

Chapter One

ELLIE

It's pitch dark, pouring rain, and I have no idea where I'm going, which is also the perfect analogy for my life. As I drive, squinting through the fogged-up windshield, a bug zigzags down the glass, caught in a rivulet where the broken wiper can't reach. It keeps getting a grip, legs scrabbling to hold itself steady, to catch its breath for one merciful second before the pounding rain sends it tumbling down until it finds the next spot where it's *so* sure it is safe . . . and it's not.

The rain finally washes the poor bug into the path of the wiper, and it's crushed into a dark smear on the glass.

"All the analogies, all the time," I mutter.

I've spent my adult life looking for those safe footholds, for places where I can hole up and breathe and regain my balance. And, in my desperate bid for stability, I've always stayed just a little too long. Jobs where I was mistreated and cheated. Relationships where I was mistreated and cheated *on*. Like that bug, I cling until I'm washed away by a trickle of remaining dignity that finally says "enough."

Now, once again, I'm retreating to the only place I know is safe.

Home.

According to the GPS, I'll be there in . . .

I frown at the screen. I've driven off the map. When did that happen? I must have lost cell signal in the storm. I check the car clock.

11:56

I blink. That's not right. I left at seven, heading out right after my last day at work. I

grabbed dinner at a drive-thru and was on track to be at my parents' place before midnight. I tap the clock, as if that will help. Then I realize—duh—I have both a watch and a phone.

I squint at the phone. 11:57. My watch says the same.

When did I last check the time? The map diverted me for a slowdown at ten, and I'd been thinking that I might be slightly later than expected and I should call my mom, because at 12:01 she'll start to panic, as if the roads turn to lava at midnight.

It can't be *this* late, though. Sure, I'm driving at . . . I check the speedometer. Twenty-five miles an hour? No wonder the other cars that took the same detour are long gone. I'm being careful on the unfamiliar road. I will never endanger another person's life with my recklessness.

Never again, you mean.

I take a deep breath, as my old therapist's voice overrides my inner one, telling me for the hundredth time that what happened wasn't my fault. I wasn't being "reckless." I was being a ten-year-old child.

The point is that I'm driving far below the speed limit, because of the rain and my bad wiper, but there is still no way it's taken me two hours to travel about fifteen miles.

Thunder crashes, making me jump again, my hands death-gripping the steering wheel.

When my breathing slows, I recheck the time. I'm seeing it wrong, I must be. I'm tired, and my vision is blurring and—

11:59.

That isn't possible.

I turn back to the GPS. The last time I saw the map, Lake Michigan had been somewhere to my left, which is correct. I've been living in Chicago, and my parents are up near Traverse City. The best route hugs the lake on 196. I'd been near the spot where it veers inland, so it

makes sense the detour took me onto a smaller lakeside route. I just can't see the actual lake . . . or anything else.

As if in response, lightning flashes, and I get a two-second view of my surroundings. Trees. That's all I see. Looming hardwoods on either side.

The windshield fogs, and I spin the dial on the fan, as if that will help. Then I rub away condensation and peer into the darkness, seeing nothing but road and precious little of that, asphalt swallowed by the rain and night.

I take a deep breath and focus on home. I'll get there, no matter how long it takes, and when I arrive Dad will come to carry my bags, despite the storm while Mom will stand on the porch, waiting to pull me into a crushing hug.

They're always delighted to see me, no matter how little I've done with the wonderful life they gave me.

Oh, but you're still so young, Ellie. You just need time. The right job will come along. The right man will come along. And you'll look back and laugh at yourself for being in such a hurry.

They've been saying that since I was eighteen. I'm now thirty-five. I have three partial degrees, one ex-fiancé, and the car my parents gave me for graduating high school. But Dad will fix the old car and Mom will mend my frayed seams. They'll patch me up as best they can and give me the courage I need to venture into the world again.

I just need to get—

A woman appears in my headlights. I yelp and yank the wheel as I jam on the brakes. My foot goes to the floor, and nothing happens. I jerk the steering wheel, but the car keeps barreling toward the woman.

I see her face—a pale oval in the night—and then there’s a horrible, gut-wrenching crash.

