

MARK J. SPINICELLI

CATCHING
A
MIRACLE



Catching A Miracle

Mark J. Spinicelli

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to those brave individuals who have been forced to battle a disease that takes so many lives each year, and to the families who walk the difficult path with them.

Catching A Miracle was created to offer hope, encouragement, or at least thought-provoking entertainment.

The notion that a cure is out there is not far-fetched. A number of recent advances could turn this fictional read into reality. A 2011 report claimed scientists at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Canada, discovered the cure, but it has yet to materialize. Israeli scientists have found rat cells secrete a substance that destroys cancer cells in humans.

Catching A Miracle is the first of a trilogy:

Catching A Miracle

To Kristen Elizabeth Spinicelli

When God reaches down into the garden of humanity, he always grabs the brightest flower.

Catching A Miracle: The Hunt For Hans

To Joseph "Joe" Carney

You were right, I became everything others said I could never be.

Catching A Miracle: Sparrow in the Fog

For my wife, Susan.

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Thanks also go out to:

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David Gentilella of DIGITTO Media for leading the way in getting this book from manuscript to the book you see now.

Finally, the reason for this story, my loving sister Kristen and my mentor Joe Carney, both of whom succumbed to cancer in 1985. Kristen was a nurse who specialized in treating children with brain damage. Her "kids," as she called them, were her life and she is buried next to many of them in Orlando.

Joe Carney was the man who would tell an eighteen-year-old high school drop-out that what I had to do was go out and be everything people said I could never be, successful.

Kristen and Joe have been the driving force that makes us wonder when we hear, "There's nothing more we can do." Will you accept that, or simply stand with us and say, "I bet you are wrong."?

To me, *Catching a Miracle* is more than a book, it is a blueprint to another way.

SYNOPSIS

Under the watchful eyes of Dr. Gregory Wall, eight-year-old Shelly White and her best friend and roommate, Kristen, fight for their lives at St. Theresa's Hospital for Children. After Dr. Wall has tried everything, Shelly's cancer disappears overnight in what becomes the hospital's first miracle. Yet as Shelly leaves the hospital, she sees Dr. Wall rush to Kristen's bedside, where her best friend loses her battle against cancer.

Thirty years later, Dr. Shelly White works alongside her mentor in order to save other children. At a fundraiser to honor Kristen, she meets advertising executive Nicholas Harris, who along with his father, Salvatore, will change her life and possibly wipe cancer off the face of the earth. With the help of Nick and his father's high-profile friends, an idea becomes a quest to find a cure.

Catching A Miracle is a unique and fast-paced story of compassion, intrigue, and power about a group of people who each have a reason to stop a killer... by trying a different approach: greed.

CHAPTER 1

October 1972

From the doorway of Room 1604 in the children's ward, Nurse Doris Powers watched the celebration in the reception area a short distance down the hall. A child going home was always a reason to celebrate.

Nurse Doris smiled and waved to some of the parents she had grown to know, all the while keeping a keen eye on the pale little girl lying in the bed a few feet away. Above the bed loomed machines monitoring her vital signs. The readings were not good. The children's laughter in the lobby faded from Doris' ears as she focused on her patient. The child lay unconscious, curled in a fetal position.

The celebration was almost over, the eight-year-old honoree whisked away in her wheelchair by her mother as smiling children chattered and waved goodbye. Doris saw right through the smiles on their faces and knew they wished with all their might they were going home too. But few ever did. The nurse's eyes locked with those of the brown-haired girl in the wheelchair as if thanking each other for sharing the past four months of their lives.

A sound snapped Doris' attention back to the patient in the bed. It was a sound she had been dreading, a sound she desperately wished she would not hear.

The monitors shrilled.

Her patient was flat-lining.

Doris punched the room's intercom button. "Code blue 1604! Code 1604."

A moment later, a calm, authoritative voiced oozed from overhead speakers. "Code blue, 1604. Code blue, 1604."

The ten-year-old's eyes twitched. Her body shook. She soiled the bed.

Doris pushed back the bed curtain, the side table, and anything else that might hamper the code team's action.

"She's coding!" Doris told the first doctor to enter the room.

Dr. Gregory Wall studied the monitors. He stood tall, calm, his face an impassive mask, but his eyes told the real story. Wall was black, in his thirties, and just a year out of the Navy Medical Corps, and, at six feet two inches tall, could be a bit intimidating. Yet he was a champion for children, and every pain they felt hurt him.

The rest of his medical team appeared at the patient's side. One pushed the crash cart into the room.

Wall rattled off commands. "Adrenalin. Five hundred CCs."

A second later one of the resuscitation nurses handed Wall the demanded drug.

"Okay, little one," he whispered, "let's not ruin a perfectly good day." He stabbed her chest with the needle. "C'mon, give me something ..."

"We're losing her." Doris' words were steady but awash with fear.

Wall swore. "Compressions."

An intern began CPR.

Wall called for the defibrillator and with practiced motions placed the paddles and sent an electrical charge across the child's heart.

She gurgled. The monitors showed no heartbeat.

"Clear!" Hands raised in the air and bodies moved from the rails. The girl's body jumped again from the electrical surge, then shook as it fell back on the sheets. The doctor tried again to revive her. No change. She went limp. The team bowed their heads. An intern took notes while a nurse wiped a tear from her eye. Dr. Wall faced Doris.

"We could try ..." he offered.

Doris shook her head. She was young, just 27, but had been a nurse long enough to know the truth. "She's gone, Doctor."

He laid a hand on the dead child's head. Doris saw it shake. She had once asked him if he got used to the pain and death. "The day I get used to seeing children die is the day I leave medicine forever."

"Sometimes the Lord gives us miracles, Doctor. Sometimes he takes the little ones home," Doris said. "It's time to let go."

"There was nothing more I could do," Dr. Wall said. A tear formed in the corner of his right eye. "Five months of treatment and we end up losing her."

"You did everything right, Doctor." She placed her hand on his. "Remember, the first rule of medicine is that patients die. And rule number two?"

"You can't change rule number one." He nodded.

"I'll get a gurney." She stood up and rubbed the small of her back. "You okay?"

"I just want to stay with her a few minutes," he said as the light over the bed began to flicker. He looked at Doris Powers and then up at the bulb. She smiled.

"If you're up there, child, how about fixing that thing, would you?" she asked with eyes to the ceiling. The bulb went dark, flickered again, and returned to a bright, steady light. They both smiled. "See that, Doctor Wall?" the nurse said. "She made it."

In the lobby, the party atmosphere turned to dread, at least for those old enough to know what was happening.

The guest of honor stretched her neck to see what room was causing all the commotion—her old room. That's what she'd feared. A pit formed in her stomach. She was so frightened for her friend that she wanted to scream. She wanted to run back to her room and help. Tears leaked from her eyes as her mother pushed the wheelchair faster toward the exit.

JUNE 1972

The linoleum floors of the hospital appeared to gleam with enthusiasm about the little feet that now walked their pathways

with hopes of getting better. The state-of-the-art, five-story St. Theresa's Children's Hospital was the toast of the town. A circular driveway lead to the main entrance off Hope Drive. In the corner of the waiting area, a black and white television on a curio cabinet displayed re-runs of *The Lucy Show*. A single parent sat nearby, nervously leafing through *Life* magazine.

