

I AM NOT SUPPOSED TO BE HERE

KATE DENDRINOS-RICKEL AND SHAWN RICKEL
WITH STEVE MARSH

BIG VIEW RANCH PRESS
GOLDEN, COLORADO

Published by Big View Ranch Press
P.O. Box 18350
Golden, CO 80402

Copyright © 2010 Kate Dendrinis-Rickel, Shawn Rickel,
and Steve Marsh

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without prior written permission from the publisher.

ISBN-10: 0-9799143-5-3
ISBN-13: 978-0-9799143-5-5

Second Edition

Printed in the United States of America

Photos courtesy of Kate Dendrinis-Rickel, Shawn Rickel, James Venis,
Jennifer Abney, and Miguel Hernandez

Editing by Kathryn Severns Avery and Jalyynn Venis
Additional Editing by Jackie Sachen Turner

Original Book Design by James Venis
Second Edition Book Design by Maryann Swartz

Cover Design by Maryann Swartz

INTRODUCTION

“Wow! Fredo was right. She is beautiful,” Shawn Rickel thought to himself as he watched Kate Dendrinos enter the bar in May of 2002. Mutual friends had been relentless in their quest to set them up. They finally succeeded. After months of missed opportunities, Kate and Shawn met on a beautiful, warm, Colorado day at a place popular with bikers and weekend-warrior motorcyclists.

Kate wore her summer “uniform” of jeans and a sleeveless tank top as she strode through the bar. She recognized Shawn from her friend’s description and was immediately attracted to the tall, good-looking man who repeatedly tried to catch her eye. Yet throughout the afternoon, Kate pointedly ignored Shawn and carefully choreographed her way around the room to avoid talking to him. Kate was divorced and not eager to invite another man into her life.

Living alone, Kate tended her garden, dogs, and horses during daylight hours and managed a bar at night. In her spare time, Kate helped disabled kids who were being introduced to equine therapy, worked as an aide to the elderly and others needing home healthcare assistance, and attended school as a part-time university student. Although Kate had enough credits for three college degrees, she hadn’t committed to any one course of study. She was looking for something,

call it purpose or a plan, that would incorporate her interests in horses and working with disabled people. Kate wasn't quite sure what her calling was, she only knew she hadn't found it yet.

If anyone personified the aggressive, hard-driving, self-absorbed profile of a Type A workaholic, it was Shawn Rickel. The son of a hard-working businessman and a Kansas beauty queen, Shawn had grown up in West Texas in a small town that prided itself on its cowboy culture and ranching roots. Like most other boys in the area, Shawn loved to ride horses and did so at every opportunity. His outgoing personality and athletic ability made him popular. Both a high school and college football star, he'd learned to work hard, play hard, and bask in the glow of Texas football fanaticism. Now as an executive at a Denver mortgage-lending firm, he focused on three directives: make money, make more money, make money as fast as you can. The only time he relaxed was when he hopped on the back of his Honda Valkyrie motorcycle and lost himself in the sun, the wind, and the freedom of the road.

The moment in the bar when Shawn sauntered over to Kate and said with a boyish grin and Texas drawl, "You know, I'm your date today," the carefully erected walls around Kate's heart began to crumble. Initially, she was leery of his charms. Shawn was the kind of man who was used to being surrounded by a bevy of beauties and enjoyed playing the field. He was not interested in a serious relationship. Kate knew instinctively that Shawn was a guy who could easily break a girl's heart. But after talking non-stop for several hours, Kate let her emotional guard down and was swept away by the eyes, the smile, and

the charisma that attracted everyone in the room to Shawn Rickel. The day, the setting, and the man all conspired to create one irresistible experience into which Kate fell head over heels.

The day Shawn met Kate and convinced her to take a ride with him on his motorcycle, he discovered a soul mate. From that moment forward, they were inseparable. As the following months flew past, they learned that they shared a common interest in horses and equine therapy for those with disabilities.



This is the story of Kate, Shawn, a near-fatal motorcycle accident, a severe head injury, a series of miracles, a beautiful dream, and a profound love that gave both of them the strength and courage to persist and prevail when almost everyone else around them had lost hope.