I slam back against the headrest. Pain explodes behind my eyes, as if I’ve been punched in the face. White fills my vision. Endless white. Then it sinks away, and I realize the airbag deployed. I bat it down and—

Storm. Collision. Woman.

Struggling to free myself from the deflated bag, I wrench the door handle, and the door flies open with an ugly screech that tells me it won’t be closing properly again, and I don’t care because I hit someone. I was going so slowly, being so careful, and I *did* try to swerve and brake, but somehow I still hit her.

I stumble toward the front of the car as one leg screams and buckles. Hot blood pours from my nose, and icy rain drenches me. I can’t see. The lights from my car are out, and everything’s dark, and I’m staggering forward—

My knee strikes something hard as sharp pain slashes down my arm and my hands fly up to ward off attack from . . .

A tree?

There’s a tree across the road. That’s what I’ve stumbled onto, my knee cracking against the trunk, a broken branch slashing my arm.

A massive tree stretches nearly across the road.

Did I miss the woman and knock down a tree? Not when the trunk is nearly as wide as my car.

I hit a *fallen* tree.

That’s what my car struck.

But . . . wouldn’t I have *seen* it?

Blood drips onto my parted lips, and I pinch my nose as I try to focus.

I squint and sluice rain from my face, but I can't see a damn thing.

"Hello?" I call. Then again, louder.

When no one answers, my heart picks up speed. If I didn't hit her, she'd answer.

If I didn't hit her, she'd have come to check on me after the crash.

"Hello!" I bellow, as loud as I can.

Only the pound of rain answers.

I know I'd seen a person. A middle-aged woman with gray-streaked hair, standing there, looking straight at me.

A woman who'd seen an oncoming car and hadn't moved.

She must have been in shock.

Only she hadn't looked shocked. I remember her face the moment before impact. She'd looked tired. Resigned. As if she'd seen the car coming and known she couldn't get out of the way and just—

Just what? Stood there?

What matters is that I *know* I saw a woman, and I *know* I swerved and braked, and then I hit a fallen tree.

Did I also hit the woman? Is she under the car? Or—worse—crushed between it and the tree?

I need light. Hands out, I feel my way back to the car. The door hangs open. I stick my head inside and smack the airbag away as I search for my phone. It's not where I left it, and I'm frantically patting the seat, the floor, the—

There! On the floor. I grab my phone. Please be working. Please be . . .

The screen lights up at my touch, and I exhale. As I back out of the car, I try to flick on the cell phone flashlight, but my fingers are too wet to work the touch screen. I rub one hand on my jeans.

My soaking-wet jeans.

I growl in frustration. A woman could be lying on the road, dying, and I can't do anything right. It's like one of those nightmares, where I'm desperately trying to phone my parents, and my fingers keep hitting the wrong numbers.

Reaching in, wipe my hand on the dry cloth seat, and turn on the flashlight. I check under the vehicle first, but there's nothing there. Then, with the light outstretched before me, I run to the front of the car, only to see nothing except that massive tree.

I wave the phone around the hood, searching for a sign of anyone between the bumper and tree, but the downpour means even the flashlight doesn't illuminate more than a few inches.

And then suddenly I can see, as everything lights up in another flash of . . .

I lift my face to the sky. That's not lightning. There was no thunder—I'd have jumped, and the road is still lit, as if by something behind me.

I turn just as the light swallows me. And then—

Nothing.

Chapter Two

HENRY

Henry glances at the phone in the dashboard holder. His younger daughter, Ivy, gave him the holder last time she'd been up from college because she "worried about him" driving around without a Bluetooth-enabled truck. Which made him feel like an old man, his kid pointing out the newfangled gadgets of the modern era.

He's forty-one, and he knows perfectly well that he could buy a holder, but he doesn't use his phone when he drives. He's a paramedic—he's seen what happens when you take your eyes off the road. But he has to admit the holder is useful for a trip like this, when the GPS kindly warned him of a slowdown and detoured him to . . .

He peers out the rain-streaked window.

Fuck if he knows where he is. And apparently, the GPS doesn't either. He lost service a while back. Still, tomorrow he'll text Ivy and tell her the phone holder came in handy, because that'll make her happy, which will make him happy.

