



CHAPTER ONE

THE EXPLORER'S tires found the ice hidden beneath the fresh dusting of snow and lost traction, sending the SUV into a skid: nose right, ass left. The driver, accustomed to wintry driving conditions, corrected. The SUV came around, then kept on going: nose left, ass right. The driver corrected again but with no success. Physics had taken over – momentum and ice conspired, sending the vehicle hurtling off the mountain. Gravity pitched in, accelerating the descent of the doomed Explorer. For the driver, that would have been the end of the story – if not for a lone pine.

The impact shattered the tree's trunk, but it remained standing. Though bent and shattered, and certain to perish, its sacrifice

halted the Explorer's descent. A moment later the engine cut out. The driver, blood trickling down his forehead, moaned one last time. Then tranquility once again blanketed the snow-covered mountain pass.

Inside the SUV, dangling from the mirror, a doll – a plump miniature monk – rocked back and forth, as though praying.

Two hours later a team from Rocky Mountain Rescue, outfitted in orange and yellow parkas, their walkie-talkies crackling commands, rappelled down the slope. Wielding power saws and crowbars, they pried the driver's limp body from the wreckage. The rescuers scrambled up the rocky incline and hoisted the body into a waiting Bell Jet Ranger for the flight to intensive care where he would join the barely alive or, in the eyes of a pessimist, the nearly dead.

At the nurse's station in ICU a cop, cheeks red and hands chapped from the cold, hefted a plastic evidence bag onto the counter. It held the driver's personal belongings recovered from the crash scene.

"Looks like someone could use a hot cup of coffee," quipped a nurse.

"Or a warm bed," the cop mumbled, blowing on ice-numbed fingers, flashing a wink, flirting.

She shot back a wry smile. "No vacancies."

"How's the driver?" he asked. "You don't suppose he could answer a few questions?"

"Not unless you're a psychic medium," she joked. "Hot coffee, one floor down. Make yourself at home. If you're waiting for him to talk, you'll be here a while."

"And that's a damn shame," she mumbled, experiencing a pang of unexpected sympathy for the patient on life support in ICU 7. He was lights out. In a coma. He must have been handsome before the wreck left him bruised and swollen. When she had measured his height – or his length given he was flat on his back – she discovered he had stopped growing half an inch short of six feet. She wondered if the near miss bothered him. He weighed one-seventy, muscle tone was excellent; she knew his fit condition tipped the scales toward

possible recovery but, she reminded herself, tongue-in-cheek, there were certain things one was not supposed to do to a body – like driving it off a cliff and slamming it into a tree.

The cop circled behind the counter and stowed his clipboard with the accident report attached, then ambled to the elevator still blowing on his hands, trying to roust the lingering chill.

A tech-savvy candy striper, identified by her nametag as Teri, snooped through the evidence bag, discovered the driver's phone. She accessed the stored numbers, and started making calls. Two calls later she reached the victim's girlfriend, Chase Callahan. She was leaving immediately, she said, and asked the nurse to call his mother, speculating the number should be in the phone's directory under "family."

An hour later, Chase sat at the side of her comatose lover and held his hand in hers. For the first time in her life, she wrestled with a hopelessness that negated all options. In the past, when he was troubled, more than likely she was the one that gave birth to a problem-solving insight; now flashes of intuition no longer mattered – you couldn't share a bright idea with a man in a coma. There was something else she couldn't share: for the third time in three days the test strip turned blue – she was pregnant.

Randi Carte boarded a plane in Los Angeles and, hours later, arrived in the ICU. Before leaving the coast, she had tried to locate her ex-husband, to let him know their son had been in an accident. They hadn't talked for years. The truth was, even now, she didn't want to speak to him but she felt duty-bound to at least try. But he might as well have fallen off the planet: all leads were cold.

The head nurse, an older lady who rejected the institutional coolness her position warranted, welcomed Randi with a hug. Without a word, they were on the same page, bonded with the empathy reserved for mothers, linked by intuitive awareness of a mother's pain. As they entered ICU 7 Randi glanced at her name tag: Lani. When she looked up, she discovered a young woman who met her gaze and reached out for her hand. For an awkward moment their fin-

gers lingered, searching for clues. Lani realized they had not met. She quickly executed a minimal introduction and then busied herself with nursing chores, leaving them to sort out their emerging relationship.

Though her son had briefed her – he was seeing a new girl, she was fantastic – that had been two years ago. Now that they were face to face, Randi matched her mental picture against the in-the-flesh girlfriend – she had not pictured Chase accurately. She was taller than expected at five-six. She wore her hair in a simple cut, unpretentious and flattering; her eyes, brown flecked with green, were unwavering and confident. She was not an extrovert, but she did not cower. Randi recognized Chase had replaced her as *the* woman in her son's life but, at this instant, she was little more than a stranger.

Chase had not expected to find herself ill at ease. She presumed she had formed an accurate picture of Mom based upon his stories; now, she doubted herself. Randi's southern California tan, radiant in the middle of winter, provided plausibility to the fiction that her wrinkles were the result of too much sun rather than aging. Chase imagined Randi running on a SoCal beach, her kick strong and high, defiant in the face of advancing age. Most of all, she did not look like a grandmother. Chase worried about how Randi would take the news that she was being promoted from mother to grandmother. But this was no time for discovery. Randi, standing at the bedside of her dying son, had suffered enough startling news for one day. So Chase held her secret close, tucking it away like a present placed under the tree to be opened later.

