



A THRILLER

# THE LAST

GIL SNIDER

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I wish to dedicate this book to all of my multiple sclerosis patients, whose courage, determination, and perseverance in the face of this difficult and unpredictable disease has been an inspiration to me.

## Prologue

*He could feel the closeness of Death, as palpable as the blasts of cold winter wind that shook the cabin to its very foundation. Samuel Morehouse accepted his early demise stoically, as his ancestors had for hundreds of years. What saddened him, though, was his wife's stubborn denial of the inevitability of his demise and the implication of his passing on their daughter's future.*

Rebecca Morehouse, her face flushed from the radiance of the wood fire, lifted the cast-iron pot from the fire with a long bar and set it on the oak table that had been in the Morehouse family for generations. The heavy metal kept the water boiling while she dipped a ceramic cup in and held it there until the handle became almost too hot to hold. Then she poured in a spoonful of dried herbs and stirred until the steam carried the aroma up to her nose in a soft, warm cloud. Using a thick linen cloth to protect her fingers, she carried the cup to her pallid husband, who lay in the bed across the darkened room.

"Drink it while it is still hot. It will break the fever more quickly."

Samuel rose with painful slowness, then leaned on his elbow and held the cup with a skeletal hand, his veins painting dark blue patterns through his translucent skin. As he sipped the tea, he periodically coughed up thick wads of bloody mucus. His sunken eyes reflected his profound weakness, and several times his wife supported the cup so it wouldn't slip from his grasp. He wrapped his cold fingers around his wife's hand and gave it a gentle, loving squeeze before she set the empty cup down on the nightstand.

The sound of a heavy footstep crunching on gravel made Rebecca start. "What was that?" Her ears strained to hear through the night wind.

"I heard nothing," Samuel mumbled.

"No, I heard someone treading on the trail from Artemis's shack."

"Perhaps it is your sister and my brother come to visit."

"Why would they come up the trail? Their house lies in the opposite direction."

Rebecca took a lantern and stepped onto the porch into the bitter winter night.

Their farm lay at the edge of a dense forest that covered the entire slope of Eden Mountain up to its flat crest, which had been painstakingly cleared and transformed into the Morehouse family compound over many generations. A single trail led through the trees to the settlement, and poor drunk Artemis Donnard, their neighbor, was never sober enough at this hour to make the difficult journey from his pitiful shack. At the trail's end, Rebecca and Samuel had laid a broad gravel pathway to keep their vital connection to the outside world from becoming a muddy morass during heavy rains. It was from that path that Rebecca had heard the sound, like the crunching of a single pair of boots.

Rebecca's lantern was too dim to illuminate anything beyond the porch, so she crept cautiously down the steps, swinging the lamp in broad arcs. She sensed nothing but the clouds speeding through the starry sky and the wind rustling the trees.

"Isaiah? Miriam?" she called into the darkness. Hearing nothing, she retreated inside from the bitter cold but was stopped by an intense fit of coughing that left her dizzy. She steadied herself against a nearby chair.

"You should be drinking some tea yourself, woman," Samuel said.

"Never you mind what I should be drinking. It is your job to do the farm work and mine to know the remedies, so do not tell me how to do my job."

"For fifteen years, have I ever been able to tell you how to do anything? Why should my dying allow me any new rights?" He sank back into the bed.

Rebecca wagged her finger at her husband. "Do not babble on about dying. I will not hear such talk in this house."

"We have been married too long to be deceiving one another," he said with a sigh. "Besides, it does not matter what happens to me or to you. We must concern ourselves only with Ruth." He summoned all his reserves of energy and sat up. "She is the last."

"She is not the last," Rebecca cried. "Not yet. We are not dead, and Miriam and Isaiah are younger than either of us."

"They remain childless. Ten years of trying, and nothing has come of it. Get it through your head that it is a matter of time until our daughter is the last. She cannot be allowed to contract our illness." Samuel stopped to catch his breath, then continued. "In town, there are real doctors trained in schools in big cities. Two years ago, one of them came up here and saved her life. They can examine our blood, have machines that can look inside our bodies, and they have medicines—real medicines—not your roots and herbs. We should see if they can help us."

"It is the Lord's doing that Ruth's life has been spared so far. You know we cannot leave this mountain. Besides, I will not abandon the two of you to seek help."

As Samuel's head fell back into his pillow, a knock sounded.

Rebecca grabbed the iron poker from the fireplace and took a tentative step toward the door. "Who is there?"

"Miriam and Isaiah," said a woman's voice. "Who else would it be?"

Rebecca opened the door to a burst of cold wind that whistled over the bare mountaintop. Two dimly lit forms stood outside the reach of the fireplace's glow. "I thought I heard someone walking outside a few minutes ago. It must have been the wind. Come out of the cold. I have water boiled for tea."

"We have not come for tea," Miriam said, remaining on the porch. "We have come for the child."

Rebecca's eyes blazed. "You shall not have Ruth. Not while I or my husband still live."

"It is not your decision," Isaiah boomed. "We cannot have children, and if either of you should die, Ruth will be the last. If she does not come with us, she will die as well, which cannot be allowed to happen. It is God's will."

Rebecca retreated from the doorway and screamed at the shadowy figures. "You cannot have her. She is my child. I will not let you take her from me."

Samuel spoke out from his bed, too weak to raise himself. "Let Ruth go, Rebecca. This house holds nothing for her but death."

"It holds my love for her, and that is enough," Rebecca cried, tears streaming down her cheeks onto the rough-hewn pine floors. "I will not give her to them."

"We have talked about this many times," Miriam said. "We knew this day would come for you, as someday it will come for us. But for now, we are the only ones who can help her." She stepped toward the threshold, the firelight illuminating the concern and weariness on her face. "Please do not make me risk my life by coming in. Your daughter needs me too much."

A silence enveloped the house, broken only by the crackling of the logs burning to embers in the hearth.

"There are no alternatives," Samuel said wearily. "Let the child go."

Rebecca stood quietly and gathered herself, then called out to the back of the house. "Ruth, your aunt and uncle are here. Please come out and greet them."

A door in the back of the room opened. A pretty, slender girl with long chestnut hair and olive skin stepped into the room. Her intense brown eyes made her look years older than her twelve years. She wore a plain white linen dress, her hands clasped in front of her as she kept her eyes looking shyly to the floor.

"Good evening, Miriam and Isaiah, and may God's grace be on you. We have not had the pleasure of your visit for many days."

"Good evening, Ruth," Isaiah said, stepping into the cabin, "and may God's grace be on you as well. Your father's illness has kept us away. I am glad to see you well."

"My mother makes me stay in my room. This is the first I have seen of my father except from my doorway." Ruth gazed sadly at Samuel.

"Your parents should have sent you to us a long time ago," Miriam said, "but we did not have the heart to come here ourselves to get you. Get your coat, Ruth. You must come stay with us for a while until your father...recovers."

Ruth glanced at her mother, who nodded slowly, her face expressionless. Ruth retreated into her room and closed the door.

"You must at least let me kiss her goodbye," Rebecca pleaded.

"Sorry," Isaiah said, "but we cannot take that chance."

Ruth returned, a coarse woolen coat covering her dress, her eyes downcast. Her mother turned away quickly.

"Do not touch your mother," Miriam commanded. "Nor your father. You must not become ill with their affliction."

"Can I not kiss them goodbye before I leave?" Ruth said, seeming to fight back tears.

Miriam rushed in, put her arm around Ruth's shoulders, and hurried her out the door. "There is no time for that now. We must leave quickly."

As Ruth fought to free herself from her aunt's grasp, her uncle clutched her tightly and led her into the darkness.

The bang of the door as the wind slammed it shut made Rebecca jump. She struggled to maintain her composure as her daughter's cries faded into the night air, replaced by the crackling of the logs. She collapsed onto a fireside stool, her body convulsing with sobs.

"Is it God's will that we should die here alone, without our child?" she wept to her husband while looking for the answer in the heavens.

Samuel held his arm out and called to her. She walked over, lay down beside him, and cried herself to sleep in his arms.

\*\*\*

The fire had burned down to dull red embers when a sharp knock on the door awakened Rebecca. Opening her eyes, she felt disoriented, unsure if the sound had been part of a dream. But it returned, more insistent. She jumped out of bed and shook Samuel.

"Wake up. Your brother has brought our child back. Wake up!" But so close to death, Samuel barely opened his eyes before sinking back into his stupor. Rebecca ran to the door and flung it open, surprised and frightened by what greeted her.

