

## Chapter 1

The black car, traveling at high speed, turned from the highway into the smaller road leading up into the hills. The driver handled the car with the determination of a racing driver. The gearbox crunched as he forced it through a series of shifts and the motor roared as he put his foot to the floor and accelerated. The car skidded. The driver fought it. Again under control the car followed the road. The driver was angry. He couldn't keep his self-control.

"It's none of your business if I give Jill a present. She helps me with my work and is worth every penny of it."  
"If you appreciate your secretary so much, why don't you just give her a pay rise or a bonus? Diamond studs take it to another dimension. You don't give your secretary diamonds. Or is that a new trend in doing business?"

She paused giving him a chance to answer but he remained tightlipped and silent.

"And another thing. Do you really need your secretary when you go to a conference? It would have been better for her to stay in the office to keep an eye on the business. One telephone call a day is enough for a good secretary to keep the business running for the three days you are normally at a conference. Or is there business with her that you can't do over the phone?"

Peter Warwick kept his mouth shut. He had to be careful. He didn't need trouble at the moment, certainly not a divorce. He was in line for promotion and the boss liked stable men. Of course he had given Jill the studs. He didn't have any choice. He wanted to keep her as his secretary and even more; he wanted to keep her as his mistress. She had in fact forced him into it. He was wondering how his wife, Lauren, had found out about it.

"How dare you accuse me. The only person you have to blame is yourself. You had an affair with Brian, or did you think that I hadn't noticed. His wife in the hospital and the two of you close in the salon...."

"You know better than that," Lauren snapped.

"I knew Brian had his eye on you but I didn't think you would give him the chance. Now I ask myself why it was necessary that you went to the hospital so often. Or did you really go there?"

"Are you insinuating I was meeting Brian somewhere?"

"Did I say that? I only ask myself why you are never at home."

"Do you really expect me to be home the whole day waiting for your phone calls, when you are somewhere overseas in a hotel room with your secretary? There are other things in life."

"Brian for example."

"You bastard, you don't even want to listen. You really have it in your mind that there is something between Brian and me. Well, let me tell you that that is the meanest thing I have ever heard from you. And I'll tell you something else, Mister Warwick. I'm fed up with it. I really think things between us.....Peter, look out.....!!!!!"

The driver fought the wheel as the black car swerved over the road, smashed into a tree and bounced back across the road. The wheels dug into the soft edge and the car rolled down the shallow bank. It came to rest in the bushes at the bottom, the motor still running. Then the motor spluttered, muttered and went dead. One of the wheels turned slowly, squeaking. Then it was silent.

On the road above a small van stopped. The driver had witnessed the sudden wild movements of the car traveling at some distance in front of him. He had seen the sudden flash of break lights and the crazy gyrations of headlights and then the lights had disappeared. He ran to the place where the lights had disappeared. The black car was on its side at the bottom of the bank. He didn't hesitate. He hurried back to his van to pick up his mobile. As an afterthought he grabbed his flashlight as well. He sprinted back to where the car had left the road pushing the numbers for the emergency number while he ran. Making his way down the slope, he gave the operator instructions.

"Are there injured?"

"Hey sis, give me time to get down there, just hang on."

He slipped and fell but was straight away on his feet again. Reaching the car, he sniffed the air. There was no smell of gas or smoke. The car had wedged itself between two trees and appeared stable. The windscreen had been smashed by a big branch, which hung, ripped in half, out of the car. Carefully he leaned over the car and looked through the windows. He saw two motionless bodies hanging by their safety belts.

"Two people in the car as far as I can see. They don't move, neither of them."

"Is there gas leaking?"

"I don't smell anything but the car has been bashed around and there's considerably damage."

"Thank you sir. The emergency services are already on their way. Please, leave everything as it is."

The man crawled back up to the road to wait. He could hear the sirens of the approaching rescue team in the

distance.

When the police arrived, he hurriedly showed the officers where the car was. While one officer stayed with him waiting to direct the ambulance, the other officer went down the bank. After the ambulance arrived, the officer took a statement from the van driver.

“Be careful with that mechanical claw of yours,” the paramedic yelled, “the metal is bending inwards and that’s right where her leg is trapped.”

The fireman removed the claw, replaced it further along the door jam and reactivated the hydraulics.

“How’s that?” he asked.

“Wait a moment,” the paramedic answered. He pushed his arm through the windscreen into the car and felt around the place where the woman’s leg was trapped.

“OK. Slowly now.”

Under the claw’s pressure, the metal began to groan. With an ear splitting noise the door swung loose, pushing the paramedic backwards. He staggered then regained control.

“We’ll have a better chance if we saw that thing from its hinges. Then we’ll have more space to move.”