CHAPTER 1: THE ACCIDENT

In three short months, Kate Dendrinis and Shawn Rickel had gone from being total strangers to being a couple. They realized that their friends who had tried to set them up had been right; they were a perfect match. Their affability gave people the impression that they had known each other for a long time.

Kate's oddball sense of humor, almost eradicated during her earlier marriage, returned. Whenever she and Shawn were together, they laughed easily and often. Her heart, which had long been wary and mistrusting, opened up to Shawn. He proved to Kate on a daily basis that she could trust him. Sure, there were women who tried to come between them, but Shawn liked Kate and no one else.

It seemed natural for them to spend every possible moment together when not working. They had fleeting conversations about building a life together but one or the other would become terrified by the thought of commitment and quickly change the subject. Soon, Kate and Shawn found something they both felt committed to and passionate about: a business.

While growing up, Shawn had worked on the nearby ranches of friends and family and on his grandparents' farms in Kansas. His life revolved around horses, football, and the rural landscape that dominated life in West Texas.

In his late 20s, Shawn had worked as the general manager and marketing director at the Chisholm Trail Ranch, a dude ranch in Rhome, Texas. People traveled here from all over the world for a genuine cowboy experience.

One day, a bus filled with kids with disabilities arrived at the ranch. When Shawn saw the connection these children made with the horses, he knew he had found his calling. Joy and excitement replaced sadness and pain as the boys and girls stroked the horses' coats and hugged their necks. It touched Shawn to see how a few hours around these creatures could soothe and comfort children with problems much larger than his own.

In conversation one day with Kate, Shawn shared that he wanted to work with horses and kids. Kate could hardly believe her ears. She had spent the last year providing equine therapy to children with disabilities.

"I want to work with horses and kids, too!" Kate grinned.

"That's amazing!" And then Shawn said something that made Kate tingle right down to her toes: "We should go into business together."

It only took a moment for Kate to agree.

"So you want to get married?" Shawn asked.

"Nope. You want to get married?"

"Nope. That's really the business you want to be in?" he asked Kate.

"Yup," Kate replied with no hesitation, no second thoughts.

SHAWN

That was the first time I'd ever voiced those desires. For me, this was the paramount moment

in our relationship. In that instant, I knew why I was put on this earth. All I could think about was I've got to find horses. I've got to find land. We had a business and a life to start together. And all I could think about was I want it to start now!

Kate and Shawn spent hours talking about finding property to develop as an equestrian therapy center. The business would combine Kate and Shawn's love of horses with Shawn's marketing background and Kate's deep seated desire for helping others, no matter what their challenges.

KATE

I was a loner before I met Shawn. Several years before, I'd been married to a very abusive man, and I'd never been allowed to have a social life. After I met Shawn, life was just about perfect. I'd not only found the love of my life, we also shared a dream. Life suddenly meant something more than just stacking up paychecks. I felt like I'd reinvented myself and found out who I truly was. We were going to build a healing sanctuary for people of all ages who were recovering from traumatic brain injuries and other debilitating conditions.

Before meeting Shawn, Kate had never ridden a motorcycle. After her first ride with Shawn, she was hooked. She loved the wind in her hair and holding on tightly to Shawn's muscular body as the roadway disappeared under the tires of the bike. Like Shawn, she found the sense of freedom exhilarating.

On August 4, 2002, only three months after they had met, Kate and Shawn left Shawn's home in the morning and spent the day looking at ranch properties for their equine

therapy business in Poudre Canyon northwest of Denver. Cruising down a two-lane mountain highway on Shawn's motorcycle emblazoned with a custom-painted, red, white, and blue American flag on the gas tank, Kate and Shawn thought life couldn't be more perfect. A close friend and colleague of Shawn's, Fredo Yorba, rode with them that day on his Indian motorcycle.

Kate and Shawn knew exactly what they were looking for in a ranch property and were confident they would find it. However, it would not be this day.



Upon returning to Denver, the trio stopped at a Mexican restaurant in the Cherry Creek arts and shopping district for a late lunch. Afterward, they mounted their motorcycles and headed for Shawn's townhouse.

Shawn, with Kate riding double, and Fredo were traveling eastbound on Alameda Avenue. As the two bikes and their riders approached a wide intersection at Alameda and Quebec Street just a couple of miles from Shawn's Denver home, something unthinkable happened.

A white pickup truck with a camper on the back was waiting to turn left across traffic on Alameda and head south on Quebec. As the truck proceeded toward the intersection, the green traffic arrow turned red. The driver of the truck made a bad decision and continued into the intersection directly in the path of the oncoming traffic.

Onlookers would later say that Shawn, Fredo, and the other eastbound traffic had the green light and the right of way. As the 72-year-old woman at the wheel of the truck realized her mistake, panic and confusion set in. She froze and hit the brakes. Then she hit the gas again to get out of the way. Then she hit the brakes again. Then she once more stepped on the accelerator. Then she hit the brakes a third time.

At the older woman's first pause, Shawn's best move in the surrounding traffic was to snap his motorcycle to the right, toward the front of her truck, and he did so. When the truck unexpectedly started to move again, Shawn flung his weight to the left and Kate, following his lead, held tight and leaned with him. Shawn could not anticipate the erratic behavior of the woman in the truck. In an anguished blink, he realized a collision was unavoidable.

SHAWN

I'll never forget the image of that white truck and the elderly woman at the wheel. She just sat stone-still, like a deer in the headlights of an oncoming car. But in this case, she saw the vibrating headlights of two oncoming motorcycles. I immediately angled to the right to go around the front bumper, Fredo angled to the left to go around the back. If she'd stayed put, our lives would never have entered a five-year tour of hell.

From Fredo's vantage point, riding staggered behind Shawn and Kate, he saw it all: the traffic moving around them, the white truck, and Shawn desperately trying to save Kate and himself from disaster. Fredo did the only thing he could do—stay out of Shawn's path. Clenching his teeth, Fredo veered

left and ached with the fear of the impact he knew awaited his friends.

FREDO

Shawn scraped along the right rear quarter panel of the truck. This sent the bike wobbling side to side. Then he jumped on the tanks to stop the wobble. I yelled at him, "Keep it up, keep it going!" All the time I watched Kate trying to hold on for her life.

For an instant, Shawn believes he blacked out. When he returned to consciousness, he felt a surge of pain shoot through his body like the jolt of grabbing a live electrical wire. The bike fishtailed to the left, and Kate held on with all she had.

They hit the back bumper of the truck, knocking off their right-side saddlebag. The bike wobbled out of control. The force of the collision caused Kate to lose her grip on Shawn. She flew off the bike and landed in the street several feet east of the intersection.

As the motorcycle slid out from underneath him, Shawn catapulted over the handlebars of the bike. When he hit the pavement, Shawn covered his head and slid forty feet. He heard the motorcycle's mirrors shattering as the bike flipped three more times, the engine downshifting with each crack against the pavement.

Fredo, still on his bike, perceived the accident in slow motion. He watched in terror and disbelief as Shawn's body shot past him and slid along the pavement. Fredo quickly stopped his bike while screaming, "Shawn! Are you okay?!"

When at last Shawn raised himself up, he had one thought: Where was Kate?

He saw her lying on her back in the middle of the striping between the two eastbound lanes of Alameda. She wasn't moving.

As Shawn ran to Kate's side, he looked around for Fredo. Was Fredo hurt, too?

When Shawn caught sight of his friend again, Fredo had moved his bike out of traffic and had pulled into an entrance to Fairmont Cemetery on the south side of Alameda.

Beyond Fredo was the wreckage of Shawn's motorcycle, lying dead in the street in front of one of the largest graveyards in Denver.

As he reached Kate's side, Shawn dropped to his knees and called her name over and over. She was unconscious, but moaning quietly. She was alive! Kate had blood on her brow and nose. Her eyes twitched below the lids. But she was alive.

It was then that Shawn heard a woman in a gentle voice asking him something. He looked up to see a black woman and what Shawn took to be her two daughters standing there, dressed in fresh, floral-print dresses as if they'd just come from church. Their expressions were full of concern.

"May we lay hands on her?" the woman asked.

"No, no. Don't touch her! Don't move her!"

"Then, may we pray over her?"

His heart full of unspoken fear and pain, Shawn choked on his words. "Yeah. Please. Pray for her."

Fredo ran to Shawn and Kate's side, yelling out to others who had stopped, "Call 911, call 911! Did anybody see where

that truck went?” The older woman in the white pickup truck had vanished. Sirens were already wailing toward the scene of the accident.

As Shawn stood in the roadway in a dazed and altered state of consciousness, he heard a murmur of voices praying. He heard the ambulance braking beside them and the paramedics asking questions about the accident, asking questions about Kate, asking questions about him. No, he wasn't hurt. Help Kate. No, he didn't feel any pain. Help Kate.

The images and sounds around him melded into one resonant hum, one blur of color and contrast. The effect was like a rain washing over him, soothing him, and calming him.

And then that gentle shower stopped.

Shawn turned around and the woman and her daughters were gone. He turned back to see Kate being loaded into the ambulance. Almost as quickly, she was gone.

The only ones left at the scene were Shawn, Fredo, and the police.



If you ask Shawn what he thinks really happened that day, his eyes water, and he blinks back tears from recalled pain and death, both Kate's and his own. He will tell you that he and Kate were given a second chance in an alternate reality that day. He remembers T-boning the white truck, going over the bike's handlebars and through the wall of the camper. He remembers both Kate and himself being decapitated and their bodies shredded. Shawn remembers dying.

What died at the accident scene was not Shawn's physical body but his egocentric, self-absorbed personality. He would be given the opportunity that day, and in the days to come, to learn how to care for someone else more than he cared for himself. He would learn to trust his intuition and divine guidance rather than the opinions of experts. He would also learn to love someone in a way he never thought possible.

Perhaps his realtor friend Chad Church said it best: "I liked the Shawn Rickel I knew on August 4, 2002. However, I like the new Shawn better."

By the grace of God and through the ministering of angels, Shawn and Kate were spared that day, but their lives would never be the same.

CHAPTER 2: ENDLESS INTERROGATION

A marked squad car arrived on the scene along with the ambulance. A uniformed Denver police officer surveyed the site, and then talked to Shawn and Fredo as the ambulance whisked Kate away to a downtown hospital.

Shawn and Fredo told the officer about the elderly woman who had illegally turned in front of them. Witnesses to the accident said that the white truck disappeared before they could get close enough to see identifying plates or markings. The accident had become a hit-and-run crime scene.

A split-second disaster quickly turned into a living nightmare for Shawn—one he couldn't escape. All he wanted to do was get to Kate's side, but there were questions to answer and affidavits to complete. After Shawn and Fredo gave their report to the uniformed officer, the Denver Police Department investigative team arrived, and they would not let Shawn leave. Strangely, the detectives did not receive either the report from the first officer on the scene with information from witnesses about the truck that had caused the accident or Shawn's and Fredo's statements.

FREDO

A uniformed cop had us sit down at the corner and fill out paper work. He was the only one who knew there were two bikes. Later, detectives

showed up and started their investigation. I was hanging back, watching a detective go over the skid marks. He was combining the skid marks of both bikes, thinking the marks belonged to one bike—Shawn's. I pointed this out to Shawn, and Shawn later tried to explain it, but the detectives were just ignoring what he was telling them. They didn't want to hear what he had to say.

While one of the investigators surveyed the scene, the other talked to Shawn. The investigators kept Shawn at the scene of the accident questioning him over and over about the details.

Not only were the Denver police grilling a man who had watched as his unconscious girlfriend was taken away by ambulance, but they were interrogating an accident victim who was in shock and should have been getting medical attention himself.

Shawn had been thrown off of a motorcycle that had flipped end-over-end. He had landed farther from the point of impact than had Kate. He had slid across gravel and pavement, which shredded his leather chaps and jacket and ripped off one of his back pants' pockets. Shawn's body had been slung past Fredo before Fredo could bring his skidding bike to a complete stop.

Fredo knew that his friend was half-crazed to get to the hospital and check on Kate's condition. Fredo asked Shawn for his truck keys and left to get the truck so that they would have transportation to the hospital once the police were through questioning Shawn.

The fact that Fredo left the scene to get Shawn's truck resulted in some inaccurate investigative work and misunderstandings among the detectives. At some point, it became clear to Shawn that when the police had measured the skid marks, they had incorrectly combined the two marks created by his and Fredo's bikes into one long skid. The detectives mistakenly believed that Shawn and Kate were riding alone and traveling as fast as 100 miles per hour down the street.

"Come on, Shawn," a detective said, "there never was another bike."

"Your girlfriend is probably going to die," said the other detective.

After hours of interrogation by investigators at the scene of the accident, Shawn had an affidavit shoved in his face. "Sign it," one of the investigators barked. He told Shawn that the "crime scene" sketches would be evaluated overnight; as if it had already been determined that Shawn had committed a crime. The detectives ordered Shawn to be at the police precinct Monday afternoon at 4 o'clock.

Suddenly, Shawn realized that the detectives could be building a case against him. If Kate died, he could be charged with vehicular manslaughter.

The questions went on and on for hours, with the detectives acting as though they didn't believe a white truck had ever been involved in the accident. While frantically looking around for the witnesses, Shawn tried again to describe the vehicle he had hit. A white truck slowly approached the intersection and pulled over to the side.

"There! It looked just like that one!"

An elderly woman stepped out of the truck and looked around. The driver who caused the accident had returned to the scene!

SHAWN

Without a truck or driver or vehicle license number, they thought I made the whole thing up. Although two-and-a-half agonizing hours had passed, the woman did come back. I'll never forget the moment when the pitch darkness turned to light. With her hands clutching a purse held tightly to her chest, an elderly woman emerged from the truck. Now I began to appreciate the police experience. The cop knew it was her by sheer instinct. He immediately pointed to her and said, "Stay right where you are."

He then turned to me and said, "You stay right where you are. Do not approach her. Do not speak to her." He walked across the intersection, set a flashlight beam on her right-rear bumper, and saw red-white-and-blue paint all over it.

The paint had come from Shawn's motorcycle that lay mangled on the side of the road. An investigator immediately called for two wreckers and took photographs of the truck bumper. Eventually, the woman's truck was loaded on a wrecker and Shawn's bike was loaded onto a flatbed truck—both headed for the police impound lot. The elderly woman cooperated with the investigators, admitting her role in the accident.

After receiving a citation for reckless driving and failure to yield, the elderly woman left in another car; but Shawn was made to sit in a patrol car. One of the police investigators flat-

ly told him something that troubles Shawn to this day. The investigator had said the report would read that the woman had taken an improper left turn at the intersection. The report would go on to say that she had then proceeded south, turned around, and more or less immediately returned to the scene of the accident.

SHAWN

The investigator intended to leave critical information out of the report because, “Well, she did come back,” he said, “and she is in her 70s,” he concluded, which was certainly chivalrous of him on her behalf. However, it wouldn’t help us make much of a case when the time came to dispute claims of her honesty and character or when she would eventually contend that she hadn’t seen us coming.

The cops had an agenda all planned out and it had nothing to do with helping us defend a future claim from an insurance company. After all, in their eyes, even though I was a mortgage executive and Fredo was a successful loan officer, at that moment we were “biker trash.” Weekend biker trash, but biker trash regardless.

By the time the detectives allowed Shawn to leave the scene of the accident, more than four hours had passed.

One of the few comforts to Shawn that day was the thought of those three women who had prayed over Kate and himself. Some of his relatives would later suggest they were angels and that divine intervention came into play that day.

SHAWN

All three ladies were just really sweet, obviously very religious, very kind. They appeared the minute my knee touched down beside Kate. Their presence was automatic, and so was their disappearance. I can only feel total gratitude for their kindness. I was falling apart and maybe they saved me, too, or at least my sanity. Do I think they could have been angels? I don't know, but I do know that Fredo saw them. Angels? Maybe. Or they could have been three, fast-walking, good Samaritans who are out there reading this right now. If they are, I want to say thank you! You have no idea how much your prayers meant to us. I say that because I do believe God heard your prayers and that your prayers were transformed into miracles down the road.

CHAPTER 3: NO HELMET

Sirens wailing and lights flashing, the Code 3 ambulance sped toward Denver's regional trauma center. Inside the vehicle, paramedics put a tourniquet on Kate's arm and felt for a vein. In rapid succession, they inserted a metal needle covered with a Teflon catheter into the vein, taped it to her skin to hold it in place, attached plastic tubing to the catheter, and started an IV drip of saline solution. A pulse-ox monitor on her index finger tracked her vital signs.

Kate was unconscious as the ambulance pulled into the emergency bay at the hospital.

"What have you got?"

"Thirty-seven-year-old female with head trauma, possible fractures, multiple contusions and lacerations. Motorcycle versus pickup. No helmet."

The paramedics continued to rattle off Kate's vital signs and pertinent information as they lowered the portable gurney from the ambulance and wheeled it briskly into the emergency room.

Once inside, they moved Kate to an examination room and a medical team sprang into action. Nurses cut off Kate's clothing and covered her with a sheet. Blood was drawn and whisked off to the lab for evaluation. Monitors to track her heart rate, blood pressure, and respiration were hooked up.

A doctor ordered upper body x-rays and a CT scan of her head. The results showed a fractured right scapula; far grimmer was the damage to her brain.

The rebound force of the back right side of Kate's skull hitting the roadway caused her brain to smash into the left front of her skull. The impact caused part of her left frontal lobe and her left temporal lobe to detach from the rest of her brain. The neurosurgeon, responding to the stat page, reviewed her brain scan and chart. He consulted with the attending emergency room physician, and Kate was on her way to surgery.

The surgical team scrubbed in and entered the operating theater. Multiple trays of sterilized retractors, forceps, scissors, scalpels, a drill, and a specialized saw sat at the ready. Kate's long, blonde hair was shaved. They bathed her crown with antiseptic solution, draped her body and head with sterile cloths, and secured her head in a skull clamp. The lead neurosurgeon called for a scalpel, and the operation to remove the detached portions of Kate's brain began.



After four hours of interrogation, the detectives finally allowed Shawn and Fredo to leave the crash scene. The 20-minute ride to the hospital seemed endless. Agonizing waves of unspoken disbelief, fear, and sorrow washed over the men as they drove. All they could think about was Kate.

When Shawn and Fredo entered the hospital, they were oblivious to others. Shawn's clothes were in tatters, and the anguished looks on Shawn's and Fredo's faces caused more

than one person to look away uncomfortably without making eye contact. Directed to a waiting room, they sat in hard, plastic chairs, anxious for news about Kate.

They waited. And waited. And waited. Shawn and Fredo shifted in their seats many times as the waiting room repeatedly filled and emptied. Still no word came about Kate's condition. Shortly before midnight, Kate's surgeon appeared.

SHAWN

I can still hear the doctor telling me, "Your girlfriend is in bad shape. We had to open up her head and remove the detached portion of her brain. It was dead, and we could not leave it in her cranium. It would begin to rot like spoiled meat." He even proceeded to draw out the basics of the procedure on a chalkboard to show Fredo and me what had been done. Because of the swelling in her face and neck, Kate needed a tracheotomy, and she was now on a respirator.

As the doctor described the situation, the clock passed midnight. I can still clearly see Kate's blood on his shoes and all over his surgeon's scrubs. He was so calm and honest, so matter-of-fact when he said, "Get prepared. Your girlfriend is probably going to die. But if she lives, she will never speak to you. She may learn a word or two but she will never form a complete sentence. You've got to be prepared for that."

I knew the situation was grave, but I wouldn't accept it, even if the outcome seemed a certainty to the doctor standing in front of me. I had to challenge the whole negative scenario he had just laid out. "How can you say that?" I asked. I suddenly felt foolish—as if the doctor hadn't heard what I'd just asked a thousand times before. To avoid his eyes, I remember looking down at my boots,

scuffed and with deep cuts full of sand and grit I hadn't seen before.

The doctor took a deep breath and responded to my question with an answer that I knew he'd used time and time again. He said, "I can say that because I've done a thousand brain surgeries. Everything that once controlled speech in her brain is now gone. We cut it out, Shawn. It was dead. You must accept it, and you must prepare yourself because speech will not be an option for her. I hate to have to say it twice, but sometime it's necessary to get the point across. I am deeply sorry it couldn't have gone another way, but we had no other choice."

The doctor left to remove his bloodstained scrubs and to prepare for the next emergency. Shawn and Fredo returned to the waiting room. A hospital worker told them that they would know "within a couple of hours" whether or not Kate would survive. The waiting game resumed. For hours, Shawn and Fredo stared at the worn carpet in the windowless room, watching it swell with people waiting for word on the condition of their loved ones. Stabbings, gunshot wounds, and other conditions facing these patients were as dire as the situation facing Kate. Yet because the people in the waiting room were family, they were soon greeted by a doctor or nurse and escorted into the rooms beyond the locked doors of the ICU. In the hospital's view, Shawn was an outsider, and he would have to wait. Not knowing what else to do, Shawn repeated the same silent prayer over and over: "Please God, just let Kate live through the night."

Shawn faced another agonizing task: calling Kate's parents and telling them what had happened to their beloved daughter. He went to a nurse's station and asked to use the phone. Hands shaking, he dialed the number.

Shawn had met Kate's parents at a family gathering in Wyoming earlier in the summer. They, like Kate, were quite taken with him. But how do you make a phone call to the parents of the woman you're dating and tell them that their daughter, their little girl, is likely to die before first light?



It had been a long day for Pete and Peggy Dendrin—Kate's parents. The couple, in their mid-70s, had returned to their home outside of Traverse City, Michigan, after a month of traveling in Europe. It had been a dream vacation they'd anticipated for a long time, but they were happy to be home. Exhausted and jetlagged, they'd gone to bed with unpacked suitcases left on the bedroom floor. The phone ringing in the middle of the night was an ominous disruption.

Shawn's voice cracked as he told Kate's father what had happened. The emotions he had been keeping in could no longer be contained. Shawn wept uncontrollably when he heard Pete say that he and Peggy would get there as fast as they could.

Pete delivered the devastating news to Peggy, and the two quickly made plans. Pete called family and friends to tell them of the accident. He also chartered a plane, not willing to waste precious time waiting for a commercial flight. They repacked

their suitcases, still full of clothing, toiletries, and souvenirs from their European trip, and headed to the airport as fast as they could.

Kate's brother, Peter, was with his wife, Cheryl, and their three teen-aged children at a cottage several hours from Traverse City. As soon as Peter heard the news about Kate, he called the school where he worked and made arrangements for a sabbatical from his job. He took the next available commercial flight and joined his parents in Denver. Cheryl Dendrinos planned to join her husband as soon as she could return to Traverse City with their children and make arrangements for their care.



Wiping away his tears, Shawn composed himself and returned to the waiting room. Hours crawled by and still no word came about Kate's condition. Shawn called his parents in Texas and told them about the accident. Their heartfelt concern and offered prayers were small comfort. They told Shawn to stay strong and that they would come to Denver as quickly as they could. They also asked him to call them if Kate's condition changed. He promised them he would.

Fredo stayed by Shawn's side throughout the night; but several hours before dawn, Shawn suggested that Fredo go home, clean up, and grab a few hours of sleep. Reluctant at first, Fredo eventually agreed, promising to return in a couple of hours.

Fredo contacted the office where he and Shawn worked and told them what had happened. He also telephoned others who would want to know about the accident and Kate's condition.

After Fredo left, Shawn sat with his head in his hands and spent several hours in an endless mental loop reviewing every detail of the accident in his mind. He replayed it minute by excruciating minute, searching for ways that he could have avoided the collision. There were none.

Shawn heard someone enter the room and a familiar voice called his name. His younger brother, Perry, who also lived in Denver, stood in front of him. "Thanks for coming," Shawn said as Perry sat beside him. The two of them continued to wait, the mood somber and anxious between them.

Night ended and clouds dappled with rosy streaks of light stretched across the sky. A receptionist walked into the waiting area to begin her morning shift. Shawn sprang out of his chair to speak with her.

SHAWN

I walked up to her and muttered, "Well, it's good to see somebody around here finally. They shut this place down at midnight, and you're about the first person I've seen since. I never saw my girlfriend's doctor again. No one ever came out after a couple of hours to tell me what happened, like they said they would. Nobody! Is this how you treat people? I've been up all night, pacing around in here thinking Kate is probably dead. An update from somebody would have been nice." I was half-delirious from lack of sleep, shock, stress, panic, anger, frustration, fear, and dread. Imaginary