Alone in the doorway stood a looming dark figure dressed not in homemade linen clothing but in a manufactured wool coat and black leather gloves, like someone from town would wear. He carried an elegant black leather bag, and his face was shielded from the cold by a thick woolen scarf.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" Strangers from town rarely visited – and never unannounced – especially at this hour. She narrowed the door's opening to a few inches, partly to block the cold wind but mainly as a shield between herself and the ominous stranger.

"My name is unimportant, Mrs. Morehouse. I came to talk about Ruth."

"What do you know about my daughter?"

"I know a lot, in some ways more than you do. I know that someday she will need special care that you and your family cannot provide. But don't worry, Mrs. Morehouse. When the time comes, I'll look out for her. I'll make sure she doesn't die the way you and your husband are doing."

Rebecca's features softened, and for the first time in weeks, a smile played across her face. "Are you truthful?"

He nodded.

"Then you must be an angel. An angel from God." She opened the door to let him in.

"I suppose you could say that." He stepped through the doorway into the cabin. After looking around, he set his leather bag on the table, removed a bottle from it, and poured a clear aromatic liquid onto a handkerchief from his pocket. Then, without warning, he grabbed Rebecca and twisted her arm behind her back, forcing the handkerchief into her mouth and muffling her screams. She fought in vain to free herself, but bit by bit, she weakened, her vision darkening and her consciousness ebbing. Thirty seconds later, she fell limply into his arms.

He laid her body across the table, then strode to the bedridden Samuel and yanked the pillow out from under his head. As Samuel awakened with a start, the visitor pushed the pillow onto his face and held it fast with the weight of his body. Half dead already, Samuel's struggles proved weaker than his wife's, and he perished quickly.

After confirming Rebecca's demise, the intruder pulled the handkerchief from her mouth and set her next to Samuel, carefully positioning them as if they were sleeping in each other's arms.

Then he poured half of the bottle's contents onto them, sprinkling the remainder around the cabin. With one smooth motion, he held the handkerchief against the embers until it burst into flame, then flung it onto the bed. The mattress erupted in a blaze, followed by a flash so intense that despite the protection of the scarf, the stranger had to shield his face as he grabbed his bag, rushed into the night, and hurried down the gravel path to the trail from which he had come.

# Chapter I

## *Three Years Later*

Dots floated wherever Dr. Anne Mastik looked. Tiny maroon specks so small that she might not have seen them if she didn't know they were there.

Some drifted alone like scattered flecks of dust. Some paired up as if caught in the act of kissing, while others lined up like long strings of bloody pearls. But she ignored them all as they moved quickly across her field of vision. Only when she saw them clustering did she grow concerned. And the clumps got bigger the more she looked. Initially appearing no larger than small bunches of grapes, they soon coalesced into enormous masses, exploding in size and number until they became all she could see.

Anne pulled her head up from her microscope and gazed out her laboratory window at the foothills of the distant Blue Ridge Mountains, their peaks riding on a sea of early morning fog. In her five years as an associate professor of Infectious Disease at the University of Virginia, this slide was the worst case of Staph sepsis she had seen. The telltale clumps of tiny round bacteria, tinted deep red by the Gram stain dye, told a deadly story. As a hospital-acquired infection, it would undoubtedly be resistant to the commonly used antibiotics. Labeled "MRSA," for Methicillin-Resistant *Staphylococcus aureus*, it required more-expensive, toxic antibiotics and had evolved into one of the most lethal infectious organisms in the United States. With no time to lose, Anne needed to switch the patient's antibiotics. When the phone on the sixth-floor Medicine Ward nursing station rang interminably, she hung up and called her friend Dr. Gary Nesmith, the staff physician, but his cellphone went to voicemail. No alternative. She had to go directly to the unit before the patient crashed.

Anne rose from her chair and turned toward the door, but her feet failed to react when her brain told them to. She stumbled, clutching the edge of the laboratory table to prevent a fall.

*God, that was close.* Her pulse pounded in her ears from the rush of adrenaline. She steadied herself against the table, then took off for the Medicine Ward as fast as her stiff legs would allow.

*Damn this MS.*

Anne made her way through the research building toward the elevator and rounded the corner just in time to see the doors closing.

She groaned. During her athletic years playing college soccer, the four-floor climb to the Medical Ward would have been considered good exercise. She would have taken the stairs two at a time and hardly broken a sweat, but spasticity in her legs caused by multiple sclerosis made maneuvering the steps a formidable task. Plus, this was the oldest and slowest elevator in the hospital, and the floor indicator showed it stopping at every floor. It would take at least ten minutes to make the round trip back to Anne's floor. If she didn't get the order to the pharmacy in the next few minutes, the

patient's first critical dose would be delayed, possibly fatally. With a sigh of disappointment, Anne turned to the stairwell and started her trek.

As she struggled up the four flights of the empty stairwell, Anne mulled over her situation. Her first attack of multiple sclerosis had occurred during her second year of medical school at the University of Virginia, two years into her marriage to Roger. She'd woken one morning with her entire left side numb. With winter midterm exams close by, she'd done nothing about it. Probably stress, she thought. Luckily, the numbness resolved after three weeks. She forgot about the episode until six months later, when the vision in her left eye blurred to the point where she couldn't read. Reviewing her brain MRI scan with her neurologist, he pointed to evidence: abundant scarring in the form of scattered white ovals. *No use in even attempting to count*, she recalled. She heard the doctor say the words "Multiple Sclerosis," but the rest of his explanations—about prognosis, treatment, and anything else that he thought a medical student would want to know—became a blur of words as her mind churned through what this meant to her life.

Anne stopped at the next floor to catch her breath. She put her foot on the first step, held onto the railing for support, and continued her climb.

Anne's original reaction to her disease had leaned toward intellectual acceptance but emotional denial. She'd become obsessively independent and even persisted in her dream of becoming a surgeon despite her adviser's cautionary counsel. But when every surgical residency turned her down, she realized that no surgical program director could possibly accept a candidate who might struggle to tie a knot, let alone perform intricate operative procedures. The stress of the rejections triggered a relapse of her MS, which affected her right arm and both legs.

Five days of complete dependency, lying in a hospital bed receiving intravenous steroids and total nursing care, proved unbearable. In her state of denial, she became a difficult patient. But reality finally hit her during rehab, when it took a week of intensive physical therapy to master a simple unassisted trip to the bathroom and another week to get back the coordination to button her blouse.

Shaking off a deep depression, Anne resolved to conquer the disease and resume life where she had left off. Who knew how much was attributable to the steroids and how much to her stubbornness, but by the time of discharge, she was well on the mend. She recovered almost completely from that relapse, but Rehab gave her plenty of time for a realistic career assessment. She needed a specialty that, if necessary, she could practice from a wheelchair. Infectious Disease, which involved studying microorganisms capable of attacking any body organ, would be perfect. It involved no medical procedures, and she would maintain her general medical knowledge while still interacting with a broad range of other specialists. She seized upon a last-minute opening at UVA to stay on as a resident in Internal Medicine, leading to a guaranteed fellowship in Infectious Disease.

On the downside, residency training was notoriously hard on marriages, even stable ones. Anne's long hours, her obsession with her independence, and the fatigue

induced by her MS had opened fault lines in her marriage. It all culminated in a major split when she accepted an academic position with a tenured track at the university.

Halfway up the third flight of stairs, Anne stopped. *It would have been quicker to take the elevator.* She looked up and shook her head. *Too late to stop now.* She grabbed the handrail and pulled herself up with each step. By the time she reached the sixth-floor landing, she was winded, her legs and arms aching. She brushed back the strands of strawberry blonde hair that had slipped in front of her face and paused to catch her breath.

"Can I get the door for you, Dr. Mastik?" said a medical student descending the steps.

Anne managed a weary smile. "No, thanks. I'm okay." She opened the door and dragged herself into the Medical Ward.

At the nursing station, she half sat, half fell into a chair and logged into the records system to write the order for the new antibiotic.

"What an honor," boomed a familiar male voice behind her. "Dr. Anne Mastik herself has come from her laboratory on high to visit the poor foot soldiers here on the front lines of patient care."

Anne smirked but continued typing. "You know my laboratory is not on high, Gary. It is exactly sixty-four steps below this floor. I know because I counted them on my way here. And if you haven't seen me for the last two weeks, it's because you're home at 8:00 p.m. when I'm rounding."