Without waiting for an answer the fireman put his grinder to work on one of the hinges, careful not to send too many sparks into the car. It only took a few minutes to sever.

“Keep it steady while I do the other hinge,” he directed.

The paramedic held the door while he again used the grinder.

“OK, it’s free. Let’s get her out now. I don’t like to be near overturned cars. They’re just like bombs,” the paramedic stated.

“This one’s safe, mate. Do you smell anything?” the fireman asked.

The paramedic shook his head.

“Right, then let’s do it carefully.”

“Wait till I’ve secured that leg, I can’t see what damage there is. If you’re sure this car’s not going to blow, let’s not take any risks with her.”

“It will be tricky to get her out of there without doing more damage. How’s the other?”

“Don’t bother, too late, he’s dead. The big branch that came through the windscreen must have killed him. It looks like it got him straight in the face. He didn’t have a chance.”

Lauren heard the murmur of voices and the soft whirling of a fan.

She lay on a bed.

‘But that was not possible. She’d been in the car with Peter....? They’d taken their son Pip to the airport. He’d gone back to university after the holidays. What was she doing here in bed?’

She tried to get her thoughts together but she couldn’t concentrate. Things raced through her mind and she fell back into the blackness of unconsciousness.

A tall blond lady of around the same age as Lauren stood at the bottom of Lauren’s bed, and looked with concern at the motionless patient.

“Mrs. Warwick did come around for a few moments,” the nurse said when she read the prints. “I don’t think it will be long before she regains consciousness.”

The nurse lifted Lauren’s head and rearranged the pillow to make it as comfortable as possible.

“If there is any change in her condition, even if it is only small, I want to be informed immediately, nurse, please. You can contact me day and night on this number.”

The nurse took the card and read the name.

“I will inform the station, Mrs. Lauerdale, are you family?”

“No, I’m a very close friend. I’m the only one she has around here. Her son, Pip, has gone back to the university. It’s exam time.”

“We’d better go to the station together, Mrs. Lauerdale. They usually only deal with relatives. They’re generally not so happy if they have to inform friends and acquaintances.”

“What can I do for you?” the station assistant asked with a friendly smile.

“Mrs. Lauerdale would like to be informed immediately if there are any changes in Mrs. Warwick’s situation.”

“You are family?”

“No, but....”

“Sorry but we only inform the direct family, Mrs. Lauerdale.”

Lauren’s blonde friend straightened her back, and looked down at the nurse.

With an air of authority and coldness in her voice, she said, “Mrs. Warwick’s husband was killed in the accident, her only son is back at university to do major exams and she doesn’t have any other family. I am the only one she has around here. I would appreciate it if you would give me the opportunity to talk quietly with Mrs. Warwick when she comes to. I want to be the one to tell her what happened. I want to speak to her before the police come. Can I have your co-operation?”

“Yes Mrs. Lauerdale. We’ll contact you immediately the moment there is any change.”

“Thank you very much. And it is Miss.”

Lauren opened her eyes. In the dim light of the room she could see instruments around her. She understood she was in a hospital of some kind.

"Mrs. Warwick?" a friendly voice said and a nurse entered the room.

"Where am I?" Lauren asked.

"The City Central Hospital."

"What happened? Why am I here?"

"You were involved in an accident. We'll call Mrs., I mean Miss Lauerdale immediately. I'm sure she will be here soon."

Lauren closed her eyes. She was tired and she had a headache. Once more she slipped into unconsciousness.

Lauren became aware that somebody was in the room. There was a man talking to a woman.

She could hear the woman's voice as if from some place far away say: "Yes, doctor, every five minutes."

Then a man's low voice replied but she could not understand.

"Yes, doctor, we have informed the next of kin."

The voices receded and the black descended, the terrifying blackness.

"Lauren."

Lauren woke with a shock. There was something happening, something threatening.

"Lauren."

She looked up and saw a figure at the foot of her bed.

"It's me, Vicky."

The person came towards her and she recognized Vicky, Vicky Lauerdale, her friend since High School.

Vicky sat on the chair next to the bed and took Lauren's hand in hers.

"Vicky, what happened, why am I in hospital?" Lauren asked in a whisper.

"You had an accident, Lauren, a car accident. And you have broken your leg."

Lauren's attention went to her leg. She couldn't move it and a cage over the bottom of her bed kept the blankets from touching it.

Like a tidal wave the memories flooded back. They took Pip to the airport, Peter and her in the car, the quarrel and then...nothing, just a strange emptiness like a broken movie.

"Peter?"

"I'm sorry, Lauren, but Peter....., he didn't make it."

It took a while before the meaning of her words reached Lauren.

"Peter... gone..., oh my God."

"I have to tell you something else..."

"Pip?"

"No, Pip's OK. He's back at university."

"But he should be here for the funeral," Lauren cried.

"That's the other thing I have to tell you." Vicky paused. "Lauren, the accident was a week ago, you've been unconscious for all that time. You looked so bad we thought we'd lose you too, but your scans have shown that everything is all right. The doctor has told us that it is just a matter of time, a matter of healing."

"Peter is gone..." Lauren closed her eyes. She remembered the quarrel. They had parted with a quarrel.

Vicky stroked Lauren's hair; she knew that Lauren would need her more than ever. They had not been as close lately, she and Lauren, but Vicky knew that now she was needed. She would be there for Lauren.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Warwick, I am Doctor Brand. How are you feeling?"

The good-looking young man in a white coat stood next to Lauren's bed. He studied the clipboard he held.

"I hope we can talk. Your situation is improving. You must have suffered a severe knock on the right side of your head because you have a large bruise just behind your ear. I was very worried at first, I must admit, but the scans show that it's clear. They don't show any permanent damage. It will take a while and you'll have some headaches but they will cease in time. However, you were unconscious for a week. You also have some wounds on your arm but they are healing very well. They most likely won't leave any scars. Your leg, however, is another story. It was a mess. Both the fibula and tibia of the right leg were broken, the fibula in two places. We had to do an extensive operation and unfortunately we couldn't avoid scars. There will be some but they won't be obvious."

The doctor saw the sorrow in her face.

"I'm sorry about your husband. He must have died instantly. There was nothing we could have done for him. I'm very sorry..." He looked down at his clipboard so he didn't have to look at the pain in her face.

"We want to keep you here for a while. I don't think there is any likelihood of brain damage but I would like to keep you in observation. I just want to be sure. I also need to keep an eye on how your leg heals. I don't think that we will have problems there either. Your body is strong and you are in good shape."

"Nurse, I'd like you to keep the pain killers down to a minimum. I want to do a new scan tomorrow morning. If that is favorable then I'll get you to contact the physiotherapist to assist Mrs. Warwick to do short walks. Do you have any questions, Mrs. Warwick?"

"Shall I be able to walk normally again, doctor?"

"You should be as good as gold when the cast comes off, Mrs. Warwick, as good as gold."

The phone rang.

"It's your phone, Mrs. Warwick," the nurse who was pottering around the room said.

Lauren picked up the phone: "Lauren Warwick," she said.

"Mum."

"Pip." It did Lauren good to hear her son Peter's voice. "How are you?"

"I'm OK, Mum, but more importantly, how you are?"

"I feel terrible. I'm just back from nowhere!"

"I know," Peter said, "Aunt Vicky called me an hour ago. She left a message that you had regained consciousness."

Lauren wanted to know how her son had coped with the death of his father but how could she ask?

"I'm trying to come to terms with what happen to your dad." After a long silence she said softly, "How do you feel?"

"He was my dad, Mum, and....." His voice became slurred and he fell silent.

Lauren knew Peter never had much time for Pip. He paid him off with money. He'd never gone camping or fishing with Pip and he'd never played ball or anything else with him. But she knew that Pip still loved his father.

".... and I miss him, even though we weren't that close." There was a moment's silence. "I'm OK, Mum. Sorry that I had to go back to campus but there are a few important exams coming up. I really didn't want to miss them and the doctor told me that you would be OK. He had no idea when you would come around. I'll come home as soon as my exams are over, even if I have to bring some of my work with me. With that broken leg you can't go very far, so we can keep each other company at Aunt Vicky's. I'm not such a good nurse but you know you're in really good hands with Aunt Vicky."

Lauren had to smile. She thought about the occasions that she had been sick and Pip couldn't even bring her a glass of water or a cup of tea without spilling half of it between the kitchen and her bedroom.

"I will call you again tomorrow, Mum, love you"

"I love you too, Pip. And good luck with your exams."

Vicky was her normal self again, vivacious and bubbly. She came in with the biggest bunch of flowers Lauren had ever seen.

She searched Lauren's face. "How is our patient to-day?" she asked.

"I had a scan this morning. Now they want me to get out of bed but it's hard Vicky. They're cruel. They tell me that it's easy and I can do it."

"It's better for the circulation,' Vicky insisted. "They'll let you hobble for a few weeks before they let you put your full weight on the leg and before you know it, you'll be running the hundred meter hurdles."

"I hope so but I feel so helpless. I know I'll have to try."

Lauren looked at her friend. Vicky had had her problems too, but she'd never let it get the better of her. She never allowed them to defeat her. Lauren knew how Paul, Vicky's husband, had tried to get her down after their divorce.

