on the rim road, maybe a half mile east of my house. My car hit a man. We need an ambulance.'

'How badly is he hurt?'

'He's unconscious, but he's breathing. I'd say there's a broken leg, but I'm not sure what else. The only cut I see is superficial, but I can't look more without moving him.'

'Is anyone else hurt?'

'No. How fast can you get someone here?'

'I'll call now.'

Deborah closed the phone. Grace hadn't moved. Soaking wet, curls long and bedraggled, she looked very young and frightened.

Frightened herself, Deborah stroked wet hair back from her daughter's cheeks. On a note of quiet urgency, she said, 'Grace, I need you home with Dylan.'

'I was driving.'

'You'll be more of a help to me if you're with Dylan. Please, sweetie?'

'It was my fault.'

'Grace. Can we *not* argue about this? Here, take my jacket.' She was starting to slip it off when the girl turned and broke into a run. In no time, she had disappeared in the rain.

Pulling her hood up again, Deborah hurried back into the woods. The smell of wet earth and hemlock permeated the air, but she knew what blood smelled like and imagined that, too. Again, she looked for something beyond the scrape on Calvin McKenna's jaw. She saw nothing.

He remained unconscious, but his pulse was strong. She could monitor that and, if it faltered, could manually pump his chest. Studying the angle of his leg, she suspected that his injury involved the hip, but a hip injury was do-able. A spine injury was something else, which was why she wouldn't move him. The EMTs would have a backboard and head immobilizer. Far better to wait.

It was easier said than done - an endless ten minutes of blaming herself for letting Grace drive, of taking Calvin McKenna's pulse, trying to see what else might be hurt, wondering what had possessed him to be out in the rain, taking his pulse again, cursing the location of their house and the irresponsibility of her ex-husband - before she saw the flashing lights of the cruiser. There was no siren. They were in too rural a part of town for that.

Waving her flashlight, she ran back onto the road and was at the cruiser's door when Brian Duffy stepped out. In his mid-forties, he was one of a dozen officers on the town force. He also coached Little League. Her son Dylan had been on his team for two years.

'Are you all right, Dr. Monroe?' he asked, fitting a plastic-covered cap over his crewcut. He was already wearing a rain jacket.

'I'm fine. But my car hit Calvin McKenna.' She led him back to the woods. 'I can't tell how badly he's hurt.' Once over the ferns, she knelt and checked his pulse again. It remained steady. She directed her flashlight at his face; its beam was joined by the officer's.

'Cal?' she called futilely. 'Cal? Can you hear me?'

'What was he doing out here?' the officer asked.

Deborah sat back on her heels. 'I have no idea. Walking? Running?'

'In the rain? That's strange.'

'Particularly here,' she said. 'Do you know where he lives?' It certainly wasn't nearby. There were four houses in the circle of a mile, and she knew the residents of each.

'He and his wife have a place over by the train station,' Brian replied. 'That's a couple miles. I take it you don't treat him?'

'No. Grace has him in school this year, so I heard him speak at the open house last fall. He's a serious guy, a tough marker. That's about all I know.' She was reaching for his pulse again when the road came alive with light. A second cruiser arrived, its roofbar thrumming a raucous blue and white. An ambulance was close behind.

Deborah didn't immediately recognize the EMTs; they were young, likely new. But she did know the man who emerged from the second cruiser. John Colby was the police chief. In his late-fifties, he would have been retired had he been working anywhere else, but he had grown up in Leyland. It was understood that he would keep working as long as his health allowed. Deborah guessed that would be a while. He and his wife were patients of her father's. His wife had a problem with allergens - dander, pollen, dust - that had resulted in adult-onset asthma, but John's greatest problem, beyond a pot belly, was insomnia. He worked days; he worked nights. He claimed that being active kept his blood pressure down, and since his blood pressure was chronically low, Deborah couldn't argue.

While John held a floodlight, the EMTs immobilized Calvin. Deborah waited with her arms crossed, hands in the folds of her jacket. He made neither movement nor sound.

She followed them out of the woods and was watching them ease him into the ambulance, when Brian took her arm. 'Let's sit in the cruiser. This rain's nasty.'

Once inside, she lowered her hood and opened her jacket. Her face was wet; she wiped it with her hands. Her hair, damp and curling, still felt strange to her short after a lifetime wearing it waist-long and knotted at the nape. She was wearing a tank top and shorts, both relatively dry under her jacket, and flip-flops. Her legs were slick and smudged with dirt.

She *hated* rain. It came at the worst times, defied prediction, and made life messy.

Brian folded himself next to her behind the wheel, and shook his hat outside before closing the door. He took a notebook and pen from a tray between the seats. 'I have to ask you a few questions - just a formality, Dr. Monroe.' He checked his watch. 'Ten-forty-three. And it's D-E-B-O-R-A-H?'