As Gary rested his arms on the nursing station desk and grinned, Anne gave him a quick glance. He'd always been a bright, cheerful guy, rounder in the torso than he should have been, with curly black hair and blacker rimmed glasses. Their friendship dated back to medical school, when he had been the one male friend who stood by Anne during her MS relapses. They'd become even closer after Gary's wife, Katy, died of breast cancer a few months after Anne's divorce.

"I told you to go into Derm," he said. "Hours are more humane. There are worse ways to make a living than injecting Botox from nine to five."

"Gary, for even a fraction of a second, could you imagine me working a nine-to-five job?"

"I couldn't, but I'm sure Roger could have."

She frowned and kept typing. "That was his problem, not mine." When Anne had accepted her academic position, Roger had seen no light at the end of the tunnel. After the divorce was finalized, he moved to the West Coast and remarried within a year. Anne had been too shattered to even cry. As paralyzed emotionally as she had been physically, she self-isolated in her apartment for weeks. Finally, she'd fought back by immersing herself in her work.

"You made it both of yours," Gary said. "You had an out. You could have been anything you wanted."

"You mean anything Roger wanted me to be. He knew what I was like before we got married. I wasn't about to be a stay-at-home wife simply because of" — Anne's face darkened — "because of some disease." *Time to end this bull session. More important things*

to think about than Roger. "By the way, your patient has MRSA. He needs an immediate change of antibiotics."

"You could've called me and saved yourself sixty-four steps."

"Your phone went to voicemail."

"Sorry. I was in a conference. Haven't had a chance to check for messages."

"This couldn't wait. There's lunch break, change of shift, and any number of ways his first dose might get delayed. I couldn't take that chance, and I needed to check his status." She hit the ENTER key. "There. Done."

"I've got a problem patient for you," Gary said.

"I love puzzles. Shoot."

"Thirty-six-year-old female veterinary assistant with a combined kidney and pancreatic transplant eight months ago for end-stage diabetic kidney disease, on the usual cocktail of meds to suppress her immune system. Admitted yesterday with a fever of 105, severely low blood pressure, elevated white blood cell count, and markedly abnormal liver tests. Only finding on the exam was mild tenderness over her liver. We scanned her from head to foot. Nothing. Bloodwork for AIDS was negative. What's she got?"

"A diabetic with an impaired immune system who works with animals? She could have almost anything." Anne tapped her fingers as she pondered. *Good case*. In this one patient, Gary had the three great challenges of Infectious Disease: evolving bacterial antibiotic resistance; the bizarre infections of the immunologically compromised patient; and finally, the zoonoses, the hidden diseases that spread to humans from animal reservoirs. "Let's see. Most of the viral infections from her transplant should have shown themselves months ago. What about parasites like toxoplasmosis from the animals she works with?"

"Her transplant team covered her for toxo with antibiotics months ago, knowing she was a setup for infection."

"Tuberculosis? Fungal infections?"

"Chest X-ray, sinus CT, and spinal tap – all negative."

"What about bacterial cultures?"

"All cooking. Nothing showing yet."

"Have you done Gram stains of her body fluids?"

"Gram-positive, rod-shaped bacteria in her blood."

"Why didn't you tell me that before?"

"You said you liked puzzles."

Anne rolled her eyes. "Gram-positive rods mean the bacteria are either *Listeria* or *Clostridium*."

"My vote was for *Listeria*."

"The antibiotics they put her on for toxo should cover that. What about her liver tenderness?"

"Not impressed. She barely moaned when I pressed down."

"Pain sensation in diabetics is diminished. My bet is *Clostridia* gangrene of the gallbladder, early enough that it didn't show up on the scans. Call surgery pronto, get

an ultrasound of her gallbladder stat, and cover her with chloramphenicol as an additional antibiotic before her gallbladder ruptures. For bacteria, it's a short stroll from her gallbladder to her brand-new million-dollar pancreas."

"Thanks," Gary said, nodding. "By the way, an old fraternity brother of mine is coming to town this weekend. Care to meet him?"

"I thought only women set people up for dates."

"Can't a guy do a friend a favor?" Gary said, sounding exasperated.

Anne reached out and touched his hand. "Sorry. I didn't mean to snap at you. It's still so hard for me to believe I can ever trust someone." Roger's parting words filled her head. Halfway out the door, suitcase in hand, he'd turned and glared at Anne, whose legs were so weakened from the stress of the breakup that she'd had to support herself on the back of a club chair.

*"Look at yourself," he said. "Who the hell would want you like that?" Then he slammed the door behind him and walked out of her life.*

Gary's voice brought Anne back. "You ever think that maybe you need to get out of your lab and meet people? Your biological clock doesn't stop ticking because grant proposals are due."

"Babies aren't part of my life plan right now. Now you—you would make a wonderful dad if you could only find the right woman." Anne lightly squeezed his hand. Remarriage was probably a long way off for Gary, who was still shattered by his wife's death.

Before Gary could respond, Anne's beeper directed her to the hospital operator.

"Catch you later," Gary said, heading down the hall. "If you change your mind about my friend, let me know. We can all go out for a drink."

Anne waved him off as she dialed the operator.

"Dr. Mastik, you've got a call from West Virginia."

*That's a new one.* "Okay, put it through."

"Mornin', Dr. Mastik. My name's Matt Drisner. I'm the Public Health Service physician here in Eden, West Virginia." The voice on the line had a southern drawl and down-home casualness that Anne didn't hear much in Charlottesville. "I saw that you're speaking at the *Updates in Medicine* conference at The Omni Homestead Resort this weekend, and I was wondering if you could help me with a little problem I've got here."

*Good Lord, I almost forgot about that conference.* "I'll try. What's wrong?"

"I've got a fifteen-year-old girl who lives on a mountaintop with her aunt and uncle. Real country folk, live-off-the-land types. She's been pretty sick for the last week. Fever to 104. Can't get out of bed. I've cultured her up twice, but the lab keeps growing contaminants, and they're only growing from her blood. Urine, sputum, everything else is clean."

"What are you covering her with?" Anne said, referring to the antibiotics the patient was currently taking.

"We've got her on ceftriaxone, but I give it as a muscle injection. She's holding her own for now, but she's not getting any better."

"You can't manage sepsis in someone's home," Anne said. "You've got to give the ceftriaxone intravenously, and she needs to be in a hospital, in Intensive Care."

"Believe me, I've tried. This family is the last of a community that's been isolated on a mountain for generations. As far as I know, not one of them has been to town for decades. You can't pry them out of that house with a crowbar. I was hoping you could convince her family to let the girl go to the hospital."

"You're the local doc. You know them better than I ever will. If they won't listen to you, what makes you think they'll listen to me?"

"They've been at odds with the town for generations. They don't trust the local medical establishment, or anyone else for that matter. Maybe they would see you as being more...objective."

"Get a court order. The aunt and uncle are endangering the well-being of the child."

"Tried that too. This is a small town. Small, religious, and extremely conservative. The judge saw this as a First Amendment issue, and I don't have time to go to the Supreme Court."

"What happened to her parents? Can't you talk with them?"

"They died in a house fire three years ago. Her aunt and uncle are the only family she's got."

A pang hit Anne. Only ten years ago, her own parents had died in a car crash. Her heart went out to this poor girl. "Unfortunately, I can't simply drop what I'm doing and drive out to West Virginia."

"Eden's not far from The Homestead. After the conference, you could drive there in a few hours. It would really help if you could convince them to bring her to the hospital."

"I'm sorry, but I've got a terribly busy schedule right now. I can't take time off to argue with a couple of Christian Scientists."

"They're not Christian Sci –"

"I don't care what religion they are. I'm sorry, but I can't come."

A rising urgency sounded in Drisner's voice. "Dr. Mastik, you have no idea how important this girl's life is. I can't explain why, but I can tell you she is...unique." Drisner's voice cracked at the word. "I really, really need your help."

Anne paused. *He's holding back on something that makes this deeply personal for him. And she's an orphan.* That broke Anne's heart.

"Okay, let me speak to my chairman. I'll see what I can do."

"I'll be at the conference this weekend." He sounded pitifully hopeful. "Can you let me know then?"

"I make no promises, but I'll do what I can."

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Anne finally made it home at 10:00 p.m., her legs fatigued to the point where she simply fell back on the living room couch. She kicked off her shoes and reflected on the day. Gary's MRSA patient had improved, her lab experiment was on autopilot—at least for the next week—and her conference lecture was packed away on PowerPoint. Life was

good. All that remained was to call Bob Rothberg, which she dreaded, especially at this late hour.