St. Theresa's had opened a few months before and focused primarily on the treatment of children with cancer. Beds were filling up with children from all walks of life. Some could not afford to pay, and many of the families were indigent, but the Board of Directors vowed they would never turn a child away.

The lobby was clean and stark and it worried Shelly White. It reminded her of the building she had visited before her father died. The smell was the same. Her mom held Shelly tightly in her arms as she walked through the lobby. Her mother's embrace comforted her some, but she wished to be home instead of this place. They had driven two hours to get to the hospital.

Shelly squirmed a little in her mother's arms. She was getting too big to be carried by her mom, but she was too weak to stand for long let alone walk very far.

"Welcome to St. Theresa's." The calm voice seemed to break Shelly's mom out of her trance. "I am Dr. Gregory Wall. Who do we have here?" He held out his arms to Shelly.

Shelly looked at the tall black man in the white doctor's smock. His smile was wide and she thought she saw a twinkle in his eyes. Shelly's mom tightened her hold as if she was not sure whether to hand Shelly over to the stranger.

"So you're not feeling too well, little one?" Dr. Wall asked Shelly. She buried her face into her mother's chest.

He asked Shelly's mom, "May I take her?"

Her mother started to hand her to the doctor, but Shelly tightened her grip. "No!"

"She's just scared, that's all," her mom said. "Let the nice doctor take you, okay, Shelly? He wants to help us."

"I-I guess." When Shelly raised her head again, she saw tears on her mother's cheek.

Dr. Wall took Shelly in his arms. She didn't resist but kept her eyes on her mother. The smell and strangeness of the place, her mother's tears, the big man who insisted on holding her frightened her all the more.

"Well, then, let's see if we can make you better, young lady." He carried her down the hall. Her mom tried to keep pace alongside.

"I'm new to this area," said Dr. Wall. "Something made me come to this hospital. It's a special place. I like its mission. I like what they do. And it's not just kids with cancer, we work with all children."

"We were told this was the best place to go. We're hoping you can do something for Shelly."

Dr. Wall arrived at the nurses' station cradling Shelly.

"I have a young lady who needs assistance here. Could we have a check-up for Miss Shelly, please?" He smiled and lowered Shelly into a gleaming silver wheelchair that smelled like plastic. "I'll leave you here with these fine folks, but don't get too comfortable, because I want you running out of here soon. You understand?"

"Yes, sir," Shelly fidgeted in the wheelchair, trying to find a comfortable position. A pulse of pain ratcheted through her chest. She winced and sighed, wondering what was going to happen next. Suddenly, she felt faint. Maybe she was about to throw up.

"Thank you," her mom said as the doctor left down an opposite hallway. She caressed Shelly's sweat-dampened hair.

A nurse leaned over the counter. "Shelly, I'm Doris Powers. Do you have a last name, Shelly?"

"Yes. White."

"Hi, I'm Carol White, Shelly's mother."

"Nice to meet you. Now, what seems to be the problem?"

"Well, Shelly was a normal little girl,," Carol said. "Then, one day in the backyard, she became too weak to play with her friends. Over the next few days, her skin began to change color, and I had no idea what to do. I'm afraid our insurance isn't very good."

"Don't worry about the money, Mrs. White. Let's just take care of Shelly. Sound good?"

Carol's eyes welled up with tears. She turned away from the counter, crouched down, and kissed Shelly on the forehead. Shelly looked up at her mother.

"Don't cry, Mom. It'll be okay."

Shelly hoped that was true.

CHAPTER 2

Dr. Gregory Wall stood at the foot of the exam table. Seated on the table was his newest patient, Shelly White. The child sat quietly, her hands folded in her lap. Shelly looked drawn and tired. She had a right to look that way. After she'd endured two days of tests, Wall and other doctors determined cancer cells from a large tumor were attacking her, robbing her of her strength and energy. Carol White, standing by her daughter, also looked drawn and tired, but from fear.

Wall loved the practice of medicine, but there were times when he hated it. This was one of them. No matter how often he had to inform parents that their child had cancer, it still gutted him. Some doctors learned to remove the emotion from such conversations, but Wall lacked that ability. The words, "We found cancer," still burned in his throat.

Carol had checked her daughter in for treatment. What choice did she have? Wall and St. Teresa's offered some hope, and she had to do everything she could to save Shelly.

Nurses had set up a little room for Carol to stay to avoid the two-hour drive back and forth from home.

Explaining cancer to adults was easy. It was so widespread that almost everyone knew someone stricken the disease. Children Shelly's age had trouble understanding what was wrong with them. Wall had become adept at making the complicated sound simple. One thing he couldn't do was make it easy to hear.

"Cancer is like rust," he explained to Shelly. "Did you ever get rust on your bike?"

Shelly shrugged. "Sometimes, near the wheel."

"Well. Our job is to use the best medicine made to get the rust out. Understand?"

She nodded and pressed her dry lips together.

"You see, this place is for kids just like you. This is a hospital for children and it's named after St. Teresa. Do you know who St. Theresa is, Shelly?"

"No, sir."

"Well, St. Theresa is a Roman Catholic saint. You just can't go wrong when you have St. Theresa on your side. So let's see if St. Theresa can make a miracle happen for you."

Shelly looked up as he continued to explain.

"You may need to work hard, so are you ready to fight something I call a war against cancer?"

"My daddy died in the war."

Wall looked at Carol, then turned back to Shelly. "I am so sorry to hear that." He leaned in toward Shelly and glanced at Carol.

"Let's get you to your room and meet your new roommate," he said. He stood and grabbed the handles of her wheelchair.

"Well, that sounds like fun, huh, Shel?" Carol chimed in. A nurse joined them as they traveled down the hall to Room 1604.

"Hi, my name is Kristen," said her ten-year-old roommate. Kristen was fighting cancer of the adrenal gland, a very rare type that Dr. Wall had been trying to combat with everything he knew.

Shelly extended a meager wave, looking around the room with two beds, a sitting area, and plain white walls. It smelled like medicine.

"So, what's wrong with you?" Kristen asked.

"I have cancer," Shelly said matter-of-factly.

"We all have cancer," Kristen responded. "Some are really bad, and some are not so bad. Mine's bad. Is yours?"

"I don't know. Dr. Wall said it was called a tumor."

"Is that a bad one?"

A nurse helped Shelly get settled into her bed. "All cancer is bad, sweetheart."

"You guys get to know each other," Dr. Wall said. "I need to take Shelly's mom outside for a minute. Okay?"

"My mom worries about me," Shelly said after they left.

"Well," said Kristen, "you're lucky you have a mom."

"What do you mean?"

"My mom died last year. They say she died from the well water. They say that's where I got cancer. So the state brought me here after my mom went to heaven."

Shelly lowered her head. "My daddy died in the war."

The room fell silent for a moment.

"Doc Wall is great," Kristen said. "He does magic tricks sometimes!"

Shelly lay on the bed and listened to her new roommate, who was obviously lonely and had been waiting to talk to someone.

"The nurses are kind of like moms to me, so it's nice here," she continued.

"I don't really like hospitals," Shelly said.

The light above Kristen's bed began to flicker.

"There it goes again." Kristen laughed and pointed. "They've replaced that thing three times. For some reason, it likes to go out. Funny, huh?"

Carol, Doris, and Dr. Wall returned to the room and found the girls giggling.

"Okay ladies, it's time to—" Dr. Wall paused, seeing the light show that had become a regular occurrence in Room 1604. "Again with your light, Kristen?"

Kristen smiled at Dr. Wall, then suddenly winced in pain. The room became quiet. Shelly looked around. *What was going to happen next?* Dr. Wall broke the silence. "I think a little medicine would be in order here, Doris," he said to the nurse.

Kristen's body was now doubled over into a fetal position. The sight made Shelly want to cry.

Three months after her admission to the hospital and the start of her cancer treatment, Shelly was starting to feel closer to Dr. Wall. He always took time to explain what was being done and why. She

did her best to understand. Dr. Wall monitored her x-rays personally and kept her and her mother informed. Radiation was being streamed into her chest to shrink the tumor so he could operate to remove it. Dr. Wall explained that reducing its size before surgery would give Shelly the best chance of remission.

Although Kristen continued to struggle through the pain, she and Shelly had become inseparable. Together they laughed and counted the times the bulb over Kristen's bed needed to be replaced – each one was a big event for them. It was now up to six.

"Let's see if we can get it up to ten," Shelly said. But there was no response. Kristen had fallen asleep again, something that happened a lot after the treatments. Shelly decided to be adventurous. She got out of bed and peeked into the hall. She saw a ten-year-old boy walking the corridor with an IV stand. His eyes met hers, and she pulled back.

"Hi, I'm Chucky."

Shelly peered back around the door jamb, then stepped outside her room.

"What is that?" Shelly pointed at the portable IV stand.

"Supposed to kill off the bad stuff, but it just makes me want to pee a lot."

She giggled. "I'm Shelly. Do you have cancer, too?"

"I got here a while ago. I have to fight it myself, but my family stays with me a lot." That sounded familiar to Shelly. Dr. Wall must be taking care of Chucky.

As they talked, the floor nurse spotted them.

"Keep walking, Mr. Chucky, and Miss White, back to your bed."

Doris Powers ran a tough ward. No one snuck out of their room without her knowing it.

"I'm in 1648," Chucky said as he made his way back down the hall. "Come visit if they ever let you walk around." He smiled at Doris.

"You better not let me catch you wandering these halls again without my permission, Mr. Chucky. Now shoo!"

Doris followed Shelly into her room. She fluffed her pillow, then sat on the edge of Kristen's bed. Shelly watched her dab Kristen's forehead with a damp washcloth.

By now, the radiation was taking a toll on Shelly. Her hair had begun to fall out in clumps. Shelly's mom took Dr. Wall's advice

and planned a haircutting party. They all laughed as Carol made zigzag patterns on Shelly's head. Her hair fell to the white sheet spread on the floor. "Mine did the same thing, but no one cut it for me," said Kristen. "Mine just fell out!"

"You sure it's going to grow back, Mom?" Shelly asked.

"I promise. And so will yours, Kristen," Carol said.

On cue, the bulb over Kristen's bed blew again. "That's number seven!" the girls blurted out in unison.

"While Shelly is showing great improvement," Dr. Wall told Carol as they walked toward the girls' room after visiting the cafeteria one day, "Kristen is not. We have tried everything, and I just don't know what else to do. I will say Shelly has the makings of a great nurse. See?"

As they walked into the room, they found Shelly standing next to a sleeping Kristen and wiping her lips. "She seems to like ice on her lips, Doc."

He looked at Kristen's IV and then at Shelly. "You know, I was just telling your mom you could be a great nurse someday."

"Nah," she said. "I don't want to be a nurse."

"But you seem so good at it."

"I don't want to be a nurse, Doc. I want to be a doctor like you. I was going to ask you—when I get better, will you help me be like you and help people like her?" Shelly pointed at Kristen.

The young doctor looked at Shelly and then at Carol.

"I would be honored to help you," he told Shelly. "All the way through high school, college, and medical school. But you have to study. You have to study hard. You think you can do that?"

"If you'll help me."

"Then we have a deal." Dr. Wall beaming his bright, big smile. "For now, let's let Kristen sleep, and we'll go take a few x-rays. Back in the wheelchair, miss."

"See you, K," Shelly yelled to her roommate as Dr. Wall pushed her from the room.

"Shh. She needs her sleep."

As he wheeled her down the hall, Shelly noticed room 1648. "Hey, that's Chucky's room! Where's Chucky?" she asked as the open door revealed its emptiness.

"How do you know Chucky?" Carol asked.

"He walked by my room a few weeks ago. Did he go home?"

Dr. Wall continued pushing the wheelchair down the corridor. "Yes, honey, he went home a few days ago."

"He's really nice," Shelly said. "I'm glad you made him better. I hope you can do that for Kristen, too. You think you can?"

"We're trying, honey. We're trying real hard. So say a little prayer for her. Can you do that?"

"Sure I can do that." Shelly beamed, craning her neck backward to be sure Wall could see her. "That's easy."

Radiologist Phil Thompson arrived at the main nurses' station out of breath, stopping Wall, who was just about to turn down the hall of the west wing to check on a patient.

"I need to see you about Shelly White," Phil said. "I have her film."

Dr. Wall stopped in his tracks and turned, fearing the worst. "You ran over here? It's bad news?"

"More like weird news," he said.

"What do you mean, weird?"

"These films, Doc," he said, holding up the x-rays. "They're clean."

Wall stepped back trying to process what Phil was saying, unable to believe what he had just heard. Yet Phil would not joke about such matters. He waited for him to continue.

"Doc, I'm telling you, these films are clean. No tumor. No spots. Zip. There is nothing there. I checked all her previous films, compared them, and it's gone."

Dr. Wall stared at him for a moment, then pulled him aside.

"Give me those. A grapefruit-sized tumor does not just disappear overnight." He walked into the lounge and placed the film on a wall-mounted light board. Phil stood behind him. "I'll be damned." The gray outlines of Shelly's chest showed no sign of the tumor. "A cancer miracle may be in our midst."

"Doc, we look at these every day and see nothing but bad news. It's a good day when we see good film, but this, this *is* a miracle."

Wall nodded. "Let's play this safe," he said without taking his eyes off the film. "Do another round of x-rays, but keep this quiet until we get those back. Got it? I'll order a new blood draw."

"You bet, Doc."

Phil raced to Shelly's room as Dr. Wall stayed, studying the x-rays alone. "Shelly, my dear, you may be one lucky little girl."

It took a painstaking two days for all of Shelly's new tests to come back.

"You ladies have a moment to talk?" Dr. Wall asked after knocking on the door of room 1604. Carol nodded, not speaking. She pointed to a sleeping Kristen. Shelly looked up and smiled.

"Let's go out in the sitting area for a minute," he whispered.

Carol and Shelly sat on the faux leather couch. Shelly cradled her arms against her chest and dangled her feet off the edge, peering down to see how much taller she would have to be to sit on a regular couch and reach the floor.

"What's going on, Dr. Wall? How is the treatment working?" Carol asked.

"Yes, yes, it's fine." He took a breath. "The treatment, Mrs. White? The treatment worked. That's the thing. And quite frankly, I have no idea how this happened, but the tumor is gone. Not smaller, not shrinking. It's gone as if it was never there. We double checked x-rays, ran new blood work, and it has disappeared ..."

"You mean I can go home!" Shelly shrieked, interrupting the doctor.

Carol broke down and began to cry—the emotions she had suppressed for the past few months unleashed.

Dr. Wall smiled, but a single tear collected in his right eye. "You betcha, young lady." He flashed Shelly an even wider smile. "And we are going to have a little party to celebrate, if that's okay with you, Miss Shelly."

She jumped up and gave him a big hug. "Thank you," she whispered in his ear.

A couple days later, as promised, Shelly had her party and packed to go home. She was so happy with the balloons and cake, but was saddened that Kristen was not going home with her. She wouldn't be here to help her friend and put ice on her dry lips and talk to her when she woke up. "I don't even get to see if the light goes out ten times," she said to her mom.

By now the nursing staff, as well as most of the workers at St. Theresa's, were buzzing about the miracle girl whose cancer simply vanished. They were calling her "the miracle child," and she was becoming a star. Doctors and nurses stopped by to say hello. Parents of sick children asked Carol what she did to make such a miracle happen. "I prayed," she said. "I asked for a miracle, and I got it."

Shelly hopped in her wheelchair for the last time and said her goodbyes to the nurses, the doctors, the staff, Dr. Wall, and all of the friends she had met who had come to see her go home. She was happy that she had already said goodbye to Kristen earlier when she was awake.

As her mom pushed her down the hall toward the doors leading out of the hospital and into the fresh, cool, Atlanta air, the code alarm suddenly went off. Doctors and nurses rushed into the room in answer to the alarm.

Shelly's eyes caught Dr. Wall's as he ran past her. He paused long enough to look at Shelly, but said nothing and continued on as the crash cart was wheeled into Room 1604. Shelly would remember that moment forever. No matter how her mom or Dr. Wall tried to shield Shelly from this fact, she knew she was going home and Kristen was dying. And there was nothing she could do about it. As her mom whisked her away, Shelly could just barely make out Dr. Wall's voice barking orders as he tried one last time to save Kristen's life.

CHAPTER 3

October 2007

Dr. Shelly White strolled down the hall toward the nurses' station with a cheerful, happy step. She silently celebrated the anniversary of her release from St. Theresa's and she was feeling a bit giddy. These were the same halls she'd walked as a cancer patient in 1972. Now, thirty-five years later, she patrolled the corridors as a bona fide healer alongside the great Dr. Wall. The young, spunky Nurse Doris had grown to be an older, plumper Nurse Doris, who still ran the ward like a prison matron. Part of her job was to keep young patients in their rooms and ensure their safety. It was a work she had been doing for a long time and one she was well suited for.

"Well, hello there, Doctor," Wall said. He stood at the nurses' station, leaning on the counter.

"And to you as well, Doctor."

Doris, who sat behind the counter making notes in files, gazed over her glasses. "You two need something? Are you waiting for me to get you some coffee? Hmmm?"

"I would love a latte." Shelly nodded. "Dr. Wall?"

"Oh, great," Doris said. "All right then. I'll tell you what. All you need to do is go to this little room we call the doctors' lounge. There's a coffee machine there. Get it yourself."

Shelly raised an eyebrow. She recognized stress when she saw it. "You're not having a good day, are you, Doris?"

"Well, look around, Doc. We got kids in all the rooms and they are all jumping up and down, and I am down two nurses, and to top it off, I still have to go pick up my dress for your Kristen Foundation event tonight. And I need to fix my hair."

"I'm sorry about your day, Doris," Shelly said. "But tonight will be fun. The band has a great funk sound." Doris looked up at her and Shelly got the smile she was looking for.

She and Dr. Wall had created the Kristen Foundation to help raise funds for research programs at St. Theresa's. Launched when Shelly graduated from medical school at the University of Florida, the fund had raised close to five million dollars. "With any luck, we may be able to buy that new centrifuge machine this year," Shelly said. "And some playground equipment."

Wall perked up. "Let's just concentrate on the little guys in their rooms now, shall we?"

Shelly leaned in toward Doris as she collected her files and messages. "You are going to look great tonight. Are you bringing anybody?"

"Are you kidding?" Doris blurted out. "We have everybody who's anybody in Atlanta going to be there and I'm going to bring some guy? I'm fishing for my man, which is what you should be doing, too, darling."

Up to now, Shelly had avoided dating. She had focused solely on working with her kids.

"From the movers and the shakers of Atlanta to the CEO of UPS," Doris continued. "And you know I looked at the guest list and saw that Nick Harris is going to be there. That's a fine hunk of man, baby."

Shelly gathered up her charts and looked at Doris. "Thanks for the tip, but how does he matter to my kids? I'd love a check from him like anyone else, but other than that, no thanks."

"Look, the man is a successful businessman, a nice picture to look at ... who knows, you might get lucky!"

"I believe it would be he who would be lucky," said Wall, "and Shelly, if I were you, I would avoid him like the plague. From what I hear he is a bit of a man about town, and you don't need that."

"Tell you what, Doris," Shelly said. "If you have an opportunity to go out with him, you do it and tell us all about it."

Wall faced Shelly. "So you're a great doctor and a hopeless romantic. Is that about right?"

"Don't get sarcastic with me," Shelly said with a smile. "Just remember, I'm here to help sick kids, not to get set up with some guy. So, Doris, he's all yours." She smirked and walked down the hall.

"You know, Doris," Wall said. "I love her like a daughter. That's why I can't see her with Nick Harris. I've heard too much about him."

"I don't think you're giving him enough credit," she said. "I think he's a good guy."

"I doubt it."

The pre-function area leading to the ballroom was spectacular, with turn-of-the-twentieth-century chandeliers dangling from the thirty-foot, fresco-adorned rotunda ceiling. Shelly and Wall stood by the entrance, greeting guests as they arrived for the fundraiser. The Kristen Foundation logo glowed from the nearest wall.

Shelly spied a dark-haired man about five feet ten, in his mid-thirties, with a smile on his face, shaking hands with other guests as they came in. He stood next to Jerry Lamont from AdWorks, who had been doing some pro bono work for the Foundation. She wondered if the handsome sidekick was Jerry's co-worker, the infamous Nick Harris. Both men relocated to a quiet corner to survey the crowd.

"Looks like the whole town turned out for this one," Nick said to Jerry. "There's Don from UPS. And here comes Marie Mellon." Adjusting their postures to the form their moms had taught them, they both met the eyes of St. Theresa's executive director. Marie was the face of St. Theresa's and known as the queen of the hospital. She had seen Nick grow up, as his mom had served on the Board

before she got sick and Marie had watched Jane bravely fight her battle with cancer.

Marie's smile broadened as she approached. "This is a bit of a surprise," she said. "I've never seen you guys at one of our events." She put out her hand, which Nick took, and then leaned forward to offer a kiss on her cheek.

"Well," he said, "Jerry said I should come by to meet some of the important people of Atlanta."

Jerry aimed a not-so-subtle evil eye at Nick and quickly returned his gaze to Marie, extending his hand. "Jerry Lamont. Great to see you again."

Marie shook his hand, then turned back to Nick. "You'll have to do better than that."

"Truth be told," Nick said, "Dad told me if we were ever going to start our own agency, I'd better meet the entire town, and I hear this is where the entire town is tonight."

"Now that I can believe," Marie said. "So when is this new business venture happening?"

"One day. But right now, I do what Mom told me to do last year. Take care of Dad."

"Your mom was such a class act, Nick. I was so sorry to hear about your losing her. How is Sal doing?"

"Dad's fine." Nick smiled. "Always cooking up a storm at home. The only concern I have about Dad is his persistence in dating the neighbor across the street."

"The neighbor across the street?" Marie asked. "That may be just the thing for him."

"Good Lord, it might kill him," Jerry retorted. "She's forty!"

"Actually, she's forty-four, widowed, and a flight attendant for American Airlines. But Jerry is right, she could kill him. And then I would have to wipe that smile off his face before his wake." Jerry rolled his eyes at Nick's off-color comment.

"Well, please tell him I said hi." Marie moved away to greet a couple who had just walked by, then tilted her head back. "Let me know if I can help with your new venture."

"Thank you, Marie," Nick said.

He and Jerry stepped back from the crowd and sipped champagne inconspicuously delivered by a silent waiter carrying a silver tray of glasses.

"Who's that?" Nick nodded toward a beautiful brunette walking toward them. She stood about five feet seven, wore a sparkling blue dress, had a gorgeous figure, and exuded confidence. "Have I ever told you how much I like the color blue?" Nick added.

"That's Dr. Shelly White, Nick. She's the one who started the Foundation with Dr. Wall over there. She's all about the kids at St. Theresa's. They call her the miracle."

"Wow, she's stunning. Do you know her, Jer?"

"We talked a few times. I put together their logo for them." Jerry pointed to the wall just beyond where Dr. Wall was standing. "Want to meet her?"

Nick looked at his friend as if he was crazy. "Is this a trick question? Of course I would. And I don't have a date for Saturday night. She would make for a perfect evening."

"Cool it," Jerry said. "She's coming our way."

Shelly approached, smiling at her other guests along the way. "Hello, Dr. White," said Jerry.

"Hello, Mr. Lamont, thanks so much for coming."

"My pleasure. I'd like to introduce my friend and colleague, Nick Harris, from AdWorks.

"Nick Harris?" she asked.

"Yes." He extended his hand.

Shelly took it. "I was just talking to some of my colleagues about you this afternoon."

"Is that a good thing or a bad thing?" he asked.

"Well, I hear you make some pretty funny commercials."

"I have my moments. Have you seen any of them?"

"Not that I know of. I spend most of my time with the kids at the hospital. If I do have spare time, I read to them, so TV isn't really big for me. Oh, Jerry, by the way, thanks so much for your help tonight."

"With the logo?" asked Jerry.

"Yes, and we love it, by the way."

Jerry smiled. "I'm very glad to hear that."

"So what's the Kristen Foundation all about, Dr. White?" asked Nick, trying to keep the conversation going.

"Back in 1972, I was a patient at St. Theresa's. A young doctor from the Navy saved my life. That would be Dr. Wall over there." She pointed. "I spent four months here. And shared a room with a

girl named Kristen. I was eight, she was ten. Her dad, like mine, had been killed in Vietnam, and her mother died from the same kind of cancer that would eventually kill Kristen. She was so alone. She lost her life on the day I left. She died just as I was heading out the door to go home. So, I made a promise that I would do what no one else had done."

"What's that?" Nick asked.

"Find a way to stop cancer. For good. When I got out of college, Dr. Wall and I started this Foundation to help get research equipment for the lab and what we needed for the kids. Stop by sometime, Mr. Harris, and see what it's like to fight childhood diseases."

"Did you say you were here in 1972?"

"That's right. The year St. Theresa's opened. Why?"

"Just curious." A familiar ache swam around in his gut.

"Looks like a great crowd," Jerry interjected quickly. "You should do well tonight."

"We have Marie, who's on the hospital board, to thank for that. She knows half the city and helps out a lot. But we do have a lot of great volunteers."

Nick chimed in. "Do you ever have time away from the hospital, let's say for dinner?"

"Wow, are you asking me out after just meeting me five minutes ago?" She rolled her eyes.

"Well, I do know some great restaurants tucked away here in Atlanta."

"Tell you what, Mr. Harris. I'm going to just raise some money tonight and thank a lot of volunteers. I am sure there are plenty of women who would love to spend an evening with you. Now, if you two will excuse me, I need to say hello to the mayor."

Jerry turned to Nick, flashing his best smug look. "Wow, shot down in midflight, big guy."

Nick watched Shelly walk away. "She is absolutely stunning."

"And wants nothing to do with you."

"I must admit, that didn't go as planned, did it?"

"C'mon, Nick. Your tricks won't work with her. She's one smart lady. 'Come and have dinner with me?' That line is not going to work. You need to find something that makes her tick. Her kids.

The Kristen Foundation. You know, be a team player. And why did you act like you knew nothing about the Foundation?"

"I am a team player. I just thought she would spend more time talking to us if I asked about the Foundation. There's something about her that intrigues me."

"Good Lord," said Jerry. "Look at her. Hell, your dad would ask her out."

"Speaking of my dad, he's cooking chicken cacciatore. Want to get out of here in a little bit and have some homemade, stick-to-your-ribs food?"

"No, I'm going to stay to the end. Let's go inside."

The ballroom was spectacular, but not too pretentious, as they were trying to raise money, not show off how well they were doing. The lighting was soft enough to give a soothing feeling, an emotion the hospital tried to instill daily. Tables dressed with white linens and eight settings apiece were adorned with centerpieces made by the children, no two alike. Nick wondered if that had been Shelly's idea. They seemed to be a big hit with the other guests.

After the last of the guests had been served their tiramisu, and Drs. White and Wall had spoken a few words on behalf of the Foundation and the hospital, Nick said his goodbyes to his tablemates and Jerry. He had eaten enough to be polite but knew his dad would be waiting with his famous cacciatore whenever he got home. He couldn't disappoint Dad. Before leaving, he searched out a path to intercept Shelly so he could say goodnight. He didn't want to leave things the way they were.

CHAPTER 4

As Nick pulled his car onto the driveway, he could smell the garlic and sauce permeating the air. Dad was at it again and that was a good thing.

“It smells great in here.” He closed the front door behind him and took another deep sniff. His stomach rumbled to life.

“And where the hell have you been, son?”

Nick smiled at his dad. Salvatore Harris could be blunt, even crass, but Nick knew his true, caring nature. Sal had moved in with his son after his wife of forty-five years passed away from breast cancer. Throughout the home, pictures of her decorated the walls, tables, and shelves, and her glass collection, as well as old photos of Nick’s younger brother, who had also died from cancer.

Nick looked into the dining room, where the table was set and already plated with the food for the evening.

“I made breadsticks, but don’t fill up on them.”

“This looks great, Dad.”

“Oh, it’s nothing. Four hours in the kitchen slaving away, only to have you home late. What gives?”

“Tonight was that event for the Kristen Foundation. I thought it was just going to be a reception. There were a lot of important people there. You were right. It was worth the effort.”

“She has quite a story, that Dr. White. I hear she’s stunning.”

“Yeah, she is.”

"She's the one who'd been admitted with a tumor when your brother was there, and the damn thing just vanished overnight." Sal munched on a breadstick, dunking it into the cacciatore sauce before each bite.

Nick took a bite of a breadstick in concert with his father. "Man, these are good."

Sal nodded without looking up.

"I don't really know that much about her," said Nick, "but she must know something about me. Or heard something, because when I asked her out, she said no."

Sal looked up this time. "No?"

"Well, it was more like *hell no*."

"Does she know about your mom? Your brother?"

"I didn't really have a chance to say anything. But Jerry knows her."

"So how is the Comb-over Kid?" asked Sal. "And why isn't he here for dinner?" Jerry, like Nick, was in his late thirties, but balding with a comb-over you could see from outer space.

"Well, they served dinner at the event ..."

"You ate already?" he yelled from across the table. Nick knew that if he were any closer to his dad, a slap to the back of the head would have been included with the question.

"No, no, I just picked to be polite. I couldn't wait to get home to your famous cacciatore. Besides, hey, we're Italian. We can't eat dinner twice?"

Sal smiled. Nick could always tell how proud his father was of his spunk, his self-confidence, and the sense of humor he got from his mom.

"I bet Jerry would love to have some of these leftovers tomorrow, though."

"Only if you promise to make sure Bongero doesn't eat any of it."

"Nah, he's out of town, so the office is quiet this week. The only excitement is that our new secretary just started. This should be interesting."

"Well, try not to scare this one off, will ya?"

Nick rolled his eyes. "Dad, Tracy left to be a yoga instructor. I never saw that coming. I just thought she liked to stretch a lot."

"Yoga. What the hell is yoga? Sounds foreign."

Nick just grinned and returned to his plate. "Speaking of stretching a lot, since you moved in, I've gained ten pounds."

"Don't worry, whatever you don't finish, I'll bring over to Tanya across the street. After Jerry gets his."

"Now you're feeding her?"

"Name's Tanya, and don't be smart." He pointed his fork at Nick. "I know what it's like to travel around the world and come home to a nice meal. Your mother was great about that."

"Mom was sixty-three, not forty-four ... I guess it just bothers me."

"You're right, she's not like the mom you remember. But I'm happy."

"Well, I gotta give you that." Nick nodded. "Tanya has put a pep in your step."

"Sort of like Shelly, huh?"

"There is something about Shelly, Dad. Her eyes are this deep blue that sort of draws you in."

"Maybe you could use that Harris charm to win her over."

"You're my biggest cheerleader, you know that? Maybe I should have you talk to her. Tell her what a great guy I am."

"I am your biggest fan, but let her figure that out for herself."

Nick shook his head and smirked. "You know what? Scratch that last idea."

"That's probably a good idea, son. Breadstick?"

CHAPTER 5

AdWorks's new secretary, Bella, had only been on the job about a week, but was getting to know the staff quite well – especially Jerry. They made a connection right away, even though Bella was the opposite of Jerry in every way. She was twenty-eight and fashionable with the whitest of white teeth. She possessed a great laugh, wore her brunette hair short, and was clearly out of Jerry's league. Jerry, at thirty-eight, was looking his age and a bit set in his ways, but she clearly liked what she saw in him.

Nick and Jerry had met ten years ago here at AdWorks, a medium-sized agency owned by James Bongero, a son of bitch who cared about himself and not much else. He had the knack of putting on an act as if he was your best friend, but was despised by many. He didn't like anyone either, so that made it all even.

"Hey, big guy, ready for the team meeting at nine?" Nick asked. He purposely wanted to interrupt Jerry and Bella's googly-eyed conversation.

"Are you kidding? Miss a team meeting? Never. Wait, why are we having this again?"

"Well, rumor has it Bongero went to this seminar and now he wants us to have once a week rah-rah sessions so we can work more and make him more money. Probably to pay for the motivational tapes he invested in."

"I don't get it," Bella interjected. "Why do you keep working for a guy you hate? You could do this stuff anywhere."

"Yeah, but I might not have met you?" flirted Jerry.

"So true." She smiled, a slight blush appearing on her cheeks as she looked away from Jerry. "Maybe you two should start your own company."

Nick frowned at Jerry, his eyes asking, *What does she know, you big mouth?* That idea had been brewing for the past three years, and just when they got close to having the guts and contacts to move forward, Nick's mom got sick. He had to concentrate on taking care of his dad for the time being. So, for now, they just worked their accounts, knowing and hoping that one day things would change.

Nick and Jerry arrived at the conference room, joining the other creative minds at the agency. The walls were decorated with pictures of ads that the twenty-five-year-old company had produced. Its current major client, UPS, chose AdWorks when it moved its headquarters to Atlanta from Greenwich, Connecticut in 1991. As he was director of creative development, UPS was Nick's baby. The company had become the firm's bread and butter.

"Hello, people!" Bongero bellowed as he made his way into the conference room and to the front of the table. "What's new? Any new prospects to keep the lights on?"

"Steady as she goes, Captain," Jerry responded. Nick grimaced.

"And what the hell is that supposed to mean?" Bongero barked, the reaction Nick had been afraid of after the words had tumbled out of Jerry's mouth. As Jerry sat back, realizing he had his foot in his mouth, Nick decided to rescue his friend.

"Well, sir," he said, "we continue to work on a variety of projects, so every day seems to be busy."

Bongero stared at Nick with those wicked eyes. "Anything new I need to know about, Mr. Harris?"

Nick had been assigned a new client earlier that month who manufactured tractor tires, but he found himself struggling to focus on it. Cancer was back in the forefront of his mind, this time because of Shelly White. The truth was, he had not been the same since his mom passed away. His view of life had changed. His view of women had changed. He'd watched his mother fight her own private war, a war she lost after four years. Nick had watched as his dad stood by her side for what seemed to be endless tests and treatments—the hair loss, her struggle to remain the same person she had always been, the fight to keep her weight up. Her laugh,

though, she never lost. And that laugh was infectious. She was the embodiment of class. A woman who turned heads well into her sixties.

“Well,” Nick said, “we are starting to work on the new UPS spot today, and we should have some copy by next week for review.”

“Good, at least that’s encouraging,” Bongero answered as everyone silently prayed they were not part of the morning’s inquisition. “Anything else?”

Jerry decided to get out of the dog house and chimed in with some new ideas the staff had been throwing around for the Kristen Foundation over at St. Theresa’s. But it just wasn’t his day.

“So how’s that supposed to make us any money?” Bongero ask.

Nick didn’t miss a beat helping Jerry out of another web of humiliation. It was a game with Bongero – them against him. “It’s not all about the money, sir,” he said calmly, “it’s about helping kids at St. Theresa’s.”

Bongero was not fazed. “The last I checked, we do not get paid by children. Now, if the fine folks at UPS want to hire us to do a campaign for St. Theresa’s, that’s great. I’m all ears. But not on my dime. We’re all here to sell ads, ladies and gentlemen, not give them away.” He turned to deliver his last command directly at Nick. “So, Mr. Harris, do me a favor. You and Lamont focus on keeping the lights on, okay?”

“You know, sir,” Nick continued, “St. Theresa’s is a legendary hospital for children. Helping them would build up good will.”

Bongero sat still, not even looking up from the papers stacked in front of him, although it was evident he was gritting his teeth and could explode at any moment. “I am not interested in good will, Mr. Harris! Especially for a hospital that everyone already does free stuff for. And even when they do pay for anything, they always pay below rack rate because it’s for the children!”

Nick took offense to Bongero’s tone and dug in. Plus, he loved badgering the old goat. “They are doing a tremendous amount of cancer research.”

“Enough, Mr. Harris.” His jaw stiffened, then he turned his attention to the others in the room. “Anyone else?”

From across the table, Judy Owens, who’d joined the firm ten years ago with Nick and Jerry during the company’s expansion, decided it was time to break the tension.

"I have some news, everybody," she announced. "I'm pregnant!" Cheers filled the room as the staff rose from their chairs offering congratulatory hugs. All except Bongero, who stayed glued to his seat, his head lowered to his stack of papers.

"Oh great, just great," he mumbled.

"So how'd it go in there?" Bella asked as Jerry and Nick walked out of the boardroom and toward the front desk.

"It was going well until Jerry here opened his big mouth."

"What did I say?"

"Why did you mention the Foundation in front of him? You know he hates charity."

"Well, I thought it would be nice to have him know what it was I was working on."

"Have you learned nothing here in the past ten years?" Nick asked. "The guy is cold-hearted. He wants nothing to do with anything that does not make him money."

"You mean this guy doesn't like helping kids – kids with cancer, no less?" Bella asked.

"Yep," Nick said. "But if those kids could make him money, they would be his best friends."

"Nice. Well, if you guys ever need help with the Kristen thing, I'm in."

"Bella, it's a pleasure to have you on our team." Jerry smiled.

"I like your team, Jerry." She hesitated for a moment before flashing a smile back as Jerry walked away.

Nick shook his head, returning to his office. "Back to work," he said as he shut his door.

"How did your night go?" Shelly asked as she arrived at the nurses' station for her reports the next morning.

"My night was okay," Doris said, "but the night nurses tell me the real excitement was here. Where do I start? Let's see, little Andrea had a rough night and Timmy was a tad restless. Oh, and

Leslie in 1602 says she is in love with Billy in Room 1608. And Johnny – well, don't get me started."

"Have you ever given a straight answer, Doris?" Shelly asked with a smile.

"You know, Doc, I've been here a long time, even before your first time around, and if I gave a straight answer to all the doctors' questions, it wouldn't be much fun, would it?"

Shelly nodded, knowing full well a sense of humor was a must-have defense mechanism.

"So, just curious," said Doris, "how much did you make from the Foundation event?"

"We raised almost a hundred seventy-five thousand dollars," she answered as she flipped through the evening's charts. "And early this morning, someone gave twenty-five thousand dollars anonymously."

"Someone gave you twenty-five thousand dollars just like that? My lord. If that's a man, I need to find him and say, thank you, baby!"

"Well, if I do find him, he's all yours, Doris."

"I saw you talking with Nick Harris last night," Doris quickly changed the topic.

"Yes, and you're right, he is good looking. And then within five minutes, he asked me out."

"The man works fast. Mercy."

"He seemed like a nice guy, though. Jerry, too."

"Did you know his mother died of breast cancer last year?" Doris asked.

"Nick Harris' mom?"

"Yes, Jane. She was in our support group. Great lady. Jane and Sal had a storybook love and were the envy of everyone who knew them. They met in high school. know one thing: Nick sure loved his mom."

"What else do you know about Nick Harris?"

"There is more than meets the eye. His mother told me things she was so proud of, the last time I spoke to her. Doesn't seem that long ago ... She was a special lady. She had eyes just like yours."

"You know, you're a special woman, Doris."

"And a helluva good nurse." She smiled.

Bella paged Nick in his office.

"Nick, there's a Doris Powers from St. Theresa's on the phone."

"Who's Doris Powers?" he asked, putting down his work.

"I don't know, I'm not a mind reader. Want me to say you're not here? Not in? Dead?"

"Nah, I'll take it. It might be important." He picked up the receiver. "Nick Harris here."

"Hi, Mr. Harris," the caller said in a slight voice, almost a whisper. "You may not remember me. My name is Doris ... and I work with Dr. Shelly White. Have a minute?"

The name Shelly White got his attention. "Sure do, Doris, what's up?"

"I was your mother's support partner. I remember meeting you and your family. I am a five-year survivor myself, so I know what your mother was going through, what she was thinking. She was special, Mr. Harris."

"Thank you for those kind words."

"Anyway," Doris continued. "Your mother told me she only wanted one thing and that was for you to find that special person to share your life. She was concerned about you. Evidently, she knew the playboy lifestyle was not her real son. If you don't mind me asking, are you seeing anybody right now?"

In wonderment, Nick leaned back in his chair. "No, just spending time with my dad and working a lot. Let me guess – you have a candidate for me?"

"I hear you met Dr. White at the Foundation event."

"Yes, I did. I asked her out, but she told me to pretty much take a leap." He chuckled.

"That was just her defenses kicking in. She really thought you were something."

"Shelly White said that?"

"Not in so many words." She hesitated a moment before proceeding. "Look, you didn't hear this from me, but Shelly is a very complicated woman. I've known her since she was eight. She's had her share of challenges in life. More than her share. There's only one thing Dr. Wall and I would like to see, and that's

for her to find someone who will treat her right. And I know you, Nick. I know where you come from."

"Dr. Wall?" he asked.

"Her mentor, the man who cured her cancer. He's been watching over her for Shelly's entire life. You met him last night."

"Oh, yeah. Sorry. Met so many people last night. Great event, by the way."

"Yes, it was. Listen. I have an idea."

Nick cocked his head to the side. "Are you working for Jerry?"

"Excuse me?"

"Jerry Lamont, my friend and co-worker."

"Oh, Jerry. He's a wonderful young man. He's got a comb-over issue, doesn't he?"

"Yeah, he does. I'll let him know you noticed."

"Don't you dare," Doris chided. "Hear me out. I speak from the heart. And if anybody asks, I never called. Got it?"

"Sure, whatever you say." He still wasn't sure what this woman was up to.

"If you would like to bump into Dr. White by accident, so to speak, she always comes in around seven o'clock in the morning and parks in the doctor's parking lot on the north side. She drives a silver Beetle. Has a license plate on it that says Doc Shel."

"That's cute."

"Yes it is. Now, remember the parking lot is right next to the new playground."

"Sounds to me like you spend a lot of time looking out for Shelly."

"Between me and Doc Wall, we watched her grow up. She's our little miracle, so we've always been looking after her, especially after her mom died. So what do you say?"

"Well, we have that in common, both mom-less." Nick hesitated a moment. "You know, I'm kind of caught off guard. Let me get this straight. You want me to accidentally bump into her at seven in the morning in the doctor's parking lot of St. Theresa's right next to the new playground. Is that about right?"

"That's right. It's that easy."

"Sounds sort of like stalking, doesn't it?"

“Look, I know you’ll figure it out. You can do this. According to your mom, you can pull off just about anything. So good luck – and remember – I never called.”

“You never called. Got it. North side, you say?” The phone went dead. Nick looked at the phone, then put the receiver back on the cradle. “What the hell just happened?”

“Food tonight?” Jerry said as he popped his head into the office. “It’s closing time.”

“You mean Dad’s food?”

“Yeah, Dad’s food. Tonight?”

“Sure, come on over. We’re eating at seven.”

“I’m there.”

Nick leaned back in his chair and looked up at the picture of his mom he proudly displayed on his desk. “Do you ever stop?” he asked her framed face.

CHAPTER 6

"You're late! You better have wine with you!" Sal yelled from the kitchen as Nick let Jerry in through the front door.

"Only ten minutes!" Jerry yelled back. Sal carried out the last dish of meatballs to the table. "And I got two bottles of wine."

"That's my boy!" said Sal. "Now get in here before this stuff gets cold." They sat at the dining table. "I hear Bongero was a real ass today, huh, Jerry?"

"Not the best way to begin a morning, that's for sure," Jerry answered.

Sal liked to start dinner the right away. "Open one of the bottles, son." Nick popped open the bottle of Valpolicella.

"You know you guys don't need Bongero. You could go out on your own," Sal said. He passed the meatballs to Nick, who in turn handed the wine to his dad.

"It takes money, and we don't have it right now."

"I could front you the money. You know that."

"Yes, Dad, but if you can get money easy, it's not worth making your own."

"Who said that?" Sal looked up from his meatballs and poured some wine into his glass.

"You did!" Nick and Jerry retorted in unison.

"Oh, that's right." He smiled. "But maybe I was wrong. You guys could pay it back on time ..."

"As much as I would like to take your money, Sal, I'm with Nick on this one. It's a tough biz and quite frankly, we'd have to have a real big account to start our own agency. By the way, these meatballs are amazing!"

"Thanks." Sal lifted his glass toward Jerry. "I stole the recipe from Fazio down at the restaurant."

"How's he doing?" Nick asked. He wiped some red sauce from the corner of his mouth.

"Great. Little Lizzie is gonna be a freshman this year. She's a fantastic kid."

"Good family." Nick nodded.

"So, besides the asshole boss down at the office, how's work going?"

"Well, I think Jerry has the hots for Bella, the new secretary."

"Is that so?" Sal looked across the table at Jerry. "Is she the one Nick says has all the tattoos?"

"Six."

"Six?" asked Nick.

"Where are they?" Sal asked.

"Where are they?" Nick sputtered. "What kind of question—"

"Says a lot about a person, where their tattoos are," said Sal.

"There's one on her right boob."

Nick picked up his wine, shaking his head at his friend. "I don't believe this."

"I'm thinking about getting one," Jerry said.

"You? Remember all the stuff you used to say about tattoos? What about those seedy parlors, the waste of money, and the stuff you can never forget? The permanent mark on your life?"

"That's before I met the tattoo queen." Jerry smiled and raised his glass to meet Nick's.

"Well, I think it's great," said Sal. He laughed at the disgust on his son's face as Nick put his glass back on the table. "Good luck with her. You deserve her. And what happened to you today?" he asked in Nick's direction.

"Either of you ever heard of a nurse named Doris Powers at St. Theresa's?" he asked, looking up from his plate.

"Sure," said Jerry. "She's a head nurse. Works with Dr. Wall. Wait, maybe she works for Shelly White. Been there forever. Big black woman. Real nice."

"That's her. She takes care of both of them. Like three peas." Nick sopped up some sauce with a piece of garlic bread. "Anyway, she called me today."

"What the hell is she calling you for?" asked Sal.

"It seems this Doris is not only the same nurse who worked with Doc Wall at the beginning of his career at St. Theresa's, but she knew Shelly back when Shelly was a patient."

"Interesting," Jerry said.

"This is the same Shelly who told you to jump in the lake?" asked Sal.

Jerry chuckled.

"Well, it wasn't really a lake," Nick said, "but it was close. Anyway, here's the twist. Evidently Doris knew Mom."

Sal got quiet for a moment. She'd only been gone a year and there were still many times he was overcome with memories and had to take a step back. Nick looked at Jerry and they returned to their plates, giving Sal the extra seconds he needed.

"Oh, yeah," said Sal as he leaned back in his chair. "Doris was her support partner."

"That's right. Evidently she had conversations with Mom about me. She seems to think I would be the perfect guy for Shelly White based on whatever Mom filled her head with."

Jerry reached over for some bread. "Actually, you would be the perfect guy for her. But I don't think she's interested in you. At all. Ever."

"Thanks for the encouragement, pal."

"So what did Doris say?" Sal pressed.

"She wants me to go to the hospital parking lot tomorrow morning at seven and accidentally bump into her."

"Accidentally bump into someone in the doctor's parking lot at seven in the morning?" Sal laughed. "That's not an accident. That's stalking."

"That's what I said!"

"So, you gonna do it?" asked Jerry.

"I don't know. Sounds like a setup. Not sure what kind of setup, just—"

"Nah, it's too smart to be a setup," said Sal. "Maybe this Doris is on to something. What have you got to lose? Pretty girl?"

"She is pretty."

"She's got eyes like your mother," added Jerry.

"You noticed that too, huh?"

"Couldn't help but notice. But I still don't think she wants anything to do with you."

"I suppose she would want to go out with you, Jerry?"

"No, she can't have me. She doesn't have any tattoos that I'm aware of."

"You really serious about this tattoo stuff?" he asked.

"Absolutely!"

"Really?"

"You really going to the parking lot?" Jerry volleyed back.

"Maybe."

"I'll tell you what. You go to the parking lot, and I just might get a tattoo."

"I'm going to have to think about it."

"Look, if this lady had a conversation about you with your mom, then I think what she's doing is what Mom asked. Sounds like something she would do, doesn't it?"

"That's exactly what I thought," Nick said. "It sounds precisely like what Mom would have someone do."

"Amazing woman, your mother," Sal said. "Not even here anymore, and yet she's still trying to change people's lives. That's a talent I think I'll never get over."

"To Mom," Nick said as he raised his glass.

There was a chill in the air, but the sun was shining brightly, and Nick stepped out of his car in the doctors' parking lot, absorbing the weather in all its glory. Even though it was quite early, children played on the playground. Nurses' aides stood scattered throughout. He looked up and saw other children inside the hospital watching through the glass. As he stood near the playground, he couldn't help but realize there were few joyous sounds coming from the kids who were playing. The ones not confined to wheelchairs moved around, but many were moving very slowly. As he was looked around, he missed Shelly pulling into her parking spot.

As Shelly reached for her purse and briefcase on the passenger seat, she noticed Nick standing in the distance, staring at the grounds. She walked up behind him. "Can I help you?" Nick turned. He looked embarrassed to be caught off guard. "Oh, you're here to see the kids? Is that it?"

"To be honest, I didn't know this was here." He pointed at the playground. "I really came to ask you if we could start over and maybe get to know each other. I think I gave you the wrong impression at the reception."

"So you show up at seven in the morning to, what, bump into me? That's almost stalking, Mr. Harris."

Nick grimaced. "I'm am not a stalker. I just couldn't figure out another way to talk to you. I know you're very busy—"

"Yes, I am busy with them." She gestured toward the playground. "You see those kids? Those are the fortunate ones. They have no clue what's in store for them. So they play. The ones in the wheelchairs are lucky enough to at least get outside for some fresh air for a few minutes. We bring them out in the morning because that's the only time it's cool enough. And those behind the glass," she continued, looking up at the building behind them, "those are the ones really fighting for their lives. All they can do is hope that one day they will be like these children down here. We spend our days trying to get those kids up there down here on the playground."

"Then there's me, