

# The Accident

A NOVEL

**LINWOOD  
BARCLAY**



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## PROLOGUE

Their names were Edna Bauder and Pam Steigerwald, and they were grade school teachers from Butler, Pennsylvania, and they had never been to New York before in their entire lives. New York was hardly the other side of the planet, but when you lived in Butler, almost everything seemed that way. As Pam's fortieth birthday approached, her friend Edna said you're going to have a birthday weekend you are never, ever going to forget, and on that count she turned out to be absolutely right.

Their husbands were delighted when they heard this was a "girls only" weekend. When they learned it was going to be two full days of shopping, a Broadway show, and going on the *Sex and the City* tour, they said they would rather stay home and blow their brains out. So they put their wives on the bus and said have fun and try not to get too drunk because there's a lot of muggers in New York, everybody knows that, and you have to keep your wits about you.

They found a hotel near Fiftieth and Third that was, at least by New York standards, reasonable, although it still seemed like a lot considering all they were going to do was sleep there. They'd vowed to save money by not taking cabs, but the maps of the subway system looked like a schematic for the space shuttle, so they decided, what the hell. They went to Bloomingdale's and Macy's and a huge shoe outlet in Union Square that would have held every store in Butler and still had room left over for the post office.

"I want my ashes scattered through this place when I die," Edna said,

trying on a pair of sandals.

They tried to get to the top of the Empire State Building, but the line to get in was huge, and when you had only forty-eight hours in the Big Apple you didn't want to spend three of them waiting in line so they bailed.

Pam wanted to eat lunch at that deli, the one from that movie where Meg Ryan had the fake orgasm. Their table was right next to the one they used in the movie—there was even a sign hanging over it to mark the spot—but when they got back to Butler they'd tell everyone they got the actual table. Edna ordered a pastrami sandwich with a knish, even though she had no idea what a knish was. Pam said, "I'll have what she's having!" and the two of them went into fits of hysterics when the waitress rolled her eyes.

While having coffee afterwards, Edna said, almost out of nowhere, "I think Phil's been seeing that waitress at Denny's." And then she burst into tears, and Pam asked why she suspected such a thing, that she thought Edna's husband Phil was a good guy who'd never cheat, and Edna said she didn't think he was actually sleeping with her or anything, but he went there for coffee every single day, so that had to mean something. And the thing was, he hardly ever touched her anymore.

"Come on," Pam said. "We're all busy, we got kids, Phil's working two jobs, who's got the energy?"

"Maybe you're right," Edna said.

Pam said, "You need to get your mind off that nonsense. You brought me here to have fun." She opened her New York Fodor's tourist guidebook to the spot where she'd put a sticky note and said, "You need more retail therapy. We're going to Canal Street."

Edna had no idea what that was. Pam said you could buy purses—designer purses, or at least purses that looked just like designer purses—for next to nothing down there. You have to ask around for the best deals, she said. She'd read in a magazine somewhere that sometimes the best stuff, it's not even out where the people can see it. You have to go into a back room or something.

"You're talkin' my language, honey," Edna said.

So they grabbed yet another cab and asked to be taken to the corner of Canal and Broadway, but at Lafayette and Grand the taxi came to a dead stop.

“What’s happened?” Edna asked the driver.

“Accident,” he said in an accent Pam thought could be anything from Salvadoran to Swiss. “I can’t turn around. Is just few blocks that way.”

Pam paid the driver and they started walking in the direction of Canal. A block up, a crowd had gathered. Edna said, “Oh my God.”

She looked away, but Pam was transfixed. A man’s legs were splayed across the hood of a yellow cab that had crashed into a streetlight. His upper body had gone through the windshield and was draped over the dashboard. A mangled bicycle was trapped under the car’s front wheels. There was no one behind the wheel. Maybe the driver had already been taken to the hospital. People with FDNY and NYPD on their backs were inspecting the car, telling the crowd to move back.

Someone said, “Fucking bike couriers. Amazing it doesn’t happen more often.”

Edna took Pam by the elbow. “I can’t look at this.”

By the time they found their way to Canal and Broadway, they hadn’t exactly put that horrible image out of their heads, but they’d been repeating a “These things happen” mantra that would allow them to still make the most they could out of this weekend.

Pam used her camera phone to get a shot of Edna standing under the Broadway street sign, and then Edna got a shot of Pam doing the same. A man walking past offered to take pictures of the two of them together, but Edna said no thank you, telling Pam later it was probably just a ploy to steal their phones. “I wasn’t born yesterday,” Edna said.

As they moved east on Canal the two of them felt as though they’d wandered into a foreign country. Weren’t these what the markets in Hong Kong or Morocco or Thailand looked like? Stores jammed together, merchandise spilling out onto the street?

“Not exactly Sears,” Pam said.

“So many Chinese people,” Edna said.

“I think that’s ’cause it’s Chinatown,” Pam said.

A homeless man wearing a Toronto Maple Leafs jersey asked for change. Another tried to hand them a flyer but Pam held up her hand defensively. Throngs of teenage girls giggled and gawked, some able to carry on conversations while music chattered from the buds stuffed into their ears.

The store windows were jammed with necklaces, watches, sunglasses.