"Bob, this is Anne Mastik. Hope I didn't wake you." Dr. Robert Rothberg was chairman of her department and her boss.

"I was getting ready for bed. Everything okay?" He sounded mildly annoyed.

"Everything's fine, but I need to discuss a situation that came up. I got a call today from a West Virginia doc. He asked me, actually begged me, to consult on a patient."

"So, what's the problem?"

"It's not a phone consult. He wants me to see the patient personally."

"What! Isn't that stepping over the line a bit?"

"At first, I told him no way, but he was desperate. It sounded personal."

After a heavy silence, Rothberg sighed. "You really are a softy, Anne. You've already made up your mind, haven't you?"

"I might be able to wrap it all up this weekend. Besides, I'm already late for my monthly natalizumab, and it's the only thing that keeps my MS under control. I'll definitely be back Monday."

"But...?" Rothberg said, suspicion edging his voice.

Anne steeled herself and spoke. "Everybody but you is at the Chicago HIV conference, and I need someone to cover consult service until I get back." Bob had been hired as chairman based on his research and administrative abilities, not his clinical or teaching skills. This was no small favor.

"You've got a pair, Anne, calling me at ten at night for this."

"Bob, this guy's Public Health Service. I'm sure he sends his sick patients to Morgantown. What if the university could establish a solid referral base in West Virginia? Isn't that why you wanted me to give a lecture at the conference—for the referring PCPs?" *Nothing like the prospect of more patients to whet the appetite of a department chairman.*

A protracted silence filled the other end of the phone as Anne held her breath.

"All right, all right, I'll do it. But you owe me one. And no dawdling, understand?"

"Thanks, Bob. You won't regret this."

"I already do." But then he added, "Oh, hell. Have a good time."

As Anne climbed into bed, images of the sick, lonely orphan girl on the mountaintop filled her mind. She lay down and allowed herself a long gaze at the photograph of her parents on her nightstand before turning off the light.

## Chapter II

Anne left the Shenandoah Valley and threaded her way over the meandering country roads that ran along the stretch of the Blue Ridge Mountains between Virginia and West Virginia. As the dramatic ending of Mendelssohn's "Reformation" Symphony playing on her car's audio and came to a close, Led Zeppelin's "Stairway To Heaven" popped uninvited into her head.

*Of course, it did.* Over the years, whenever she and Roger had driven to The Homestead, their favorite getaway, they'd fight over the music. How typical that the two of them could transform the most scenic, romantic spot in Virginia into a subject of contention.

The Homestead was Virginia's venerable resort, tucked in an out-of-the-way corner of the state known for its scenic beauty and natural hot springs. Since Revolutionary War days, it had been the playground of the rich and famous, but when American vacation spots lost their appeal to the beach playgrounds of Europe, South America, and the Caribbean, the resort fell into decline. However, in recent years The Homestead was staging a comeback, fed by American passions for golf and skiing. As the red-brick and white-limestone tower of The Homestead came into view over the tops of the surrounding hills, Anne dreaded confronting the memories she had so carefully exorcised.

She got out of her car after pulling up to the hotel entrance and gazed around. Here in the mountains, the elevation tempered the sweltering heat of summer that usually sapped her strength. *At least here I won't be held prisoner to central air conditioning.*

Coming out to greet her was a lanky bellhop, barely out of his teens. "Take your bags, ma'am?"

"No, thanks. My bag's got wheels. I'll take it in."

He looked crestfallen.

*Uh-oh, poor kid needs the tip.* "Actually, I could use some help. You take the bag. I'll take the laptop."

"You hurt your leg, ma'am?" he asked as they entered the lobby, with its vast expanse of plush carpeting and elegant leather chairs. The ornate trayed ceiling was flanked by two long rows of Corinthian columns echoing the Greek revival architecture of nearby Charlottesville.

"No. I...walk funny, that's all."

"We get a lot of people here with arthritis that goes to the spa. The hot springs does 'em a lot of good. You might give that a try, ma'am."

Anne nodded politely but didn't want to embarrass him by telling him the spa would only make her symptoms worse. The hot water would raise her body temperature and make her so weak that she couldn't get out of the tub, a reaction so predictable that decades ago, it was a diagnostic procedure for multiple sclerosis.

"Are you from around here?" Anne asked.

"West Virginia, ma'am. Right across the border."

"Ever hear of a town called Eden?"

"Yes, ma'am. Beautiful place. That's why it's called Eden."

"How would I get there?"

"Drive up the road to Warm Springs and make a left onto Route 39 until you get to the Monongahela National Forest. That's when you'll be in West Virginia. Keep driving, and right about the time you think you're lost, you'll be out of the Forest, and you'll see a sign that'll direct you to Eden. Here's the reception desk, ma'am. Need me to take your bag upstairs?"

"No, thanks. I'll handle it from here." She handed him a ten-dollar bill.

"Have a nice weekend, ma'am." He pocketed his tip and sauntered away.

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Pasting her *Hello. My Name Is...* nametag to her jacket lapel, Anne took a deep breath and entered the reception hall.

She was late, having intentionally spent more time than necessary deciding which suit to wear to the reception. A substantial crowd was already milling around the bar, which she skirted in favor of the deserted vegetable platter. As she grabbed a carrot, a stocky, bespectacled man approached her, bald except for a ring of graying hair encircling a head slightly too large for his body.

"Dr. Mastik, I'm so glad you could come. It's been years since we could convince an Infectious Disease specialist to give one of our lectures."

"No problem, Doctor...?" Anne's eyes trailed to find his paper nametag, but in its place was a plastic tag festooned with a blue ribbon and thin, illegible letters.

"Langston. Martin Langston, from Roanoke. I'm the conference organizer."

"I guess I should be thanking you for the opportunity. I haven't been to The Homestead for a long time. It holds a lot of memories."

"Good ones, I hope."

"Of course," she lied. "I'm looking forward to taking some nice long walks in the woods."

"Or a nice long walk on a golf course."

"I'm not much on golf."

"This is a wonderful place to learn the game, and I know precisely the person to teach you. Let me introduce you to one of your fellow lecturers." He called to a tall, dark-haired man who was chatting with a group of physicians on the other side of the room, "Evan, come over here for a minute. I want you to meet someone."

Anne squirmed. *This was not at all what I had in mind.*

"Evan Garaud," Langston whispered. "He's absolutely brilliant. Moved around academically in the past few years but was heading the stem cell and transplant research team at West Virginia University when a biotech firm snared him. Big loss to the university."

Dr. Garaud broke free of the cluster of physicians and strolled over, holding a drink. Handsome, meticulously dressed, and half a head taller than most of the attendees, he projected a poised confidence that set him apart. He gripped Dr.

Langston's hand and shook it firmly. "Marty, you must have done an excellent job arranging the meeting this year if they gave you the blue ribbon."

Langston ran his hand over his bare scalp. "I certainly didn't get it for 'Best of Show.' Evan, I want you to meet the young woman who was kind enough to come from Charlottesville to—"

"You must be Anne Mastik," Evan said, shaking Anne's hand. "I enjoyed your review article on opportunistic infections in allograft recipients. Very professionally researched, beautifully written."

Anne blushed, and despite Evan enfolding her hand a few seconds more than etiquette required, she made no attempt to withdraw it. Dr. Langston quietly slipped away.

"Thanks for the compliment, Dr. Garaud. It's always nice to know that someone, somewhere, is reading your work. What are you lecturing on?"

"Please, call me Evan. I believe we're both on the docket for tomorrow morning. I'll be discussing recent advances in cultured tissue transplantation. As I recall, your topic is tuberculosis."

"You seem to know a lot of people. Do you lecture here often?"

"I've managed to wrangle a lecture out of Marty every year for the past five conferences. I started giving these talks before I was even at WVU. Now that I'm out of academics, it gives me an excuse to come back and hobnob with old friends."

"Where do you work now?"

"Northwest corner of North Carolina, near the Blue Ridge Mountains. It's the headquarters for Regen Corporation. We do front-line research on stem cell and organ transplantation. You wouldn't believe the breakthroughs we're about to make. It's amazing what can be accomplished when you don't have to waste time writing grant proposals."

"Don't I know it. Is that why you gave up academics?"

"One of many reasons. The pace is glacial. Meeting after meeting, departmental politics, red tape. Takes forever to get anything done."