When he glances at the phone, it confirms no signal. An alert also reminds him that tomorrow is his older daughter Raine's birthday. A text from his ex suggests they should celebrate Raine's birthday when she comes home from med school in two weeks.

He and Jenn might have split up shortly after Ivy was born, but they are still friends. They've *been* friends since they were kids. It was just one of those things where you grow up together, fool around in high school and . . .

Well, when teens fool around, sometimes there's a baby, and so they got married, had a second one, and then realized they were just really good friends living together and raising kids. Maybe that should be enough, but Jenn wanted more. She'd found it, with a good man, and

Henry . . .

Henry says he's still looking, but honestly, he's not looking all that hard. He has two amazing daughters, a great ex-wife, and a job he loves. And if his life had seemed to stall these last few years—not getting the promotions he'd hoped for, the girls moving away to college, rocky times in the romance department—it was just a slow stretch, and all things considered, his “slow stretch” was better than most people ever had it.

He leans forward to peer out the windshield, and only succeeds in fogging it up more. It's so damned *dark*. Add in the rain and the lack of GPS signal, and he really should pull over. He will, as soon as he sees a gas station. Grab a coffee, talk to whoever's working, and figure out where the hell he is.

His gaze flits automatically to the dashboard clock, and he curses under his breath as he realizes it's almost midnight. There's a rule for pulling into remote service stations at night. Or there is, when you look like him, six foot three, Iroquois, and built like the construction worker he'd once been.

That rule says that pit stops are best done before eleven. Otherwise? Well, the last time he was up this way and stopped to get gas around midnight, the lone woman behind the counter watched him like she had one hand on her cell phone and the other on her shotgun. She also told him—completely unbidden—that they didn't serve alcohol past ten.

He shakes his head at the memory. He knows how to stay cool, hands out of his pockets, hood down, smiling, friendly as can be. Yeah, if he sees a place, he'll still go in and just play it by ear.

Really, though, when his shift ran late, he should have just waited until morning and driven up in the daylight. It isn't as if the guys will be out fishing tonight. Just sitting around,

playing cards and shooting the shit, which—to be honest—is his favorite part of the getaways and explains why he hadn't postponed heading up.

He just needs to drive slow, stop somewhere if he can, and if not, maybe pull over until the rain passes. He has a cooler in the back. Grab a Coke and enjoy the storm. He can't be more than fifty miles away, and the guys will be playing cards for hours yet.

If Henry doesn't see any lights in the next five miles, he'll pull over. Hell, he could probably stop right here, in the middle of the road. When's the last time he saw another vehicle? There'd been two others taking the detour, but they'd turned off long ago.

That gives him pause. If everyone else went another way, does that mean he missed a turn? He doesn't think so. He's a very careful driver. Paramedic, again. You see enough accidents and you drive like an old man. You also make sure your girls have modern cars with all the safety features, even if it means your own vehicle does not.

Maybe only the locals had taken that off-ramp, because they knew where they were going, and here he is driving down a road that goes, for all he knows, miles from where he needs to be.

Should he turn around? Yes, it means a long drive back, but if he's off course, he's getting farther away with each passing mile. He—

A car appears in his headlights, a woman standing beside it, and it's right there, as if appearing from nowhere. Henry shouts, foot slamming onto the brake, and then—

The truck rams into the back end of the little car. But Henry barely sees that. All he sees is the woman, the force of the impact sending her flying. Then his pickup stops and everything goes dim, blood rushing to his head as it slams forward and then back into the headrest when the airbag deploys.

Henry sits there, stunned, his shocked brain turning like an engine on a cold day. He hit something. The airbag is deflating around him. Did he skid off the road—?

It rockets back. A face turned toward him. A woman, maybe the same age as Raine. Her car stopped, the young woman standing beside it—

Shit! Shit, shit, shit. He swats at the airbag and fumbles for the door, and when it sticks, he throws his weight into it and it flies open, Henry half falling out behind it. He hits the ground running, a corner of his brain processing the accident damage, his truck slammed into the back end of her little car, crumpling it, her driver's door open as if she'd been climbing in or climbing out or—

Just get to her.

But there's no sign of the young woman. Not in the car. Not beside it.

