

Chapter 1

Accusation

Tuesday, March 10

“All rise.”

It was no less intimidating the second time the judge swept into the courtroom, his black robe swirling behind him. “Please, be seated,” he said, and Shannon Molinsky, her parents and everyone else did just that.

She fixed her eyes on the back of Dylan Snider’s head, sitting several rows ahead of them at the defense table. His black hair was longer than she remembered, and it lay in neat layers. His earring was gone, and in his tailored navy suit, he could have passed for a banker or one of the new attorneys at her father’s law firm.

Anything but a rapist.

Her brother, Joel, testified this morning. One of the four girls bringing the charges was a patient of his. “Her injuries were consistent with a sexual assault,” Joel said. Her parents both stiffened with those words. They knew she’d been with Dylan, but they didn’t know the whole story.

They both protested when she announced she wanted to come to the trial. “I don’t want you anywhere near that punk,” her father said. “He’s bad news.” She didn’t disagree.

“Do you still have feelings for him?” her mother asked.

Feelings? Yes. Mostly revulsion and disgust.

She didn't blame either one of them for their misgivings, though. Not after last summer. Not long after Brad's murder, she went to a party at Dylan's house and was arrested for drinking. Her dad flipped. He wouldn't let her explain she'd taken one sip of punch after eating a hot pepper. No, his mind was made up. Case closed.

She went out with Dylan, and her dad came positively unglued. So she snuck out one Saturday morning with Dylan's help. Her brilliant plan had been to punish her father for his overbearing hypocrisy. After all, his affair led to Jack, which brought Jack's grandfather to Brad's mission downtown, which led to Brad and Jack rushing out onto the streets and into the middle of a drive-by shooting. In her mind, he was ultimately responsible for Brad's death, yet he didn't hesitate to condemn her minor offenses.

Dylan Snider preyed on her vulnerability. He toyed with her emotions, and used her need for validation against her. That Saturday night, Dylan held her down and stole her virginity from her. Because of the shame over what she'd done, and the humiliation at the role she played in Dylan's actions, she couldn't bear to face her parents. It was New Year's Day when her dad found her and brought her home. Six months later.

"The defense calls Dylan Aaron Snider to the stand."

Her mother reached out, but Shannon quickly withdrew her hand, otherwise her mother would discover how cold and suddenly clammy her hands were. She caught a glimpse of her father's scowl. *Just wait 'til he starts talking, Dad.*

Shannon watched Dylan's lawyer's demeanor change from the bulldog who cross-examined the victims, to a parent or grandparent concerned over her little boy's troubles. She was the perfect lawyer for him.

Dylan performed flawlessly. With puppy dog eyes, he spun a sad tale about pawing, desperate girls pushing themselves on him, threatening to tell everyone he'd raped them if he didn't give in.

Unconsciously, Shannon tightened her hands into fists. Lies. All of it. Lies. Every word relayed in that same soft, mellow voice he'd used on her.

"Oh, no, ma'am," he said to his lawyer. "I never gave her any reason to think that I was interested in a sexual relationship."

That was the only thing he was interested in. Shannon crossed her legs tightly. He was going to talk his way out of this. The jurors, all paying rapt attention, were buying his version. He would walk out of here scot-free after raping those four girls. None of them would get the justice they deserved. Neither would she.

Finally, Dylan looked across the courtroom directly at her. "I never hurt anyone. I never took advantage of anyone. I never violated anyone's boundaries. I never asked anyone to do anything they weren't completely comfortable with. Never."

White rage exploded in Shannon's head, and with total disregard for the courtroom, for the jury, for her parents, she leapt to her feet and pointed a finger at Dylan Snider's heart. "He's lying! He's a rapist! HE RAPED ME!"

Chuck Molinsky jerked his car from one lane to another with one thought in mind—get her away. Get Shannon away from the courthouse, from the courtroom, from that...

He tried to process and make some sense of the blurry mess of details tumbling through his mind. The leering grin on that boy's face. Bobbi's soul-shattering gasp. The bailiff's hand on his daughter's shoulder. Raped. His daughter. His baby girl. She never told them. Why? Why would she keep that a secret? In a tearful confession, she led them to believe it was consensual. Why? Why would she protect that boy? Red light.

He glanced in the rearview at Bobbi in the backseat, silently cradling Shannon, stroking her hair, gently wiping the tears from her cheeks. His daughter's eyes were clamped shut, with only the faintest whimpering snuffle.

I'll kill him. I should have last summer when I had the chance. He squeezed the steering wheel, trying to will the rational part of his brain back into control. *He told me, he admitted he had been with Shannon. And the pictures, he had pictures. Those are evidence. She's got a case.* Green light.

But this case, this trial, was over. With that outburst, Shannon probably destroyed any chance for a conviction. Arguably, she got that impulsiveness from him. If she'd told him the truth, though, he could have prepared her. The prosecutor would've eaten that kid alive. The kid who raped his daughter. Raped her. Planned it. Psychopath.

He caught Bobbi's eyes in the rearview. Anguished powerlessness. That's what he saw. It's what he felt. They were on the same page, but she could suspend her emotion for Shannon's sake. He wasn't sure he could. A few more minutes and they'd be home, and then the details would come. If he didn't vomit or destroy something, it would be a miracle.