"Oh, come on. Stop being so cynical. All of that happens at UVA, but things still get accomplished, and it's exciting to be part of scientific progress."

"In business, time is money. If something needs to be done quickly, we take shortcuts. It's a different life."

*Uh-oh, I can see where this is going.* "Dr. Langston told me you play golf."

"I dabble. Especially when I'm here. Beautiful courses. Do you play?"

"Used to. My ex-husband would drag me along when he and his friends needed a fourth, but I could never understand the fascination with ten minutes of walking followed by fifteen seconds of hitting a ball."

"A common over-simplification. If you really learned to play, you would see the game in a different light. Particularly on the courses here. Perhaps we could go for a round tomorrow afternoon." He grinned. "If you don't like it, I'll buy you dinner."

"And if I do like it?"

"I'll still buy you dinner."

*Wait till he sees me walk. How am I supposed to hide my condition on a nine-hole course?*

"Sounds like a win-win to me," she said. "But only nine holes." *More than enough time to make an ass of myself.*

"Okay, but you don't know what you'll be missing if —"

"Dr. Mastik, I presume."

Anne and Evan both turned to see a casually dressed physician with sandy-blond hair and light blue eyes who shook Anne's hand with the strong, vigorous grip of a man raised in the country.

"I'm Matt Drisner, the guy who called you yesterday. About the girl."

"Oh, yes." She turned to Evan. "Evan, this is Dr. Matt Drisner. He's asked me to consult on a difficult case. A young girl with an undiagnosed immunodeficiency disease and an opportunistic infection."

Evan's eyebrows rose. "Right up your alley, Anne. Do you practice near here, Matt?"

"Not far. A small town called Eden."

"I've heard of it. Hidden treasure, from what I understand. Well, I'd better get going. I've got an early lecture. See you tomorrow, Anne, and nice meeting you, Matt."

"Sorry if I busted up the party," Drisner remarked.

"No party. Not yet, at any rate."

"I was eager to see when you'd be able to come to Eden."

"Would Sunday morning work?"

He cocked his head. "It's a tricky drive to Eden. I'm leaving tomorrow after dinner. If you'd like, I can drive you out there."

"No, thank you. I'm sure I can find it myself."

"The little girl is quite sick, and I was hoping you would be able to get to Eden before Sunday. The mountains of West Virginia are not a place to get lost late at night."

"I'll be there, Dr. Drisner, on Sunday morning as early as I can make it. I promise. Now if you will excuse me, I have a lecture to prepare for."

"If you change your mind, let me know. I'm on the eighth floor in the Tower."

*God, the man is obstinate. If that's what I was like, no wonder Roger divorced me.*

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Anne settled down on the bed in a cotton terry robe and allowed herself the rare pleasure of a glass of wine while reviewing her slides. Since contracting MS, she mostly shunned alcohol. She had problems enough with balance, and even a small glass of wine could impair her coordination enough to embarrass her. But what the hell—she was on vacation, and the longest distance she would walk tonight was to the bathroom.

Wine often made her mind wander but tonight, for the first time in months, not to her research or Roger. Instead, it made a beeline for Evan: the lingering touch of his hand, the gentleness of his eyes, his sense of humor, and the respect he'd shown for her as an academician.

*But what about that six-hour drive from Charlottesville to the North Carolina Blue Ridge? Oh well.*

She set her wine on the nightstand and blessed her foresight in ordering a single glass from room service. Otherwise, she might have been tempted to down a whole bottle and really make a fool of herself at tomorrow's conference.

She set the alarm and turned off the light. *Maybe Evan won't pick up on my MS. At least the weather is cool, so the fatigue might not get to me.* She closed her eyes and let the wine have its effect as she drifted off to sleep.

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In his room at the top of the Tower, Matt was awakened by the insistent dinging of his cell phone. He knew the caller by the specialized ringtone; besides, nobody else would call at this hour.

He answered and listened for several seconds.

"Yes, sir," he answered. "I convinced her to come, but she won't leave until Sunday morning.... Nothing I could do. She wouldn't leave earlier, and I said all I could without raising suspicion.... Yes, the girl will be okay. Good night, sir."

## Chapter III

Anne finished showering before her wake-up call. A feeling of anticipation had awakened her before her usual six o'clock arousal and stubbornly prevented her from going back to sleep. *Nothing to do but get up early, go to breakfast, and hopefully run into Evan before the start of the conference.*

Arriving at the dining room shortly after it opened, she picked up a croissant and coffee—about all her nervous stomach would tolerate. She sat facing the door and placed her laptop conspicuously on the chair next to her. As the seats at her table filled, she made small talk while her eyes searched the room. When a waiter announced the start of the conference, she gave up on meeting Evan and headed in.

Dr. Langston greeted her at the dais. "You're up first, Anne."

"I didn't see Evan at breakfast," she said. "Isn't his talk following mine?"

"I'm sure he slept in. He told me he would be up late making phone calls. Are you set up? We're ready to go."

Anne's lecture, "Re-Emergence of Antibiotic Resistant Tuberculosis as a Public Health Concern," went smoothly. She ran through it with time to spare, perhaps too much time. When she asked if there were any questions, only the whirring of her laptop fan broke the silence.

She turned, somewhat dispirited, and was surprised to find Evan occupying the seat next to hers on the dais.

"Tough crowd," he whispered as she sat.

"I could swear I saw them drinking coffee at breakfast."

Evan chuckled. "The first slot's the roughest. It's like standup comedy. Someone's always stuck as the warm-up act."

Langston briefly introduced Evan, who stood up to a smattering of applause.

"Good morning. I've been asked to talk on recent advancements in stem cell and tissue transplantation. I have spent my career chasing the Holy Grail of safe and effective tissue grafting into diseased organs, my particular interest being neural tissue. I would like to devote this talk to some general principles."

Evan's continued with a wrap-up of basic science and did little to rouse the crowd, but their interest seemed piqued when he cited stem cell transplant research in diabetes, cancer, Parkinson's disease, and Alzheimer's disease. And when he mentioned the use of stem cells to treat spinal cord injuries and multiple sclerosis, Anne detected a brief glance her way.

From there, Evan listed the challenges with the clinical use of stem cells, such as the need to suppress the immune system to avoid transplant rejection.

"For grafts to function, transplant recipients need immunosuppression, which requires the administration of highly toxic drugs. These drugs expose the body to attack from foreign agents, a subject that our previous lecturer"—he gestured to Anne—"is all too familiar with. Although we are developing less-damaging drugs, we are still left with the inescapable problem that stem cell recipients lead a life in which the family cat,

a plate of spoiled tuna salad, or a coughing child could expose them to potentially lethal infections.

"It is my belief that we are on the cusp of developing an immunologically neutral cell line that will fool the immune system into ignoring the implanted tissue. Our ability to treat disease and trauma will only be limited by how many of the two hundred and ten human tissue types can be coaxed into stem cell conversion. So far? Over one hundred and rising fast.

"I believe that within our lifetimes, we will see the development of new techniques that will help conquer the ailments of trauma, aging and disease that have plagued mankind since the days of Adam and Eve."

Evan sat down to hearty applause and a rush of physicians to the microphone.

"Thanks for warming them up," he whispered to Anne.

"You certainly had the livelier talk."

Dr. Langston took the podium and observed the quickly lengthening line behind the floor mike. "We will now entertain questions for both speakers."

The first questioner leaned into the microphone. "To Dr. Garaud. Funding for stem cell research has been a political football for decades. The Federal government is very restrictive about the use of funds. How can you do research without a reliable source of grant money?"

"Our corporation is privately funded and owned," Evan said. "Many of our private investors have intensely personal reasons for seeing our research succeed. If we show them results, they tend to leave us alone."

"Is your corporation ever going public?"

"Right now, we're a small fish in a large pond. We have a strong research program, particularly in stem cell treatment of diabetes and neurologic diseases. However, we are currently in development of an immunity-neutral cell line. If we can patent it, we will have a clear competitive advantage, which makes an IPO viable, perhaps as early as next year. Our corporate name is Regen."

Anne smirked internally as almost everyone in the room jotted down the company name. *Note to self: The key to a successful lecture is to end it with a stock tip.*

A young physician, dressed in jacket and tie despite the casual dress code, stepped up next. "My question is for Dr. Garaud. Could you respond to ethical concerns about stem cell research on embryonic tissue?"