"Hello!" he shouts, the boom of his voice barely registering through the pounding rain. He searches, looking left and right, and why the hell didn't he grab his phone for the flashlight?

He should go back for it, but his heart thuds like it's going to burst, and all he can see is that pale face turned toward him, and the illogical certainty that if he takes two seconds to get his phone, it'll be too late.

Where had she been standing? He's not even sure. All he saw was her face. The shock. The terror.

He runs toward the front of the—

Oh, shit. No, no, no. He sees why she'd stopped. A massive tree blocks the road, and she'd gotten out for a look and please, please, please, do not let her have been in front of her car when he hit it.

How *had* he hit her car? How had he not *seen* it? Or that tree? He hadn't glanced away

from the road for a single second.

Pelting rain. Pitch-black road. His headlights not cutting through the dark like they should. Her lights off.

Never leave your vehicle without the hazards on, even if you're just pulled over. He told the girls all that. He'd seen what happened when you pulled off to the side and some idiot is looking down at his phone and—

And it isn't the woman's fault. She hit a fallen tree, and that's what she'd been thinking about.

As his brain races, he's racing too—circling the car and looking between it and the tree, bracing for what he might see, which is thankfully nothing. He checks under it and then circles again, wider.

She *was* here. He's sure of it. So where is she—

Something to his left. A dark shape merging with the tree trunk. A woman's body. He runs, skidding on the wet asphalt, scrambling over to her.

She's been thrown against the fallen tree, and she's slumped in front of it, one leg folded beneath her. She's older than he thought, maybe mid-thirties, white, with light brown hair in a braid.

His fingers press the pulse point in her throat, and when he touches cold skin, his heart jams into his throat before he starts cursing at himself. He hit her five minutes ago. She's not dead and cold already—she's just cold from the rain. And heat is already rising to his chilled fingertips, along with a pulse beat.

He lowers himself to one knee, about to look for other injuries before waking her, and her eyes fly open.

Chapter Three

ELLIE

Someone is cursing, the words piercing the pound of rain. I know they're curses, but again, it's like those dreams, where nothing is quite right, and I can't make out what he's saying. I only know that the words are a stream of profanity.

My eyelids flutter open. I see a broad brown face with dark eyes and shaggy dark hair streaked with silver. A man. Maybe forty. And huge, or maybe he just looks huge, looming over me.

Seeing my eyes open, he visibly exhales. "You're okay. Don't move. I'm going to check you out first. I'm a paramedic."

I blink, looking for the ambulance, for the flashing lights, but all I see is darkness.

I struggle to rise, and his eyes widen.

"Don't move. There's something— *Shit*."

He takes a deep breath and shuts his eyes for a second. When they reopen, they're focused.

"You're okay," he says again, slower. "But there's a stick through—" He clears his throat, saying "You're okay" again in a way that suggests he's trying to convince himself as much as me.

"A stick through what?" I say, my voice eerily calm.

"It's just . . . Not through, just kind of . . ."

"Am I impaled on something?"

"No, no, no. Just, well . . . Yes?"

I must be in shock, because I have this weird urge to laugh. Or maybe just to reassure

him, because he looks so freaked out while he tries very hard not to freak me out.

“Where is the stick?” I say.

“Your shoulder. It’s just . . . through— No, not *through*. It’s . . . You’re just stuck.”

Another squeeze shut of his eyes. Refocusing, and when he comes back his face is firm, resolute.

“It’s safe for me to pull you off it. But it’ll hurt. More than it already does.”

“I can’t feel it.”

“Well, that’ll change.”

Hands grip my upper arms. “I’m going to count down from three, okay? Three, two—”

He pulls on the count of two, and pain rips through my shoulder. Before I can protest, he hoists me up over his arms and strides to the side of the road, where he sets me down and lowers to one knee beside me.

“I have a first-aid kit,” he says. “I’m going to leave you here and go get it.”

“I can—” I start to rise, but he gently stops me.

“Please don’t move. Just let me check you out first.”

I squint. “Where’s the ambulance?”

He pauses, and then winces. “I’m not here on a call. I’m the asshole who hit you.”

“Oh.” I guess that makes sense—he’s dressed in jeans and a gray hoodie. Then I repeat his words to myself. *The asshole who hit you.*

“No, it was my fault,” I say. “I didn’t put on my hazards when I got out. My dad would be mortified—he taught me better than that.”

The briefest, strained smile. “Let’s just blame the storm then. And that tree.”

I motion to my impaled shoulder. “Oh, I’m definitely blaming that tree.”

The smile touches his eyes, and he makes a move as if to squeeze my hand and then stops

himself and rises. “Hold on. I’ll be right back.”

I lie on the roadside, rain pelting my face, and I stare up into a cloudy night, the barest hint of light edging those clouds. The light isn’t the white-yellow of the moon, though. It’s a swirl of red and orange, like fire in the sky.

The man’s footsteps set the ground quaking as he runs back to me, kit in hand.

“Do you see that?” I say when he asks if I’m okay. I point up. “Fire in the sky.”

“Fire . . . ?” He curses, and his hand touches my forehead as he peers into my eyes. “Can you tell me your name?”

“Ellie.”

“Okay, Ellie, my name’s Henry. I think you’re in shock. Just focus on me, okay? I really am sorry. I didn’t see your car. It was dark, and your taillights were out.” He rubs a hand over his broad face. “That sounds like an accusation. Sorry. I should have seen your car anyway. It was just—just there all of a sudden.”

“We’re blaming the tree, right?”

That strained smile. “Right. Okay, Ellie, I want to look at that shoulder, but first tell me where it hurts.”

“My shoulder. That’s all . . . Oh, wait. My nose. It might be broken from the airbag. Also I think I got scraped and cut by branches. Nothing really hurts too much, though. That’s shock, huh?”

“It is. Just stay with me. Don’t close your eyes.” He looks up. “Which is hard to do when rain is pouring on your face.”

“That seems fine, too. Shock?”

“Yep.” He shifts so he’s leaning over me, blocking the rain as best he can. “Do you want

to see my ID?”

“Your what?”

“Proof that I’m a paramedic, and not some stranger about to start poking and prodding you.”

“Oh.” I shake my head. “It’s fine. You obviously know what you’re doing. If you can just check me out, I’ll be on my way.”

“Uh . . .” His gaze shunts to my car, but he says nothing. “Okay. I’m going to check for other injuries before I look at that shoulder.”

“Sure.”

I think I’m wide awake, but soon my eyelids flag, and he keeps stopping and telling me not to sleep and sometimes taking my chin to wake me. When he gets to my shoulder, he needs to lift me up, and that’s when the pain jolts me wide awake. He checks the wound there, and I don’t hear what he says about it—I’m gritting my teeth, the shock sliding away.

“Can you stand?” he says, and it sounds as if this isn’t the first time he’s said it.

I nod and let him help me to my feet, as he says, “It seems safe to move you, and I need to get you out of the rain so I can bandage that shoulder.”

“I’ll be fine.”

Thunder cracks, and I jump, nearly falling as my leg buckles. Right. My knee cracked against that tree.

“Ellie?” he says as he steadies me. “You can’t drive your car. I can’t drive my truck. I don’t have phone signal, and I doubt you do, either.”

“I don’t. Didn’t.” I reach for my pocket, but of course my phone’s not there. It was in my hand when his truck hit my car and I went flying. I give myself a shake, which sends pain

ripping through me but it also helps clear my head. “Okay. My car’s out of commission, and I lost my phone but it didn’t have a signal either.”

“I need to get you out of this rain. Will you sit in the cab of my truck with me? Your car is totaled—we can’t get in your back seat.”

I frown at him, wondering why he didn’t just carry me into his truck immediately.

Right. He said it was “safe to move me” now. He needed to check me over first, and he needed me lying flat, in case my spine was injured. And now he’s asking because he’s a stranger who wants me getting into his truck with him.

“Your car’s rear seat is crushed,” he says. “I’ll show you if that helps.”

Again, maybe it’s lingering shock, but I want to laugh. Rain is pouring down in torrents, both of us soaked and shivering, and he honestly thinks I’m worried he’ll try to kidnap me? At this point, I might just think, “Well, at least I’m someplace dry.”

“Your truck is fine,” I say as I turn that way.

“May I help you walk?”

