

ACCIDENTAL ANGEL

by

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CHAPTER ONE

“Damn this weather!”

Shane Madden recklessly maneuvered his BMW down the slick mountain highway as he watched the rain turn to sleet. Someone forgot to tell Mother Nature that it was springtime in Colorado.

Glancing at the clock on the dash, and then quickly back at the road, Shane realized he was running very late. He was due at the Glenwood Country Club for the Hospital Charity Ball, and Elizabeth would be frantic with worry.

Who was he trying to kid? She would be mad as hell.

Just last week, he had been too busy to take her to the opera. In truth, he simply did not want to go. Remembering how upset she was then, he dreaded the idea of facing her wrath tonight. It was pretty low of him to be

late for a formal event, but a last minute emergency detained him at the hospital. Although he was not on call tonight, as the chief physician of the emergency trauma unit, his time was never really his own.

Elizabeth would simply have to understand that his job would always take priority. People's lives were at stake, and the well-being of his patients was more important than a charity ball. Keeping up appearances meant a lot to Elizabeth and her father. So did punctuality, but, regardless, Shane still had to go home and change into his tuxedo—a necessity that would make him even later than he was already.

Shane had concentrated on his education for most of his life, and recently, his work kept him busy. Consequently, he never had time for a serious relationship. Then Elizabeth came along, and everything seemed so easy. She was a beautiful woman, her father was the chief of staff at the hospital, and one thing just led to another. He certainly never experienced any of the overpowering emotions touted in love songs, but he was proud to have her as a girlfriend—just as hundreds of other men would have been proud—yet lately, feelings of loneliness and discontent shaded his perspective, even when they were together.

Shane often wondered if she would fit in with his large and sometimes crazy family. There was no way to be sure, however, until they all spent

some time together and, so far, Elizabeth had avoided that meeting like the plague.

She seldom asked questions about his childhood and never encouraged his occasional anecdotes about his siblings and the adventures they experienced as part of a large and loving family.

The few times they had a couple of days off together, she wanted to fly to Atlantic City or Lake Tahoe to take in the shows and spend a little money in the casinos. She obviously preferred a game of baccarat to beach volleyball or tag football.

Elizabeth was the caviar and martini type, where his family preferred beer and burgers after a stroll along the shore. He had been raised to appreciate the simple things in life; she came from a family that basked in luxury.

Shane zipped the small car into the driveway, hurried to unlock the front door of his large, tri-level mountain home, and sprinted up the stairs to his bedroom. He removed the green scrubs and tossed them over the arm of a leather easy chair in the corner of the spacious room. Leaving a trail of clothes behind him, he shed his socks, shoes and Calvin Klein briefs and stepped into the glass enclosed shower. He groaned his appreciation when the spray of hot water massaged his tense shoulder muscles and, for the

hundredth time that day, wished that he could stretch out in front of the TV instead of pretending to enjoy himself at a party designed for the stuffy and elite.

A short while later, Shane was dressed and back in the car. He sped toward the Glenwood Country Club, where he knew his name was already being taken in vain. Elizabeth had never had a problem with speaking her mind. She would not be mistaken for someone who had a tender heart. He shook his head slowly in wonderment. How could someone so cold heat up a man so quickly?

He hesitated for only a moment behind a sedan that was doing the speed limit, and then jerked the steering wheel to the left and accelerated, leaving the Honda in the slush behind him.

He was still thinking about the beautiful, brainy, and sexy Elizabeth with her body to die for. She was the kind of imaginary girlfriend men talked about in locker rooms, but not the kind you would take home to mother and introduce as your future wife.

“Wife? Now that’s a scary thought—” he muttered aloud. The words froze on his lips when he spotted headlights coming directly at him. “What the hell?”

Another car barreled toward him—in *his* lane. Shane jerked the steering wheel to the right. The BMW began to skid on the slick road and, a split-second later, careened out of control. He watched in helpless horror as the shadows of night sped past him. He knew he was going to die. The car flipped and slammed into the side of a tree, bringing an abrupt end to the frantic thoughts that echoed in his brain.

Man, this is really going to piss off Elizabeth.

Dena Quinn pulled the purple ski cap off her head and shook out her long brown hair. She switched the heater in her Honda to high and shivered until the blast of warm air hit her. She hated the cold and longed for the sweltering tropical climate of East Texas.

She turned on the lights, shifted the transmission into first gear and slowly pulled out of the parking lot adjacent to Northwestern Memorial Hospital. It was a little past seven, and she was dead tired; the consequence of putting in a twelve-hour day. The long shifts did not bother her overmuch, however. She was simply grateful to have a job, and as a floor nurse in pediatrics, no less.