"Our technique calls for cloning embryos. We use a process called parthenogenesis, which literally means 'virgin birth.' This gives us more control over the result's genetic composition and creates a life form that could only exist in a laboratory environment. In essence, we are dealing with a hypothetical life. It is as manmade as a toaster oven or cell phone. I have no ethical conflict about using these cells to save lives and reverse disabilities."

"But Dr. Garaud, against God's divine laws, you are creating monsters in the lab."

Anne could swear she saw the hairs on the back of Evan's neck bristle as his shoulders rose. "Doctor, when were you appointed God's authorized interpreter?" he said acidly.

"God never intended man to create life in this manner," the physician shouted.

Evan remained calm. "A hundred years ago, it was said that if God had intended man to fly, he would have given us wings and that the internal combustion engine was the work of Satan. Now, not only are we flying, but we've gone to the moon and other planets. God didn't need to give us wings. He gave us infinitely greater gifts: opposable thumbs and a brain with 100 billion nerve cells. And He told us to have dominion over all the earth and to subdue it. If we'd been complacent and not used those gifts, *that* would be against God's will."

Evan sat down to loud applause, and Dr. Langston quickly returned to the podium.

"This would be a good time to start our coffee break. Please be back in your seats in fifteen minutes for the cardiovascular section of the conference. I would like to thank Dr. Mastik and Dr. Garaud for two fascinating and informative lectures."

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A half-hour later, Anne met Evan at the first tee. To her surprise, he was sitting in a covered golf cart with two sets of clubs and a cooler in the back.

"I thought we'd play in style."

"Isn't a cart against the rules?" Anne asked.

"This isn't the PGA, and I'm not a purist. Go ahead and tee off."

Anne picked a driver from the bag, nervously approached the ball, and gave it a solid hit that hooked sharply and landed near a stand of trees to the left of the fairway. Evan's drive went down the middle of the fairway, coming to rest a dozen yards short of the green.

"You handled that fellow back at the conference very well," Anne commented during the drive.

"I get at least one religious fanatic at each lecture. After a while, you learn to deal with them on their own turf. I can fight them with the Bible, verse for verse, if they want to. In fact, I've got a Biblical quote app on my cell. You should download it. You might find it useful."

"You're very convinced of what you're doing."

"It's almost a crusade for me. When the techniques for stem cell implantation are perfected—and they will be within the next few years—it will revolutionize medical practice. We will only be limited by our imagination. We could replace dead heart tissue after heart attacks, repair retinal cells for blindness, do nerve and brain cell transplants for Parkinson's disease and multiple sclerosis, and pancreatic cell transplants for diabetes. We're only beginning to investigate a whole host of disorders: cystic fibrosis, sickle cell anemia, and muscular dystrophy. Give us some time, and they'll be a thing of the past. The cures are within our reach."

Evan dominated the game, but Anne could see he regarded it as nothing but a game. There was none of the intense competitiveness that Roger used to show.

Conversation came easily, and Anne felt a sense of comfort that she hadn't experienced with a man for some time.

As she prepared to tee off at the seventh hole, Evan sidled up next to her.

"May I make a suggestion?"

"Sure."

"I've figured out why you hook your shots. You might want to change your grip for this shot. Here, I'll show you."

He stood behind her and reached around to the club. His chest pressed softly against her back, his breath wafting against her cheek. Meanwhile, she concentrated on keeping her breathing under control as he enfolded her hands in his.

"Turn your right hand around a little and twist it slightly on your follow-through like this." He guided her through a practice swing, and as she turned her head in follow-through, she noticed Evan's eyes fixed on her. For a moment, a palpable silence hung in the air.

"Perfect. Loosen your legs when you swing."

"I...I'm a bit nervous right now."

He backed away. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be forward."

Anne reached out and touched his arm. "You weren't. I was feeling a little flustered, that's all." She didn't want to admit it, but long-dormant feelings had risen within her.

"Then no offense taken?"

"None at all."

The next two holes flew by. Anne sat close to Evan as he drove the golf cart, and she once dared to let her hand rest on his forearm. But with the early afternoon sun high in the sky, she was exhausted after eight holes.

"Here we are," Evan said as he got off the cart. "The notorious ninth hole."

They stood at the top of a fifty-foot rise above the green that lay off in the distance. A few yards away, the rise dropped precipitously to the level of the green.

Anne eyed the steep embankment with a sense of foreboding. "What do I do here?"

"The trick is to make sure your drive goes past the base of the hill. If it lands on the slope, there's no way of predicting which way it will roll. Remember what I told you. Keep your legs loose, and you'll do just great."

Anne took a practice swing. The driver felt heavy, like a sledgehammer instead of a golf club. She addressed the ball, drew back, and swung as hard as she could. At the last second, a surge of spasticity caused her legs to stiffen. Her driver topped the ball, and she watched in frustration as it skittered from the tee over the edge of the escarpment and rolled halfway down the slope before coming to rest.

"Want to take a mulligan?" Evan offered.

Anne shot him a hard look. "No, I'll play it where it lies."

A puzzled expression crossed his face. "Be my guest."

Anne stumbled down the slope carrying her nine iron, her legs feeling like two long strips of rubber with stiff steel springs for knees. She stabilized herself as best as

she could on the steep incline. No elegant way to hit this one. Starting tomorrow, she would take up shuffleboard instead.

Evan made his way down. "If you must play by the rules, take the shot, and we'll put the ball at the bottom of the hill."

Anne ignored him and addressed the ball. "I'll play it here, thank you." She took a swing, but the head of the club dug into the ground, throwing her off-balance. As she fell, Evan grabbed her around the waist and drew her close, anchoring his feet to prevent them both from tumbling downward.

"What the hell was that all about?" he said. "I think you owe me an explanation."

Anne caught her breath. "Can we get back to the cart first?"

They only had to climb a short distance up the hill, but Anne was encumbered by her spasticity. By the time they reached the cart, she had only enough energy to collapse into the seat.

"Why was it so damn important for you to make that shot?"

"No favors granted, no favors asked."

"Pretty hard-assed approach to a game, don't you think?"

"Same way I approach life. Play the ball as it lies. I've been doing that for years, and I don't intend to stop now."

Evan looked her in the eyes. "Is it possible your multiple sclerosis denial is ruling you more than your actual disability?"

"Who told you I had MS? Langston?"

"When you've seen as many spinal cord patients as I have, it's hard to miss spasticity. That's why I ordered the golf cart. I can add two and two together, you know."

Anne shook her head. "I'm too tired to get angry."

"Clubhouse, then? A frozen margarita will cool you off, and after you're rested, we can fight about whatever you want."

"You make it difficult to stay angry at you."

Evan leaned closer. "Am I forgiven?"

"Perhaps."

"Would dinner and an evening stroll make that more definite?"

"Let me think about it."

"Then think about this." Evan kissed her, and she responded by placing her hand behind his head and drawing him closer.

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From the wrought iron chair on his Tower balcony overlooking the golf course, Matt Drisner had kept track of Anne Mastik for the last three holes. As she and Garaud locked lips, he set his binoculars down on the cocktail table and took a sip of his bourbon on the rocks.

*So that's why she couldn't leave tonight. I suppose what happens in Hot Springs stays in Hot Springs.* He picked up his laptop and Googled "Dr. Evan Garaud." *Better to be safe than sorry.*

## Chapter IV

Route 39 turned out to be a twisting two-lane road that followed the contours of the Alleghenies. This ancient mountain range rippled through West Virginia in parallel waves that ran through the Monongahela National Forest, an enormous park that followed the boundary between West Virginia and Virginia for miles. The old-growth woodlands lining the mountains created a dense green curtain, broken only by trailer homes or small ranch houses placed in carved-out clearings. Anne knew parts of the Forest from hiking and camping trips many years ago, but the park was vast, and she was driving through a section she had never seen before.

The picturesque drive turned monotonous after an hour, and Anne's thoughts drifted to Evan. The evening had turned romantic, starting with a long stroll through a rose garden, the intermingled scents perfuming the cool breezes. They talked into the night, particularly about her MS and the divorce, but also about her research on infections in immunodeficiency diseases. Evan was guarded about his research—for proprietary reasons, as he explained. But how refreshing it was to converse with a man more interested in talking about her life than his own.

The time had passed too quickly for Anne, but she'd needed to retire early to go to Eden. To her relief, Evan had agreed that the girl's illness sounded like a life-or-death issue and that Anne needed her rest to be at the top of her game. He'd pledged to call her within a few days.