A “WE BUY GOLD” sign was positioned out front of one. A long, vertical sign hanging off a fire escape read “Tattoo—Body Piercing—Henna Temporary Supplies—Wholesale Body Jewelry—Books Magazines Art Objects 2nd floor.” There were signs pushing “Leather” and “Pashmina” and countless banners in Chinese characters. And even a Burger King.

The two women went into what they thought was one store, but it turned out to be dozens. Like a mini-mall, or a flea market, with each business ensconced in its own own glass-walled cubicle. They all offered a specialty. Stalls for jewelry, DVDs, watches, purses.

“Look at this,” Edna said. “A Rolex.”

“It’s not real,” Pam said. “But it looks fabulous. Think anyone in Butler knows the difference?”

“Think anyone in Butler even knows what a Rolex is?” Edna laughed. “Oh, check out the bags!”

Fendi, Coach, Kate Spade, Louis Vuitton, Prada. “I can’t believe these prices,” Pam said. “What would you normally pay for a bag like this?”

“Way, way more,” Edna said.

The Chinese man running the stall asked if they wanted help. Pam, trying to act as though she knew the territory, which was not easy when you had a New York guidebook sticking halfway out of your purse, asked, “Where do you have the *real* deals?”

“What?” he said.

“These are nice,” she said. “But where do you keep the prime stuff?”

Edna shook her head nervously. “No, these are fine. We can pick from these.”

But Pam persisted. “A friend told me, I’m not sure if it was your place specifically, but there might be some other bags, but not on display here.”

The man shook his head. “Try her,” he said, pointing deeper into the rabbit warren of shops.

Pam went to the next kiosk and, after giving the bags a cursory look, asked the elderly Chinese woman, dressed in a brilliant red silk jacket, where they were hiding the good stuff.

“Huh?” the woman said.

“The best bags,” Pam said. “The best knockoffs.”

The woman gave Pam and Edna a long look, thinking that if these two were undercover cops, they were the best she’d ever seen. Finally, she said, “You go out the back door, go left, look for door with number 8 on

it. Go down there. Andy'll help you."

Pam glanced excitedly at Edna. "Thank you!" she said, and grabbed hold of Edna's arm, tugging her to a door at the end of the narrow mall.

"I don't like this," Edna said.

"Don't worry, it's okay."

But even Pam was caught up short when they went through the door and found themselves in an alley. Dumpsters, trash strewn everywhere, abandoned appliances. The door closed behind them and when Edna grabbed it she found it locked.

"Great," she said. "Like that accident didn't freak me out enough."

"She said go left, so let's go left," Pam said.

They didn't have to walk far before they found the metal door with an "8" painted on to it. "Do we knock or just go in?" Pam asked.

"This is your brilliant idea, not mine," Edna said.

Pam rapped lightly, and when no one came after ten seconds, she pulled on the handle. The door was unlocked. They were met with a short set of steps leading down a dark stairwell. But there was a glimmer of light at the bottom.

"Hello? Andy?" Pam called out.

There was no answer.

"Let's go," Edna said. "I saw some purses at the other place that were perfect."

"We're already here," Pam said. "Might as well check it out." She went down the stairs, feeling the temperature drop with each step. She peered into a room at the bottom, then turned and looked back up at Edna with a huge grin on her face. "This is *so* the place."

Edna followed her into a dense, cluttered, low-ceilinged room that was jammed with handbags. They were on tabletops, hanging from hooks on the walls, hanging from hooks in the ceiling. Maybe because it was cold, it reminded Edna of a meat locker, but instead of sides of beef dangling from above, it was leather goods.

"I must be dead," Pam said. "We're in Purse Heaven."

Tubular fluorescent lights flickered and buzzed above their heads as they began picking through bags on the display tables.

"If this is a fake Fendi, I'll eat Phil's hat," Edna said, inspecting one bag. "The leather feels so real. I mean, it is real *leather*, right? It's just the *labels* that are fake? I'd love to know how much this one is."

Pam noticed a curtained door at one end of the room. “Maybe that Andy guy is in there.” She started walking toward it.

Edna said, “Wait. We should get out of here. Look at us. We’re in some basement, off an alley, in New York City, and no one has any idea whatsoever where we are.”

Pam rolled her eyes. “God, you’re so *Pennsylvania*.” She reached the doorway and called out. “Mr. Andy? The Chinese lady, said you could help us?” As soon as she’d said “Chinese lady,” she felt like an idiot. That really narrowed it down.

Edna had gone back to examining the lining of the fake Fendi.

Pam reached out and pulled aside the curtain.

Edna heard a funny sound, a kind of *pfft*, and by the time she’d looked over, her friend was on the floor. Not moving.

“Pam?” She dropped the purse. “Pam, are you okay?”

As she approached she noticed that Pam, who was on her back, had a red dot on the middle of her forehead and something was running out of it. Like Pam had sprung a leak.

“Oh my God, *Pam*?”

The curtain opened and a tall, thin man, with dark hair and a scar over his eye, stepped out. He had a gun, and it was pointed straight at her head.

In her last remaining second, Edna spotted, just inside the room beyond the curtain, an elderly Chinese man, seated at a desk, his forehead resting on it, a rivulet of blood draining from his temple.

The last thing Edna heard was a woman—not Pam, because Pam was done talking—saying, “We have to get out of here.”

The last thing Edna thought was, *Home. I want to go home.*