It is likely Randi would not have heard Chase's surprising revelation anyway, as her attention had shifted to her injured son. Finding him entombed in a coma, his bruised and bandaged body sprouting tubes – arterial lines, catheters, endotracheal tubes, and IVs – shocked Randi into raw disbelief.

Lani, the nurse, fearing Randi's overwhelm would develop into a full-blown faint, diverted her attention with an improvised lecture on the varied purposes of the wave forms dancing on the ICU monitor: graphic displays of blood pressure, intracranial pressure, and brainwaves. Her attempt to use raw data to distract Randi from her fears might as well have been directed at the comatose patient.

Randi's active imagination unveiled a new fear: she would be called upon to pull the plug. Ironic, she mused, that she had ushered him into the world without forethought, his conception and subsequent entrance onto the world's stage the result of an accident. But now, when it came to his final bow and exit, she would be called upon to make a conscious decision. It wasn't fair. But there was always hope, wasn't there?

"Perhaps not." Dr. Sloane, the neurosurgeon in charge, was not given to inflating false hopes.

Randi had not noticed his entrance. "What? What did you say?" Had he read her mind? No, the doctor had seen her before, hundreds of times, mothers filled with unreasonable hope. He did not need a crystal ball to divine her thoughts.

"Your son suffered ... severe injuries. We have hemorrhagic contusions in the interior frontal and temporal lobes. We see these often in vehicle accidents."

He pinched his patient above the collarbone. No reaction.

Randi, however, flinched.

"Our main concern," Sloane continued, "is swelling. A patient can recover from the original injury, but secondary injury due to swelling can be fatal. The ICP ..."

Blank confusion washed over Randi's features.

He started over. "We inserted a tube. Into his brain. To monitor pressure. To drain fluid. ICP, that's intracranial pressure, is in the mid-twenties. Not ideal. We'll do everything we can. But I don't want to seem overly optimistic. It's one day at a time."

Randi nodded and inhaled deeply. This ordeal was taxing her strength, draining her composure. Before she could exhale, Sloane was gone, a master of the quick exit.

Lani shot Randi a frowning apology over her shoulder as followed Sloane.

Chase stepped out of the shadows and draped her arm around Randi's shoulder but, before she could say anything, the cop entered juggling a coffee in one hand and his clipboard in the other. In startling contrast to the medical staff, he was upbeat, almost cheerful. He had seen plenty of mayhem in his day.

"You have to respect the power of the human spirit," he in-

formed Chase and Randi. “You can’t tell by looking. Trust me. Stuff happens we don’t see. If you know what I mean.”

Neither Randi nor Chase had the slightest clue what he meant, but they nodded anyway, appreciating his attempt to comfort them. Soon they were answering his questions as he filled out his report.

There was something reassuring about the process, as though they were solving a mystery. The questions made it seem this was only a game and the minute they uncovered whodunit, the victim would spring to life. But, in the end, on this day, they failed to solve the mystery.

“Why? Why did this happen?” Chase asked. Her plaintive questions were directed more to God than to the officer fussing over his report.

The cop mumbled something about Mother Nature turning nasty and how they wouldn’t really know until the young man was able to talk. He promised to return, reassuring them recovery was imminent. Balancing his coffee on his clipboard, he exited, having thawed out sufficiently to once again patrol icy streets in anticipation of impending vehicular mishaps.

Chase wondered, silently this time, what had happened on the mountain – this wasn’t like him; he wasn’t accident-prone. The cliché dead men tell no tales invaded her thoughts. She tried to pull herself together with deep breaths.

Later that evening three young men, tanned and weathered, in hiking boots, jeans, and Patagonia pullovers, slipped quietly into the room. They nodded a silent greeting to Chase, then fixed their collective gaze on the bruised, immobile figure on the bed.

Chase recognized the men, but couldn’t remember names. They were rock climbers – adrenaline freaks who risked their lives crawling up granite walls, human spiders armed with pitons. Her boyfriend had joined their climbing team on dozens of ascents.

The climbers eschewed chitchat; stony silence framed their contemplation. The sight of a climbing buddy plugged into life-support packed the wallop of a heavyweight’s uppercut; the Mountain had

beaten one of their own, even if the battle had not taken place on a climb. With their fragile mortality making a center stage appearance they suffered a bout of stage fright and shuffled out having paid their respects.

Chase's sister, Eva, delivered hot coffee and deli sandwiches with her precocious ten-year-old daughter, Bren, in tow. Lani looked the other way as the contraband and the minor were smuggled past. It was not uncommon for her to bend or even break rules when doctors and administrators were absent from the floor.

Chase briefed her sister on the unsettling medical prognosis, and then introduced Randi. Bren seized the opportunity to slip free of her mother's iron grip. She leaned over the battered patient and with the honesty of a kid offered her candid appraisal:

"He's gone, isn't he?"

Stark reality put in an appearance; Bren's appraisal fixed their focus on one possible truth. After a flurry of kisses, good-byes, and well wishes, Eva, peppering her exit with profuse apologies, departed with the outspoken Bren in custody.

"But, Mom, I can see," Bren protested as she disappeared into the elevator shaking her head at the foibles of adults. Randi and Chase recovered their emotional balance; reality once again went soft and fuzzy.

At eleven o'clock, the graveyard staff signed on. The halls were quiet except for the constant beeping of electronic monitors, guard dogs stationed at the portal of death. Chase, emotionally exhausted, closed her eyes. Randi searched a closet, located a pillow, and propped it up behind Chase's head. The mothering bridged the gap: Chase snuggled her face into the soft linen and dozed off.

Randi wrapped her fingers around her son's cold hand and whispered, "Ray? Can you hear me? Ray?"