A burst of wind from a passing eighteen-wheeler shook Anne's car and refocused her attention. She couldn't remember when she'd last seen a road sign or a turnoff, and it had been a good forty-five minutes since she had passed a gas station.

"In two miles, turn right onto Eden Mountain Road," her GPS chimed in. She grinned as she recalled the bellhop's directions.

A mile after she turned right, the woods on either side of the road gave way to broad expanses of farmland, bounded to the north and south by parallel chains of foothills rising several miles apart. But as she drove on, the foothills closed in on her like a vanishing point in a drawing. When the two ranges were about a mile apart, she entered Eden.

Eden was situated in a narrow valley flanked to the north and south by heavily wooded hillsides. On its north side, a narrow river paralleled the base of the hill, separating it from the town proper and from any commercial or residential development. However, on the south side, the streets angled upward, and the hillside was dotted with elegant turn-of-the-century Victorian houses, which clung to the slopes with admirable determination. One incongruous contemporary-style house jutted from the hill, far above the level of the others. *Wonder what egomaniac built that one.*

Closing the valley off on its eastern end and looming directly in front of her was Eden Mountain, one of the tallest peaks Anne had ever seen in West Virginia. The river seemed to flow from its base, its origin probably from a spring somewhere on the

mountain slope, and thick stands of ancient maples and oaks sprang from its slope, hiding the leveled top from view.

At the town limits, Eden Mountain Road became Main Street, which ran through the center of the valley and comprised the business district. Neat rows of modestly constructed two-story brick buildings from the 1950s had been well maintained, although the thick layers of paint on some of the window frames testified to their age. From the looks of things, mass culture hadn't yet arrived in Eden—no McDonald's, Taco Bells, or 7-Elevens. Not even a supermarket or large chain hardware store. In fact, the only recognizable corporate names belonged to an auto parts store and the sole gas station, which was servicing a line of well-used pickups, apparently the favored mode of transportation. Some were old enough to be antiques. Maybe the major limitation on residential zoning was the ability of a fully loaded pickup to safely negotiate an icy hillside driveway in winter.

If the number of houses of worship was any indication, religion ran strong in Eden. Most of the churches were unassuming storefront tabernacles or small free-standing buildings. *Probably never held more than a score of families, even on Easter Sunday.* However, one church stood out, its steeple towering commandingly over the town. The centerpiece of a cluster of aristocratic houses, of all the churches in town, it alone boasted stained glass windows and a paved parking lot.

Anne drove almost completely through town before she reached Eden Community Hospital. By far the newest building in town, it was small enough that even on one of her bad days, she could walk around it in ten minutes. She parked and headed inside.

"Excuse me," Anne said to the woman behind the reception desk. "Can you please tell Dr. Drisner that Dr. Anne Mastik is here? He's expecting me."

The receptionist appeared startled.

*Out-of-towners must be a rare sight here.*

"He's in his office, third door on the right. Go on in."

Anne found Dr. Drisner typing on a computer at his desk, his shirtsleeves rolled up, and his mismatched tie loosened at the collar. *Looks more like a first-year resident than a practicing physician.*

"I don't see many physicians use the hunt-and-peck method nowadays," she said.

Drisner looked up. "Never learned the normal way. Daddy always said typing was for girls. Now, the girls are engineers and attorneys. All I can say is, thank God for computerized voice transcription." He stood and shook Anne's hand. "Thanks for coming."

"You were very persuasive."

"You mean to say pigheaded, but I appreciate your diplomacy." He glanced at his watch. "I'd love to show you around, but we'd better get up the mountain. It's best we use my pickup."

Five minutes later, Anne climbed into Drisner's well-worn Ford F-150. "What can you tell me about this family?" she said.

"Everyone around here knows about the Morehouses," Drisner began as they pulled out of the hospital parking lot, "but no one actually knows them. Their ancestors settled this area three hundred years ago, established a settlement on top of the mountain, and they've been isolated up there since."

"Must be quite a lot of inbreeding. Is there any family history I should be aware of?"

"The community's been dying off for the past fifty years, and nobody knows why. The only ones left are the girl, Ruth, and her aunt and uncle, Miriam and Isaiah."

"Is your inpatient unit up to handling a complicated patient like Ruth?" Anne asked as he turned onto Main Street toward Eden Mountain.

"We've got forty beds for routine care and a fully equipped lab and Radiology suite."

"What if she needs Intensive Care?"

"State-of-the-art. Four-bed unit and each room can be converted into a complete isolation unit. Full battery of monitoring equipment, except for neurosurgical. Head patients go to Morgantown. Nursing is one-on-one."

A mile outside of town, Matt swerved onto a steep gravel and dirt road. Anne was thrown backward against the window. She tightened her seatbelt and grabbed the safety bar over the door.

"What about subspecialty coverage?" she asked.

"Limited. We have a full-time cardiologist and gastroenterologist. I'm the hospitalist and intensivist, and I manage the ventilators. Anything else, you got to call in from Charleston or Morgantown. We've got a general surgeon that'll do anything but a craniotomy, and orthopedics is on call."

"How did you end up...here?"

"Born and raised in Kentucky. The Feds paid for my training, so I had to give them two years in an underserved area. I'm from a real small town, and I'm a simple sort of guy, so I chose Eden. That was four years ago, and it's either the local beauty or inertia that keeps me here." He shot her a playful glance. "It's certainly not the wild nightlife, I can tell you that much. The people here are good people, and I feel needed. And believe it or not, Eden Community is the medical hub for a radius of thirty-five miles."

The gravel road disappeared, replaced by a simple mountain trail. The truck made its way over rocks and roots while Anne clung to the overhead bar with one hand, bracing her other hand against the dash. "I noticed the upscale houses on the mountainside. And the church."

Drisner turned on the wipers as the front wheels dove into a sizable puddle, spraying the windshield. The wipers only smeared the mud, obscuring the view. "Ah, yes," he said. "The church. Sometime I'll introduce you to Reverend Wainstock. He's an interesting character. Wields a lot of power locally."

After fifteen minutes, the road widened into a small clearing surrounded by trees that allowed a narrow column of light into the clearing. Just past the edge of the

column, blending in with the shadows of the forest, stood the most decrepit shack Anne had ever seen.

Drisner stopped the truck and turned off the engine. After thirty minutes of a transmission grinding in first gear, the silence was bliss to Anne's ears. After a few seconds, the high-pitched buzz of cicadas, probably frightened into silence by their arrival, began a gradual crescendo.

"Is this it?" Anne asked anxiously, scanning the neglect that surrounded her.

"Not quite. I've got to make a social call first. Wait here. I'll introduce you."

Matt strode up to the shack and banged his fist repeatedly on the door.

"Artemis, wake the hell up! You've got company." After a minute, the door opened on bitterly complaining hinges and a man stepped out.

Anne approached hesitantly. Artemis was every bit as slovenly as the shack he lived in. Bare-chested, his abdomen protruded over the top of a pair of dirty jeans, barely supported by suspenders. His face was pallid, but his cheeks and nose were bumpy and ruddy, colored by an advanced case of rosacea. His jowls were ringed by at least a week's worth of stubble, and a crop of hair exploded from the top of his head in a matted grayish-brown tangle. Completing the picture, a pair of reddish eyes squinted at the sunlight between puffy lids.

*Please don't tell me I have to go in there,* Anne thought. As dark as the forest was, it was probably a blaze of glory compared to the inside of the shack.

The man cleared his throat and spat, the color of his phlegm blending invisibly with the soil. "Christ, Doc. Why the hell you makin' such a racket?"

"Mornin', more or less. I need you to take my friend and me to the Morehouses." Matt turned to Anne. "Anne Mastik, meet Artemis Donnard."

Artemis squinted in Anne's direction, then snorted and walked toward her, arm extended. Anne eyed the outstretched hand with a touch of apprehension. *Oh well, it couldn't possibly harbor more dangerous organisms than those in my lab.* She reached out and shook it gingerly.

Artemis ambled back to the shack, mumbling to Drisner. "Ah'll be out in a minute. Jes' wait here while I git my shoes an' shirt."

"Charming," Anne said after the door closed.

"His social graces are a bit rusty," Drisner said dryly.

"What is he doing here?"

"The Donnards are a big local family, and Artemis inherited this tract of property a while back. The family supports him, so he doesn't sell it." Drisner shook his head. "There are some interesting real estate issues about this mountain that I'll explain sometime."