He pulled his car in the driveway, and quickly got out to open Bobbi's door. "Let's get you inside, baby," she said.

“Mom, I—”

“Shh, we don’t have to talk about this right now.”

Chuck wanted to shout, *Yes we do!* But he didn’t say anything. He stood there as Shannon passed by without raising her head. Shame. That ... punk raped her and she was shamed. He couldn’t watch this. He couldn’t wait until they got inside, until the moment was right, until she was ready to talk or whatever. He put a hand on her, and with the gentle pressure, she paused and raised her head.

He wanted to tell her something—something wise and profound and comforting, but he saw her tears. He managed to shake his head before she fell against him. He felt the heave in her chest, her fingers desperately clinging to him, and his emotion broke loose. He sobbed with her, with Bobbi, for grief, for anger and injustice, and for failure. And for a God who turned His face away yet again.

An hour later, Bobbi found Chuck in the kitchen. “What are we going to do?” She folded her arms and leaned against the kitchen counter. “Is there anything we can do?”

“I don’t know.” Chuck slumped into the nearest chair, and pushed his glasses out of the way to rub his eyes. “Bobbi, I ... when she ...”

She raised her hand. “I can’t go there, Chuck. I can’t let myself feel anything right now.”

She stared out across the room and shook her head. How could she have missed something like this? How could Shannon keep it from her? They’d been inseparable for

the last three months. Shannon had driven her to every doctor's appointment, sat through every treatment with her. She thought the wounds were healing. The truth was Shannon hadn't healed enough to deal with the real wounds yet.

But Bobbi had been in that very place. Not ... raped ... but too hurt to heal. Too bitter to trust anyone to walk with her on that road. Yearning for vindication, but questioning whether it would ever come. Wondering how a good God could let incomprehensible things happen. Yes, Bobbi had far more experience with those issues than she cared to. Shannon was only eighteen. Carrying that burden, alone, for so long, it was no wonder it came out when it did.

When Shannon slipped away from them last summer, for that first day, Chuck was paralyzed by guilt, unable to act, leaving it to Joel and Gavin, her sister's husband, to formulate some plan to find her. Once again, he was in that same place—paralyzed. Gavin and Rita were out of the country, in Israel on a trip their children had given them for Christmas. That left Joel. "Should we call Joel?" she asked.

"You think we should ask Shannon first?"

"She's asleep."

"Asleep? How?"

"I had something the doctor gave me after Brad. I never took any, but I hung on to them."

He gave her a half nod. "He held her down, Bobbi. Pinned her arms down."

"I know," she whispered, and blinked away a tear. Sitting on the sofa while Shannon choked through the details was the most wrenching thing Bobbi had ever been through, worse than reading that e-mail from Tracy Ravenna exposing Chuck's affair

twenty years ago. She slid into the seat next to her husband, and tried to take his hand, but he wouldn't let her.

“She stayed away for all those months because of what he did,” he murmured.

“I know.” He wasn't listening, though.

“Why was she so ashamed? He violated her. I don't understand why she's ashamed.”

“We probably never will.”

His eyes were focused on the kitchen window, or maybe some spot in the sky. “She would've come home the next week if he hadn't done that. She would've called.” His voice rose and the words came one on top of the next one. “She would've told us where she was. We wouldn't have gone for months not knowing, grieving.”

“Chuck.”

“What he did to her was just the beginning ... Everything you went through ... I nearly lost you—”

“It wasn't that dramatic.” Her words weren't registering.

“I blamed myself. I thought we were cursed. Maybe we are. How can God stand by while she was being—”

“Chuck.” This time she grasped his arm.

“What?”

“Call Joel.”

“Joel?”

“Call his cell phone.”

“He ... he's with patients. He won't answer.”

“Call him. If he doesn’t pick up, call the office and have the girls get him on the line.”

He blinked and seemed to bring himself back to the present, then he picked up the receiver and dialed what she hoped was Joel’s number.

“Joel,” he said, but then he just stopped, and handed her the phone.

She cleared her throat, and held the phone close, keeping an eye on Chuck.

“Honey, we went back for the afternoon session, and ... Shannon ... she was also a victim.”

“Oh no ... Mom ... what ... you just found out?”

“Actually, she spoke out in court. It was ... We got escorted from the courtroom.”

“Good grief,” Joel said softly. “Is she okay?”

“No.”

“And neither is Dad, is he?”

Bobbi glanced at Chuck. “No.”

“I’ve got a half-dozen patients left, and then I’ll be over. How are you?”

“She needs me, I’ll get through.”

“Superman’s got nothing on you.”

“I’m not so sure. We’ll see you soon. Love you.”

“Love you, too, Mom.” She returned the phone to its cradle, and turned to Chuck.

“I’m gonna make some coffee. You want some?”

He shook his head. “I need some air.” He loosened the knot on his tie and shuffled toward the back door.

“How’s your chest?”

“My what?”

“Your chest, your heart. Any pain? Tightness?”

“No, just broken.”