'Yes. M-O-N-R-O-E.' She was often mistakenly thought to be Dr. Barr, which was her maiden name and the name of her father, who was something of a legend in town. She had used her married name since her final year of college.

'Can you tell me what happened?' the officer asked.

'We were driving along - '

'We?' He looked alarmed. 'I thought you were alone.'

'I am now - Grace is home - but I had picked her up at a friend's house - that's Megan Stearns' house - and we were on our way home, going really slowly, not more than twenty-five miles an hour, because the rain was so bad. And suddenly he was there.'

'Running along the side of the road?'

'I didn't see him running. He just appeared in front of the car. There was no warning, no time to turn away, just this awful thud.'

'Had you drifted toward the shoulder of the road?'

'No. We were close to the center. I was watching the line. It was one of the few guidelines we'd had with visibility so low.'

'Did you brake?'

Deborah hadn't braked. Grace had done it. Now was the time to clarify that. But it seemed irrelevant, a technicality.

'Too late,' she replied. 'We skidded and spun around. You can see where my car is. That's where we ended after the spin.'

'But if you drove Grace home -'

'I didn't drive her. I made her run. It isn't more than half a mile. She's on the track team.' Deborah wrangled her phone from a soggy pocket. 'I needed her to babysit Dylan, but she'll want to know what's happening. Is this okay?' When he nodded, she pressed the speed-dial button.

The phone had barely rung when Grace picked up. 'Mom?'

'Are you okay?'

'I'm okay. How's Mr. McKenna?'

'He's on his way to the hospital.'

'Is he conscious?'

'Not yet. Is Dylan okay?'

'If being dead asleep on the sofa when I got here means okay, yes. He hasn't moved.'

So much for large eyes at the window, Deborah thought, and heard her ex-husband's, *You worry too much*, but how not to worry about a ten-year-old boy who had hyperopia, plus corneal dystrophy, which meant that he viewed much of his life through a haze. Deborah hadn't planned on that, either.

'Well, I'm still glad you're with him,' she said. 'Grace, I'm talking with the police officer now. I may run over to the hospital once we're done. You'd probably better go to bed. You have that exam tomorrow.'

'I'm going to be sick tomorrow.'

'Grace.'

'I am. I can't think about biology right now. I mean, like, what a *nightmare*. If this is what happens when you drive, I'm not doing it. I keep asking myself where he came from. Did you see him on the side of the road?'

'No. Honey, the officer's waiting.'

'Call me back.'

'Yup.' Deborah closed the phone.

The cruiser's rear door opened and John Colby got into the back seat.

'You'd think the rain'd take a break,' he said, adding, 'Hard to see much on the road. I took pictures of everything I could, but the evidence won't last long if it stays like this. I just called the state team. They're on their way.'

'State team?' Deborah asked, frightened.

'The State Police have an Accident Reconstruction Team,' John explained.

'It's headed by a credited reconstructionist. He knows what to look for more than we do.'

'What does he look for?'

'Points of impact, marks on the car. Where on the road the car hit the victim, where the victim landed. Skid marks. Burned rubber. He rebuilds the picture of what happened and how.'

It was only an accident, she wanted to say. Bringing in a state team somehow made it more.

Dismay must have shown on her face, because Brian said, 'It's standard procedure when there's personal injury. Had it been midday with the sun out, we might have been able to handle it ourselves, but in weather like this, it's important to work quickly, and these guys can do that.' He glanced at his notes. 'How fast did you say you were going?'

Again, Deborah might have easily said, *Oh, I wasn't the one at the wheel. It was Grace, and she wasn't speeding at all.* But that felt like she was trying to weasel out of something - to shift the blame - and besides, Grace was her first-born, her alter-ego, and already suffering from the divorce. Did the girl need more to trouble her? Calvin McKenna was hit either way. No laws had been broken either way.

'The limit here is forty-five,' she said. 'We couldn't have been going more than thirty.'

'Have you had any recent problems with the car?'

'No.'

'Brakes working?'

'Perfectly.'

'Were the high beams on?'

She frowned, struggling with that one. She remembered reminding Grace, but high beams - low beams - neither cut far in rain like this.

'They're still on,' John confirmed from behind, 'both working.' He put his hat back on his head. 'I'm going out to tape off the lane. Last thing we need is someone driving by and fouling the scene.'

Deborah knew he meant *accident* scene, but with a state team coming, she kept thinking *crime* scene. She was feeling upset about the driver issue, but the questions went on. What time had she left her house to get Grace? What time had Grace and she left Megan's house? How much time had passed between the accident and Deborah's calling it in? What had she done during that time? Had Calvin McKenna regained consciousness at any point?

Deborah understood that this was all part of the investigation, but she wanted to be at the hospital and, if not there, at home with Grace and Dylan.