"Where are you going after you leave hospital?" Vicky asked.

"Oh, I haven't even thought about it. I can't go home like this so I'll probably book myself into a rehabilitation facility."

"Nope," Vicky said. "You're coming home with me. I've space enough and it will give my help something to do.

She's doing nothing for her money at the moment because my apartment is always clean. I'll tell her that I need her every day and that she has to look after you. You can pay the difference if it'll make you feel better. I don't want you in such a clinical environment."

"Yes, but...."

"There are no buts, not with me. You know me. If I want something it happens.... And what are friends for, anyway. You wouldn't let me go into a rehabilitation facility, would you?"

"All right, I'll think about it."

"Good. Now you've thought about it, I'll pick you up when you're allowed to go home."

Lauren had to smile. She had known that would happen. She knew Vicky too well.

"No, Mrs. Warwick, you don't need my help. You can go to the toilet by yourself," the nurse said sternly. "If you want to walk as well as you did before, then you have to do something about it. You are too young to give up."

Lauren looked at the nurse, who was half her age. The toilet was so far away. Lauren managed to ease herself out of the bed onto her feet and with the help of her walking frame, slowly hopped to the toilet. The nurse was right. She had to do it herself, self pity would get her nowhere.

Lauren lay in bed and tried to think about what had been going on. She wanted to think about her husband, Peter, but every time she did, her mind became jumbled and memories raced in vivid progression. She was not able to concentrate. She had had good times with him and all had been OK till Jill became his secretary. Jill Fashbinder, that cocky, little, blond tart. What, for God's sake, was that woman thinking she was doing? Why did women like her act that way? Had she wanted to break up the marriage or only dally with Peter?

Lauren's frustration died away and she drifted into sleep.

Lauren wanted to know about the funeral.

"How was the funeral Vicky?" she asked one afternoon when Vicky was visiting.

"Good, Pip organized it. I gave him a hand. There were a lot of people but not many flowers. There was a big bouquet from you and Pip. His boss spoke a few words. It seems that he was well regarded in the office."

"Was Jill, his secretary, there?"

"I didn't see her."

"Of course not. How was Pip?"

"Oh, he was very good. You know Lauren; he couldn't stand to see you laying here. That's why I talked him into leaving for Uni straight after the funeral. I hope you don't blame me for it."

"No, it was better that way."

"Hi, Mum, how are you going?" Pip's voice came through the phone.

"Better and better. I still walk with the walking frame but tomorrow I have to try crutches. They will give me more mobility."

"Where will you go after you leave hospital?"

"I am expected at Aunt Vicky's place and I think that I will accept but that won't be for a while. Yesterday I felt really dizzy and nearly fell. The doctor now wants a new scan and he wants me to stay at least another week. It's not my favorite place. But tell me, how are your exams going?"

"Not bad under the circumstances. I got a distinction in design, one of the major subjects. Even though this has happened I will still do well this year."

"I'm glad to hear that. You are a good boy. I hope you don't mind me saying that."

"You can say anything you like, Mum. I know what you mean."

"What are you going to do next, Lauren?", Vicky asked.

"I haven't given it much thought, I have problems enough for the present. But much hangs on how fast I can get back to walking normally. At least move around," Lauren answered.

"I need somebody who I can trust to do a few casual jobs for me. I would like it to be you. Will you do that for me?"

"What kind of jobs?"

"Oh, I have to finalize a few contracts and then I need somebody who will keeps an eye on what's going on. You would be doing me a big favor."

"If you think I can do it..."

"Of course you can do it and I'll pay you well. There are a few other things you could do in the company, so you don't have to be bored."

Vicky had wanted her as offsider for a long time. She knew how intelligent Lauren was and felt it was a shame that she didn't do anything with her talents and her education. It was not through charity that she offered a job to Lauren, she knew she could trust her and that was worth something.

Vicky looked at Lauren. She was staring at the wall.

"What's the matter, Lauren?"

"Vicky....., Peter and I had a big quarrel in the car, just before the accident."

"Oh, I see....." Vicky said, "I assume that it was about Jill?"

"How do you know...?"

"It was more or less a public secret, my dear. We all thought that you knew so we kept our nose out of it. May I give you some advice? Don't mention the quarrel to anyone, not the police and certainly not to the insurance investigators when they come to interview or 'interrogate' you. Nobody was there and nobody knows. It's much better if we keep that under our hat. I hope I'm the only one you've told this."

"Yes, but I feel terrible about it. To finish like that and not able to make it up. I loved Peter and I know he loved me. My only question now is: why?"