I’m torn between wanting to say I can handle it and wanting to tell him he doesn’t need to be so polite. In the end, I only nod, and he puts out his arm for me to brace on as we start toward his vehicle. It’s a pickup truck, an old one, the front end smashed into the rear of my car, and I can see now what he meant about my back seat. No wonder he’d glanced at my car when I’d said, in my brain-numb shock, that I just wanted to get out of here.

We aren’t going anywhere. Not tonight.

“Sorry about your truck,” I say as he opens the driver’s door.

He gives a startled laugh. “That’s the least of my concerns. It’s a piece of shit anyway. Two kids in college.” An eye roll, as if that explains the old truck, which I guess it does.

“Anyway, it’s insured. You need help up?”

“Should I crawl over to the passenger side?”

“No, no. Sit in the driver’s seat.” He reaches past me, pulls the keys from the ignition, and holds them out. “Keep these for now.”

“I’m really not worried you’re going to take advantage of a car accident to kidnap me,” I say as I climb in.

“I’m an overprotective dad with two daughters.” He drops the keys onto my lap and shuts the door. A few moments later, he’s tugging on the passenger side. The door sticks, and I’m leaning to help him open it, when he heaves, and it flies open.

He climbs in, and only then do I realize I wasn’t imagining that he’s a big guy. He dwarfs the seat and has to adjust it so his head doesn’t brush the ceiling. Broad shoulders. Massive biceps. He looks more like a football player than a paramedic, which might be why he expected me to hesitate at getting into his truck.

He runs his hands through his hair, water sluicing down. Then he twists and grabs a duffel from behind the driver’s seat. He rifles through it and tosses me a towel.

“Going on a trip?” I ask.

“Fishing with some buddies. Left later than I should have.” He pulls out a clean T-shirt and uses it to dry his hair, ignoring me when I offer the towel. “Forecast looked fine. Then that damned detour.”

“Yep.” I dry my face on the towel. “Detour plus thunderstorm plus being too impatient to wait until morning. That’s my story, too.” I start lifting the towel to dry my hair and let out a hiss as my injured shoulder ignites.

“Let me get that bandaged. I have some painkillers, but if you have any in your car, you

might want those.”

“Because yours could be knockout drugs, all part of this secret plan to kidnap the first person you collide with in a storm?” I shake my head. “Bandage me up, doc, and then give me the drugs.”

* * *

My shoulder is bandaged and all my cuts covered. Henry gives me the painkillers with a bottle of water, apologizing that it’s been opened and offering me a Coke from his cooler instead because really, at this point, I’m very worried about catching shared-water-bottle germs.

While I take the pills, he checks his phone again.

“It’s not going to magically get service,” I say. “I didn’t have any for miles.”

“Same,” he grunts. Then he peers out the window. “Rain’s slowing.”

“It is, and the lack of other vehicles on this road means we have a choice. Sit here all night or set out and try to find either cell signal or help.” I glance over. “Did you see any houses on the way up?”

“I couldn’t see *anything* on the way up.”

“Me neither. I kept thinking I should pull over, but that didn’t seem safe. Then—” My head jerks up. “The woman. Shit!”

I twist to grab the door handle, which makes my shoulder scream.

“Whoa, whoa,” Henry says, reaching as if to stop me but again halting. “What woman?”

“But there was someone on the road. A woman. I swerved to avoid her and hit the tree. I couldn’t find her, so I was worried I also hit her. That’s what I was doing when we collided. Looking for her.”

Henry frowns. “She was standing in front of the fallen tree?”

“No, it was just her. In the middle of the road. I didn’t notice the tree until I hit it.” I grab the door handle. “We need to go look—”

“The tree is *across* the road, Ellie. All the way across it.”

I throw up my hands. “I don’t know. The point is that there was a woman, and then there wasn’t, and I need to look for her.”

“Okay.” The word comes slow. “I’ve got a flashlight in the back. We’ll look. But . . . You said you hit your head. There’s a bump already.”

My jaw sets. “I hit my head *after* I saw her. I’m not imag— Whatever. I’m going to look, and if I can use your flashlight, I’d appreciate that.”

“No, we’ll both go. I just don’t see how someone—” A deep inhale. “Okay, let me start the hazards, and we’ll get out there while the rain’s died down.”