She glanced at her watch. It was past eleven. If Dylan woke up, he would be frightened to find her still gone; he had been clingy since the divorce, and Grace wouldn't be much help. She would be watching for Deborah in the dark - not from the pantry, which she saw as Dylan's turf, but from the window seat in the living room that they rarely used now. There were ghosts in that room, family pictures from a happier time, in a crowd of frames, an arrogant display of perfection. Grace would be feeling desolate.

A new explosion of light announced the arrival of the state team. As soon as Brian left the cruiser, Deborah opened her phone and called the hospital - not the general number, but one that went straight to the emergency room. She had admitting privileges and had accompanied patients often enough to know the night nurse. Unfortunately, all the nurse knew was that the ambulance had just arrived.

Deborah called Grace. The girl picked up instantly. 'Where are you?'

'Still here. I'm sitting in the police car, while they check things outside.' She tried to sound casual. 'They're reconstructing the accident. It's standard procedure.'

'What are they looking for?'

'Whatever they can find to explain why Mr. McKenna was where he was. How's Dylan?'

'Still sleeping. How's Mr. McKenna?'

'Just got to the hospital. They'll be examining him now. Have you talked with Megan or any of the others?' There was the issue of Grace climbing into the car on the driver's side, which might have been seen by her friends, reason to level with the police now.

'They're texting me,' Grace said in a shaky voice. 'Stephie tried to call, but I didn't answer. What if he dies, Mom?'

'He won't die. He wasn't hit that hard. It's late, Grace. You ought to go to bed.'

'When will you be home?'

'Soon, I hope. I'll find out.'

Closing the phone, Deborah tucked it in her pocket, pulled up her hood, and went out into the rain. She pulled the hood closer around her face and held it there with a dripping hand.

A good part of the road had been sealed off with yellow tape, made all the more harsh now by klieg lights. Two latex-gloved men were combing the pavement, stopping from time to time to carefully pick up and bag what they found. A photographer was taking pictures of Deborah's car, both its general position on the road and the dent in the front. The dent wasn't large. More noticeable was the shattered headlight.

'Oh my,' Deborah said, seeing that for the first time.

John joined her, bending over to study what remained of the glass. 'This looks to be the only damage,' he said and shot her a quick glance. 'Think you can dig out your registration so I can record it?'

She slipped behind the wheel, adjusted the seat, opened the glove box, and handed him the registration, which he carefully recorded. Restowing it, she joined him outside.

'I didn't think of damage,' she said, pulling her hood forward again. 'I was only concerned with what we'd hit. We thought it was an animal.' She peered up at him. 'I'd really like to drive to the hospital, John. How long will these fellows take?'

'Another hour or two,' he said, watching the men work. 'This is their only shot. Rain continues like this and come morning, everything'll be washed out. But anyway, you can't take your car. We have to tow it.'

'Tow it? It's perfectly driveable.'

'Not until our mechanic checks it out. He has to make sure nothing was wrong that might have caused the accident - brake malfunction, defective wipers, worn tires.' He looked at her then. 'Don't worry. We'll drive you home tonight. You have another car there, don't you?'

She did. It was Greg's BMW, the one he had driven to and from the office, parked in the Reserved-for-President spot, and kept diligently waxed. He had loved that car, but it, too, was abandoned. When he left for Vermont, he had been in the old Volkswagen Beetle that had sat under a tarp in the garage all these years.

Deborah didn't like the BMW. Greg had bought it at the height of his success. In hindsight, that was the beginning of the end.

Folding her arms over her chest, she watched the men work. They covered every inch of the road, the roadside, and the edge of the forest beyond where Calvin McKenna had landed. More

than once, feeling useless and *despising* the rain, she wondered why she was there and not at the hospital helping out.

The answer, of course, was that she was a family practitioner, not a trauma specialist. And it was her car that had caused harm.

The reality of that loomed larger by the minute. She was responsible - *she* was responsible - for the car, for Grace, for the accident, for Calvin McKenna. If she could do nothing for him and nothing for the car, she needed to be home with her children.

Grace huddled in the dark. Each time her cell phone rang, she jumped, held it up, studied the panel. She answered if her mother was calling, but she couldn't talk to anyone else. Megan had already tried. Twice. Same with Stephe Now they were texting.

WER R U? TM ME!

R U THER? HELLO??

When Grace didn't reply, the focus changed.

DUZ YR MM NO ABT TH BR? DD SHE SMLL IT?

R U IN TRBL? U ONLY HD 1.

But Grace hadn't had only one beer, she had *two*, and even though they were spaced three hours apart, and she hadn't felt high and probably wouldn't even have blown a point-oh-one if she had been breathalyzed, she shouldn't have driven.

She didn't know why she had. She didn't know why these so-called friends of hers - *alleged* friends, as in provable but not proved - were even *mentioning* beer in a TM. Didn't they *know* everything could be traced?

UOK?

Y WONT U TALK?

She wouldn't talk, because her mother was still with the police and Mr. McKenna was at the hospital and it was *all her fault* - and nothing her friends could say would make it better.

Chapter 2

It was another hour before the state agents dismantled their lights, and a few minutes more before a tow truck arrived. Deborah knew the driver. He worked at the service station in the center of town and was a frequent customer at her sister's bakery. That meant Jill would hear about the accident soon after she opened at six.

Brian drove her home, pulling into the circular drive and, at her direction, past the fieldstone house to the shingled garage. She was exhausted and thoroughly wet, but as soon as she had closed the cruiser door and was sprinting forward hugging her medical bag and Grace's books, she opened her phone and called the hospital. While she waited for an answer, she punched in the code for the garage. The door rumbled up as the call went through. 'Joyce? It's Deborah Monroe again. Any word on Calvin McKenna?'

'Hold on, Dr. Monroe. Let me check.'

Deborah dropped her armload and hung her slicker on a hook not far from the bay where her car should have stood. Leaving her flip-flops on the landing, she hurried inside, through the kitchen to the laundry room.

'Dr. Monroe? He's in stable condition. They're running tests now, but the neurologist doesn't see any evidence of vertebral fracture or paralysis. He has a broken hip. They'll deal with that in the operating room once this last scan is done.'

'Is he conscious?' Deborah asked, back in the kitchen, drying her arms with a towel.

'Yes, but not communicating.'

'He can't speak?'

'They suspect he can but won't. They can't find a physical explanation.'

Deborah had run the towel over her face and was lowering it when she spotted Grace in the corner. 'Trauma, maybe?' she speculated. 'Thanks, Joyce. Would you do me a favor? Let me know if there's any change?'

Still dressed, Grace was hunched over, biting her nail. Deborah pulled the hand away and drew her close.

'Where *were* you?' the girl asked meekly.

'Same place.'

'All this time?'

'Uh-huh.'

'Why did the police drive you home?'

'Because they don't want me driving my car until they've examined it in daylight.'

'Isn't the cop who drove you home coming in?'

Deborah drew back to study her face. They weren't quite the same height, but almost. 'No. They're done for the night.'

Grace's voice went up a notch. 'How can they be done?'

'They've asked their questions.'

'Asked you, not me. What did you tell them?'

'I said we were driving home in the rain, visibility was terrible, and Mr. McKenna ran out from nowhere. They'll have to go back along the road in the morning to see if there's anything they missed that the rain didn't get. I'll file a report at the station tomorrow and get the car. Where's Dylan?'

'He went to bed. He must have thought you were home. What do we tell him, Mom? I mean, he'll know something happened when he sees your car missing, and besides, it was Mr. *McKenna*. This is such my luck that it was my teacher. I mean, like, I'm so *bad* at U.S. History, people will think it was deliberate. What do I tell my friends?'

'You are not bad at U.S. History.'

'I shouldn't be in the AP section. I don't have a prayer of placing out when I take the test in June. I *suck*.'

If she did, it was news to Deborah. 'You tell them that we couldn't see Mr. McKenna in the rain, and that we weren't going very fast.'

'You keep saying *we*.'

Yes. Deborah realized that. 'I was the licensed driver in the car. I was the one responsible.'

'But I was the one at the wheel.'

'You were my responsibility.'

'If you'd been driving, the accident wouldn't have happened.'

'Not true, Grace. I didn't see Mr. McKenna, and I was watching the road as closely as if my own foot was on the gas.'

'But it wasn't your foot on the gas.'

Deborah paused, but only for a minute. Slowly, she said, 'The police assume it was.'

'And you're not telling them the truth? Mom, that's lying.'

'No,' she said, sorting it out even as she spoke. 'They drew their own conclusion. I just haven't corrected them.'

'*Mom.*'

'You're a juvenile, Grace,' Deborah reasoned. 'You were only driving on a permit, which means that you were driving on my license, which makes me responsible. I've been driving for twenty-two years and have a spotless record. I can weather this better than you can.' When Grace opened her mouth to protest again, Deborah pressed a hand to her lips. 'This is right, sweetie. I know it is. We can't control the weather, and we can't control what other people do. We were compliant with every law in the book and did our very best to stop. There was no negligence involved on our part.'

'What if he dies?'

'He won't.'

'But what if he does? That's *murder*.'

'No,' Deborah argued, though the word *murder* gave her a chill, 'it would be vehicular homicide, but since we did absolutely nothing wrong, there won't be any charges.'

'Is that what Uncle Hal said?'

Hal Trutter was the husband of Deborah's friend, Karen, and while neither he nor Karen were actually related to the Monroes, they had known the children since birth. Their daughter, Danielle, was a year ahead of Grace.

Deborah saw Karen often. Lately, she had felt more awkward with Hal, but that was a whole other story.

'I haven't talked with him yet,' she told Grace, 'but I know he'd agree. And anyway, Mr. McKenna is not going to die.'

'What if he's crippled for life?'

'You're getting carried away with this, Grace,' Deborah warned, though she harbored the same fears. The difference was that she was the mother. She couldn't panic.

'I saw his leg,' the girl wailed. 'It was sticking out all wrong, like he fell from the top of a building.'

'But he didn't fall from the top of a building. He is definitely alive, the nurse just told me so, and broken bones can be fixed.'

Grace's face crumbled. 'It was awful. I will never forget that sound.'

Nor would Deborah. She could still hear it - that *thud* - hours after the fact. Seeking purchase, she clutched Grace's shoulders. 'I need a shower, sweetie. I'm chilled, and my legs are filthy.' Keeping an arm around the girl, she walked her up the stairs and down the hall. In addition to the three children's rooms, the third for a last child that Deborah and Greg might have had, there was a family room that had built-in desks, a sofa, matching armchairs, and a flat-screen tv. After Greg left, Deborah had spent so many nights here with the kids that she finally just moved into the third bedroom.

Grace was biting her nails again by the time they reached her door. Taking the hand from her mouth, Deborah looked at her daughter for a long, silent moment. 'Everything will be fine,' she whispered before letting her go.

The texting had stopped before her mother got home, for which Grace was grateful. What could she tell Megan? Or Stephie? Or Becca? My mom is taking the blame for something I did? My mom is lying so I won't be arrested? My mom could go to *jail* if Mr. McKenna dies?

Grace had thought the divorce was bad. This was worse.

* * * * *

Deborah had hoped that the shower would calm her, but warm, clean, and finally dry, she could think more clearly, and a clearer mind simply magnified what had happened. The sound of the rain didn't help. It pounded the roof much as it had the car, and she remembered another night, the one when her mother had died. It had been pouring then, too.

Creeping into Dylan's room, she knelt by the bed. His eyes were closed, dark lashes lying on cheeks that wouldn't be smooth much longer. He was a gentle child with more than his share of worry, and while she knew that there were cures for his vision problems, her heart ached.

Not wanting to wake him, but helpless to leave without a touch, she moved her hand over his sandy hair. Then she went to her room, slipped into bed, and pulled the covers to her chin. She had barely settled when she heard Dylan's steps, muted by the old slipper-socks that he wore every night. They were the last pair Ruth Barr had knit before her death, too big for him at first, now stretched so thin that they were about to fall apart. He refused to let Deborah throw them out, saying that they kept his Nana Ruth alive. In that instant, Deborah needed her mother, too.

'I tried to stay awake 'til you got home,' he mumbled.

Pulling him toward her, Deborah waited only until he set his glasses on the nightstand before tucking him in next to her. He was asleep almost at once. Moments later, Grace joined them, crawling in on the other side. It was a snug fit, though preferable to lying awake alone. Deborah reached for her daughter's hand.

'I won't be able to sleep,' the girl whispered, 'not at all, the whole night.'

Deborah turned her head in the dark and whispered back, 'Here's the thing. We can't rewind the clock. What happened happened. We know that Mr. McKenna is in good hands and that if there's any change, we'll get a call. Right?'

Grace made a doubtful sound but said nothing more. In time her breathing lengthened, but she slept in fits and starts. Deborah knew because she remained awake for a long time after that, and for reasons that went well beyond the drumming of rain on the roof. She kept seeing that striped running suit, kept feeling the jolt of impact.

Sandwiched between the children, though, she knew she couldn't panic. After her marriage ended, she had made a vow. No more harm to the kids. No ... more ... harm.

The phone rang at six the next morning. Deborah had been sleeping for less than three hours, and the press of her children made her slow to react. Then she remembered what had happened, and her stomach clenched.

Fearing Calvin McKenna had taken a turn for the worse, she bolted up and, reaching over Dylan, grabbed the phone. 'Hello?'

'It's me,' said her sister. 'I figured your alarm would be going off soon. Mack Tully was just in here. He said you hit someone last night.'

'Oh. Jill.' Relieved, Deborah let out a breath. She and her sister were close, though very different from each other. Jill was thirty-four to Deborah's thirty-eight, blonde to her brunette, five-two to Deborah's five-six, and the maverick of the family. Despite two long-term relationships, she hadn't married, and while Deborah had followed their father into medicine, Jill flat-out refused to take any science courses. After one post-high-school year as a baker's apprentice in New Jersey, then a second year in New York and four more as a dessert chef on the West Coast, she had come back to Leyland to open her own bakery. In the ten years since her return, she had expanded three times - all to her father's chagrin. Michael still prayed she would wake up one day, go back to school, and do something *real* with her life.

Deborah had always loved her little sister, even more in the three years since their mother had died. Jill was Ruth. She lived simply but smartly, and, like her bakery, she exuded warmth. Just hearing her voice was a comfort. Talking with Ruth on the phone had conjured the smell of warm, fresh baked bread. Talking with Jill on the phone conjured the smell of pecan-topped sticky buns.

The image soothed the rough edges of fear. 'It was a nightmare, Jill,' she murmured tiredly. 'I had just gotten Grace, and it was rainy and dark. We were driving slowly. He came out of nowhere.'

'Was he drunk?'

'I don't think so. I didn't smell anything.'

'Vodka doesn't smell.'

'I couldn't exactly ask him, Jill. He wasn't talking.'

'The history teacher, huh? Is he badly hurt?'

'He was operated on last night, likely to put a pin in his hip.'

'Marty Stevens says the guy is odd - a loner, not real friendly.'

'Serious is the word, I think. He doesn't smile much. Did Marty say anything else?'

'No, but Shelley Wyeth did. She lives near the McKennas. She said his wife is weird, too. They don't mix much with the neighbors.' There was a brief pause. 'Wow. You actually ran someone down. I didn't think you had it in you.'

Deborah was a minute reacting. Then she said, 'Excuse me?'

'Have you *ever* been in an accident before?'

'No.'

'The rest of us have.'

'Jill.'

'It's okay, Deborah. This makes you human. I love you all the more for it.'

'*Jill*,' Deborah protested, but Dylan was awake and reaching for his glasses. 'My boy, here, needs an explanation. I'll see you as soon as I drop off the kids.'

'You're not driving the BMW, are you?' Jill asked. She shared Deborah's disdain for the car, albeit more for its cost than for memories of a marriage gone bad.

'I have no choice.'

'You do. I'll be there at seven-thirty. Once you get to Dad's, you can use his car. I don't envy you having to tell him about the accident. He won't be happy. He likes perfect records.'

Deborah didn't need the reminder. The thought of telling her father made her ill. 'I like perfect records, too, but we don't always get what we want. Trust me, I didn't plan on this. My car was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Gotta go, Jill. Seven-thirty. Thanks.' She hung up the phone and looked down at Dylan. At ten, he was more of an introvert than his sister had been at that age. He was also more sensitive, a character trait exacerbated by both the divorce and his vision.

'You *hit* someone?' he asked now, brown eyes abnormally wide behind his lenses.

'It was on the rim road, very dark, very wet.'

'Was he splattered all over the road?' the boy asked with a hard blink.

'Jerk,' Grace mumbled from behind Deborah.

'He was not splattered anywhere,' Deborah scolded. 'We weren't going fast enough to do serious harm.'

Dylan rubbed one of his eyes. 'Have you ever hit anyone before?'

'Absolutely not.'

'Has Dad?'

'Not that I know of.'

'I'm going to call him and tell him.'

'Not now, please,' Deborah said, because Greg would insist that Dylan put her on the phone and would then hassle her with questions. Glancing past Dylan at the clock, she said, 'He'll be sleeping and, anyway, you need to get dressed. Aunt Jill is coming for us.'

There was another hard blink. 'Why?'

'Because the police have my car.'

'Why?'

'They have to make sure it's in good working order.'

'Is there blood on the front?'

'No. Get up, Dylan,' Deborah said and gave him a gentle push.

He got out of bed, started for the door, then turned back. 'Who'd you hit?'

'No one you know,' Deborah said and pointed toward the door.

He had barely left when Grace was hovering at her shoulder. 'But he's someone I know,' she whispered, 'and someone all my friends know. And you can bet Dylan's gonna call Dad, who's then gonna think we can't take care of ourselves. Like there's someone else who'll take care of us if we don't, not that Dad cares. Mom, what if Mr. McKenna died on the operating table?'

'The hospital would have called.'

'What if you get a call today? I need to stay home.'

Deborah faced her. 'If you stay home, you'll have to retake the test - *and* miss track practice, which isn't a great idea with a meet on Saturday.'

Grace looked horrified. 'I can't *run* after what happened.'

Deborah knew how she felt. When Greg left, she had wanted nothing more than to stay in bed nursing her wounds. She had a similar urge now, but it would only make things worse. 'I have to work, Grace, and you need to run. We were involved in an accident. We can't let it paralyze us.'

'What if it paralyzes Mr. McKenna?'

'They said it didn't.'

'You can really *work* today?'

'I have to. People depend on me. Same with you. You're the team's best hope for winning the meet. Besides, if you're afraid of people talking, the best thing is to behave as you always do.'

'And say what?'

Deborah swallowed. 'What I just told Aunt Jill. That it was a horrible storm, and that the car was in the wrong place at the wrong time.'

'I'll flunk the bio test if I take it today. There's *another* AP section I shouldn't be in.'

'You won't flunk the test. You're pre-med, and you're acing bio.'

'How can I take a test when I barely slept?'

'You know the material. Besides, once you're in college, you'll be taking tests on next to no sleep all the time. Think of this as practice. It'll build character.'

'Yeah, well, if character's the thing, shouldn't I go with you to file the police report?'

Deborah felt a flash of pride, followed by a quick pang of conscience. Both turned to fear, when she thought of the possible fallout if she let Grace take the blame. The repercussions wouldn't be productive at all.

Very slowly, she shook her head, then held her daughter's gaze for a moment before drawing her out of bed.

As always, it hit Deborah in the shower - the second-guessing about what she was doing. Between diagnosing dozens of patients each week, helping her father run his household without Ruth, being a single mother and having to make sensitive decisions like the one she had just made, she was often on the hot seat. Now she stood with her head bowed, hot water hitting her back with the sting of too many choices, until she was close to tears.

Feeling profoundly alone, she turned the water off and quickly dressed. The clothes she wore for work were tailored, fitting her slim frame well and restoring a sense of professionalism. Makeup added color to her pale skin and softened the worry in brown eyes that were wide-set, the adult version of Grace's. But when she tried to fasten her hair in a clasp so that it would be neat and tidy as her life was not, it fought her. Shy of shoulder length, the dark waves had a mind of their own. Accepting that there was no going back to her orderly life, she let them curl as they would and turned her back on the mirror.

Mercifully, the rain had stopped. Sun was beginning to break through the clouds, scattering gold on trees whose still-wet limbs were just beginning to bud. Grateful for a brighter day, she went down to the kitchen, set out cereal for the kids, then phoned the hospital. Calvin McKenna was in recovery, soon to be moved to a room. He hadn't talked yet, but he was listed in stable condition.

Reassured, she skimmed her Post-its on the fridge - *pay property tax - Dylan dentist at 4 - tennis camp deposit*. Then she logged onto her email and phoned the answering service. Had there been an emergency, she would have been called. The messages she received now - the flare-up of a chronic ear infection, a stubborn migraine headache, a severe case of heartburn - were from patients the receptionist would schedule when she arrived at eight. Her nurse-practitioner would examine the earliest to arrive.

Deborah was usually at her office by eight-fifteen, after seeing the kids off to school, stopping to have coffee with Jill, and checking on her father. He was booked to see his first patient at eight-thirty. These days, it was Deborah's job to make sure that he did.

Her sister Jill, though perennially at odds with the man, respected that. She appeared at the house this morning at seven-thirty on the nose. Having come from work, she wore jeans and a tee-shirt. The tee-shirt, always either red, orange, or yellow to match the bakery's colors, was red today, and her boy-short blond hair was ruffled from whipping off her apron. She had their mother's bright, hazel eyes and the shadow of childhood freckles, but the fine lines of her chin mirrored Deborah's.

As soon as Grace and Dylan were in the back seat, she passed them each bags with their favorite pastries inside. She had a bag for Deborah, too, and a hot coffee in the cup holder.

Picking up the coffee, Deborah cradled it in her hands and inhaled the comforting brew. 'Thanks,' she finally said. 'I hate taking you from work.'

'Are you kidding?' Jill replied. 'I get to have my favorite people in the car. Are you guys okay back there?' she called into the rearview mirror.

Dylan was. He ate his glazed cinnamon stick as though he hadn't just had a full bowl of cereal. Grace hadn't eaten much cereal, and she only picked at her blueberry muffin. She uttered a high-pitched moan when they passed the spot where the accident had been.

'It was here?' Jill guessed. 'You'd never know.'

No, Deborah realized. *You never would*. Only a small piece of yellow tape remained, tied to a pine to show the police where to look this morning. If there had been skid marks on the road, the rain had washed them away.

She tried to catch Grace's eye, but the girl refused to look at her, and, in the end, Deborah didn't have the strength to persist. Sitting back, she sipped her coffee and let her sister chat. It was a ten-minute respite from responsibility.

All too soon, they reached the middle school, and Dylan was out of the van. 'I'm getting out here, too,' Grace said, tugging on her jacket and collecting her things. 'No offense, Aunt Jill, but, like, the last thing I want is to pull up at school in a bright yellow van with a totally identifying logo on the side. Everyone'll know it's me.'

'Is that so bad?' Jill asked.

'Yes.' Leaning forward in her seat, she said in a voice that was urgent and low, 'Please, Mom. I'd really rather not be at school today. I mean, I've missed maybe two days this year. Can't I stay with Aunt Jill?'

'And have the truant officer after *me*?' Jill countered before Deborah could speak.

Plaintive, Grace turned on her aunt. 'It's going to be so bad for me today. Everyone's gonna to know.'

'Know what? That your mother had an accident? Accidents happen, Grace. It's not a crime. If you're in school today, you can tell everyone how bad you feel.'

Grace stared at her for a minute, muttered, 'Yeah, right,' and climbed out of the van, but when Jill might have called her back, Deborah put a hand on her arm and Grace stalked off. Her spine was rigid for the first few steps but steadily softened until she was hunched over her books, looking impossibly small.

Worried, Deborah said, 'Should I have kept her home?'

'Absolutely not,' Jill replied. 'If nothing else, you need her busy.' She put the van in gear and pulled away from the curb. 'Are you okay?'

Deborah sighed, leaned against the headrest, and nodded. 'I'm fine.'

'Truly?'

'Truly.'

'Good. Because I have news. I'm pregnant.'

Deborah blinked. 'Cute. A bit of humor to lighten things up.'

'I'm serious.'

'No, you're not, because, A, there is no guy in your life right now, B, you're working your butt off at the bakery, and, C, it would be one thing too many for me this morning, and you wouldn't be that cruel.' She looked at her sister. Jill wasn't laughing. 'You're serious? But pregnant by whom?'

'Sperm donor #TXP334. He has blonde hair, is five-eight, and writes childrens' books for a living. A guy like that has to be compassionate, creative, and smart, doesn't he?'

Deborah struggled to take in the information.

'I need you to be happy,' Jill warned.

'I am. I think. I just ... didn't expect .. a *baby*'?

Jill nodded. 'Next November.'

The date made it real. Loving babies and loving Jill, Deborah didn't know what else to do but open her arms, lean over and give her sister a hug. 'You really want a child.'

'I always have. You know that.'

'What about work?'

'You did it.'

'I had Greg. You're alone.'

'I'm not alone. I have you. I have Grace and Dylan. I have ... Dad.'

'Dad. Oh, boy.' *Major* complication there. 'And you haven't told him.'

'Absolutely not.'

Which meant one more secret to keep. 'If you're due in November...'

'I'm eight weeks pregnant.'

'*Eight.*' Deborah was belatedly hurt. 'Why didn't you tell me sooner?'

'I didn't trust you'd let me do it.'

'*Let* you. Jill, you do your own thing. Always.'

'But I want your approval.'

Deborah studied her sister's face. 'You don't look different. Have you been sick?'

'A little here and there, mostly from excitement.'

'And you're sure you're pregnant?'

'I've missed two periods,' Jill said, 'and I've seen the baby on a sonogram, Deborah, seen that little heart beating. My doctor pointed it out on the screen.'

'What doctor?'

'Anne Burkhart. She's in Boston - and please,' Jill grew serious, 'don't tell me you're angry that I didn't get a name from you, because I wanted this totally to be my choice. We both know Dad'll be a problem. But hey, I've already disappointed him in so many things, that what's one more? But you - you had no part in this, which is what I'll tell Dad - but I'm not telling anyone until I pass the twelve-week mark.'

'You just told me,' Deborah argued, 'so I do have a part in it, or at least in keeping the secret. What do I say if he asks?'

'He won't. He won't have a *clue* until I hit him in the face with it. He doesn't think I'm capable of sustaining a relationship with a man, much less having a baby, and maybe he's right about the man part. I've tried, Deborah, you know I have, but I haven't met a single guy in the last few years who was remotely husband material. Dad would have stuck me with someone I detest just for the sake of having a baby the traditional way. But my God, look at you. You played by all the rules, and now you're a single parent, too.'

Deborah didn't need the reminder. It made her think of her failings, which brought the accident front and center again. She held her hair back from her face. 'Why are you telling me now? Why in this awful minute when I have so much else on my mind?'

'Because,' Jill said, suddenly pleading, 'like I said on the phone, you're more human after last night, so I'm thinking that right now you'll understand and still love me.'

Deborah stared at her sister. Jill had just added a complication to her already complicated life, but a new baby was a new baby. Reaching out, she took her sister's hand. 'Do I have a choice?'

Grace loitered just beyond the school fence, gnawing on her cuticle until the final bell rang. Then, clutching her jacket tightly around her, she ran down the path and, joining the other stragglers, dashed up the stairs, into the high school. Keeping her head down, she slipped into her homeroom seat and barely heard the announcements until the principal said that Mr. McKenna had been hit by a car, was in the hospital, and deserved a moment's prayer. Grace gave him that and then some, but stole out of the room the instant the bell rang again and, squatting in front of her locker, tried to make herself invisible. Friends stopped for a few seconds to chat. *Did you know that Jarred has mono? Why is Kenny Baron running for student body president? Are you going to Kim's party Saturday night?* Grace only rose when it was seconds before her first class. Megan and Stephanie came up and flanked her before she reached the door.

'We kept trying to *call* you,' Megan hissed.

'Where *were* you?' asked Stephanie.

'Kyle told me it was *your mom's* car that hit Mr. McKenna.'

'Were you there? What did you see, Grace? Was it *gross*?'

'I can't talk about it,' Grace said.

'I thought I'd *die* when I saw your mom sitting outside,' Stephanie muttered.

'How much does she know,' Megan asked Grace. 'Did she notice anything?'

'No,' Grace said.

'And you didn't tell her?' Stephanie asked.

'No.'

'And you *won't* tell her,' Megan ordered.

'No.'

'Well, that's good. Because if word gets back to my parents, I'll be grounded 'til fall.'

Grounded 'til fall? Grace could live with being grounded 'til fall. As punishments went, that would be easy.