Why she decided so quickly to stay in Colorado, rather than continuing on to Canada, still mystified her. Five days ago, she had stopped for gas in

Glenwood Springs and discovered a dangerous fuel leak in her carburetor. The mechanic at the station fixed the problem, but refused to take any money. The kind old man smiled and offered her a callused hand that boasted thick grease under chipped fingernails. “We’re always glad to have young folks stop in Glenwood Springs. Wouldn’t do to let you drive off in a fire trap.”

That simple kindness, along with the majestic scenery and fresh, pine-scented air, convinced her to stay and explore the area. A check of the local newspaper ads revealed a critical shortage of qualified nurses in the quaint community; she applied for a job doing what she loved best, and the hospital hired her on the spot.

Dena obtained a temporary permit and applied for a Colorado license. Since most registered nurses preferred to work in the big city for much higher salaries, the administration was delighted to have someone with her qualifications and experience on staff.

Ramada Inn was quickly draining her cash, and using her credit cards would mean leaving a paper trail. She was too smart for that.

The gentle swish of the windshield wipers changed to an annoying thump as the temperature dropped and ice formed on the blades. Dena downshifted into second, and her hands trembled as she clutched the

steering wheel tighter. She was used to traversing wet roads; driving on ice, however, was a new and unnerving experience. Finding the job was a stroke of luck, but finding a place to live was not so easy. Locating a reasonably priced apartment in Glenwood Springs, a resort town whose main industry was tourism, was practically impossible during ski season. Her stay at the Ramada Inn was quickly draining her cash, and using her credit cards would mean leaving a paper trail. She was too smart for that.

A quick glance in her rearview mirror revealed a fast-approaching vehicle. A red sports car sped past her only seconds later, splashing dirty water on her windshield and blurring the red-amber glow of its taillights as the car sped on. “Go on, you jerk. It’s your funeral,” she muttered.

Her anger quickly changed to fear, however, when another vehicle approached—in the wrong lane—and was headed directly for the car that had just passed her. She watched helplessly as the little red BMW skidded off the road and flipped like a fish on the bank of a stream.

Dena swerved to the right and the Honda found the gravel shoulder just before she became a casualty herself. Her gaze flew to the rearview mirror, and she watched with mouth agape as the other car speed off into the night.

Dena's hands trembled as she unbuckled her seat belt and ran toward the smashed up, smoking car. Others who saw the accident also stopped, but she reached the vehicle first and automatically went into action.

A man sat crumpled in the seat. His head hung oddly to one side with the now deflated air bag against him. Dena tugged at the badly damaged door, but to no avail, then ran around to the passenger side and slid into the empty bucket seat. At first glance, she thought the accident victim's neck was broken, then breathed a sigh of relief when she felt his weak pulse.

Through the window, she saw a heavysset man and a boy coming toward her to help. "Call 9-1-1," she yelled. "I need help. And tell them to hurry. I think he's in pretty bad shape."

"Are you a doctor?" the man asked. His fast walk down the rocky hill left him breathless.

"No—a nurse. Quick! We have to get him away from the car. I smell gas fumes."

The two strangers lifted the unconscious man and laid him gently on the pine forest floor, twenty feet from the car. Just then, the vehicle exploded, spewing flames into the wet, night air. Sleet sizzled as it fell onto the wreckage. The acrid smell of gasoline filled her nostrils.

Dena took off her coat and draped it over the injured man. He was going into shock and bleeding profusely from a deep cut on his temple and another on his arm. At this point, she had no idea what internal injuries he might have, or whether he sustained head trauma. She could only tend to the things she could control—like the bleeding. Pulling off her cloth belt, she skillfully tied a tourniquet around his upper arm.

Looking down into his ashen face, she saw a handsome man with curly, blond hair. His eyelids fluttered, and then opened. His blue eyes revealed pain and confusion.

“You’re going to be just fine,” she said, although she was not sure she spoke the truth. The decision to move him without first stabilizing his spine had been risky, but she had no choice. Sirens wailed in the distance, and her chest rose again with relief. “That’s the ambulance you hear. The EMT’s will be here any minute to take you to the hospital. Just hang on now. It won’t be long.”

He reached for her hand and weakly squeezed. Rain continued to dampen his blood-spattered face, and his eyes glazed over with pain. He lifted his hand to touch her face.

“Smells good,” he mumbled.

“What?” she asked. He sounded delirious.

“Angel smells good,” he said as his hand fell to his side, and he lapsed into unconsciousness again.

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