Artemis reemerged after a few minutes, thankfully wearing a flannel shirt. He headed up a dirt trail and motioned them to follow.

The path at times seemed to disappear into the brush, then reappear after several yards. *It'd be easy to get lost in this,* Anne thought. After ten minutes, they reached another clearing, which contained the old, charred remnants of a cabin of some sort. All that remained was a blackened fireplace, a chimney, and a stone foundation.

"That was the house of the girl's ma and pa," Donnard said. "Burned to the ground three years ago, a few hours after the aunt and uncle got hold of her. They say the parents was dyin', prob'ly too weak to do anything when some embers caught the wooden building. Place went up"—he snapped his fingers—"like that. Sad thing. Parents was real nice folks. Kept to themselves."

The surrounding land—what once must have been a farm—had been reclaimed by a dense overgrowth of weeds. Across a large open field bordered by more woods sat the ruins of several deserted farmhouses. "This is desolation," Anne muttered to Drisner. "Heck of a place to raise a child."

They came to a large bronze bell hanging from a thick tree branch a short distance from a tidy cabin surrounded by well-tended gardens.

Donnard picked up a large stone. "Doorbell," he explained and struck the bell with it a half-dozen times. "Isaiah, you got visitors," he yelled. "I brought that doctor fella, and he's got a lady doctor with him."

A tall, lean man with hair down to his shoulders and a beard stippled with grey stepped out of the cabin. His face was weathered, and he was simply dressed in a linen shirt and pants. His feet were shod in sandals made of a woven bark-like material.

"May God's grace be on you, Artemis Donnard, and to your companions."

"This here's Matt Drisner, an' the lady is Anne Mastik," Donnard introduced, then turned to Anne. "They don't much believe in titles here."

Isaiah's eyes lit up as he shook Anne's hand. "You cannot imagine how glad I am to meet you."

"How's yer niece doin'?" Artemis inquired.

"She fares poorly. It is my prayer that our visitors can assist us."

Artemis shook his head sadly, then turned and held his hand out until Matt put a twenty-dollar bill in it. Then he grunted his thanks and shuffled back down the trail.

As they walked to the cabin, Anne looked around her. The Morehouse residence was an ancient structure of rough-hewn logs, which seemed to be meticulously cared for. It was surrounded by a garden of wildflowers, and a variety of crops grew over several acres of land terraced along a nearby embankment. The coziness of the cabin contrasted sharply with the disrepair Anne had seen on the remainder of the mountaintop.

The inside was homey. A central area served as kitchen, dining room, and family room, with two bedrooms extending off the central main room. The furniture was wooden and likely handmade, almost Shaker in its simplicity. But something was missing, and it took Anne a minute to realize what: There was nothing electric in the house, not even a light bulb. No radio, television, or phone. Artemis Donnard must be their sole connection to the outside world. Anne's heart sank. *Would the poor girl die on this bleak, lonely mountaintop, having never talked or played with anyone even remotely her own age? Something had to be done, and I'm the person to do it.*

Isaiah came out of a bedroom accompanied by an attractive woman with light brown skin and brunette hair tied neatly back in a tight bun. She wore a simple linen skirt and blouse despite the July heat.

"This is my wife, Miriam."

"May God's grace be on you," Miriam said. "I hope you will forgive my rudeness in not greeting you earlier."

"Love for a child is not a cause for offense," Anne replied.

Miriam nodded politely but said nothing.

"I thought Anne might examine Ruth now," Drisner said.

Miriam led Anne and Matt into the bedroom. Curtains were drawn across the windows, a candle on a nightstand provided the only illumination.

Taking charge, Anne opened the curtains and flooded the room with sunlight. A bed with a feather mattress and down comforter filled the center of the room, and nestled in its midst was a teenage girl, her long brown hair disheveled and matted with sweat. She scarcely seemed to be breathing, and her face had the pallor of death. Anne's breath caught as she feared she had come too late, but the girl unexpectedly inhaled sharply and licked her chapped lips with a dry tongue.

Anne sat at the bedside, slipped her hand under the comforter, and drew Ruth's icy hand out. *Peripheral vasoconstriction. The blood vessels in her extremities must be clamping down to shift blood flow to the essential internal organs.* Ruth's hand was a mottled purple. Anne pressed lightly on a fingernail. It turned pallid and showed no returning blush of pink after Anne released the pressure. *Ruth's circulation was seriously impaired. She's going into shock. There isn't much time.*

After the pressure on her fingernail, Ruth moaned, her eyelids parting laboriously. Then her eyes flew open, and she panicked at seeing a strange face in front of her.

Miriam flew to the bedside. "Fear not. This is Anne Mastik, a doctor who has come to help. She will not hurt you."

The words seemed to calm Ruth. "Welcome, Anne," she said in a weak voice, "and may God's grace be on you."

"Time for examination," Anne said. "All those of the male persuasion, out, please."

She pulled down the comforter and examined Ruth under the watchful eyes of Miriam. Ruth gasped when the cold stethoscope touched her chest, but otherwise, the exam proceeded uneventfully.

Back in the main room, Anne updated the Morehouses. "Your niece is seriously ill. She has an overwhelming infection and is going into septic shock, the body's final reaction to a severe infection. The blood pressure drops and the pulse gets weak. Eventually, she'll go into a coma, the brain and heart will lose their blood supply, and she'll die. Frankly, she's only survived this long because she's young and otherwise healthy."

"What can be done for her?" Miriam said.

"She needs antibiotics, intravenous fluids, and monitoring of her vital signs, plus special medications to keep her blood pressure up until the infection passes. I hope we aren't too late. Ruth is an extremely sick child."

"Then you may bring your medicines here to treat Ruth," Miriam said.

"That's impossible. Everything would have to be carted up the hill and over that path, and I don't even know what the proper antibiotic is for her until tests are done. She needs full-time nursing care, X-rays, lab work, and monitoring equipment. You don't even have electricity. There is no alternative to Ruth being hospitalized."

"She cannot leave here," Miriam said. "Years ago, when she was sick as a child, the doctors brought the medications here, and we treated her at home."

To Anne's left, Drisner sighed, probably having been through this same conversation multiple times.

"She must not have been this sick. I understand you're concerned that Ruth will not be treated properly, but I'll take full responsibility for her. I'll do everything I can to protect her."

"I trust you, but I cannot let Ruth leave this mountain. That is God's will."

Anne recoiled at the proclamation. "It can't be God's will. God would never ask for the death of a child."

Miriam's arms and shoulders stiffened, her brow creased, and her hands balled into fists. "He will not allow Ruth to die. I know it. His grace is upon her. She will not die."

"No, she will die. I can say that for a certainty. You're praying for a miracle, and believe me, I'm praying for one, too. But I've seen hundreds of cases like this. They do not get better without appropriate medical treatment. They all die. And it has nothing to do with God's will."

"You are wrong." Miriam's hands shook, and her voice cracked. "It has everything to do with God's will."

The woman was clearly struggling with some terrible internal conflict. If Anne challenged her on legal or medical grounds, she might only dig her heels in deeper. *Only one thing to do, and this child's life lies in the balance.*

Anne picked up her cell phone and opened the app that Evan had recommended. From her childhood Sunday school days, she recalled a passage that still held a terrifying fascination for her and read it aloud. "And the angel of the Lord called unto him out of Heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here am I. And He said, 'Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou has not withheld thy son, thine only son from me.'"

Anne closed the app and approached Miriam. "God knows that you would not withhold Ruth, but He would not want her to die at your hand any more than He wanted Isaac to die at the hand of his father. Please, let me take Ruth to the hospital."

Miriam stood stone-faced for an agonizingly long moment. "I must talk alone with my husband. Will you please excuse us?"

Anne nodded. Unable to sit, she paced back and forth in the main room.

"That was a master stroke," Matt said. "Where did that come from?"

"Something Evan told me at the conference. I hope it works. She was right on the edge and needed something she could accept as part of her value system. I don't know

where this 'God's will' thing came from, but it seems to rule their life. How else can you argue with God, if not with the Bible?"

The Morehouses returned. This time, Isaiah spoke. "You may take Ruth to the hospital. There are conditions. No one is to lay hands on her but you, Miriam is to stay with her at all times, and she is to return home as soon as her health allows it."

"I accept your conditions," Anne said. *And how am I going to explain this to Rothberg?*

"Good. Give us a few minutes to get ready."

Anne fell into a chair, her legs weak from the tension. Drisner gave her a respectful nod.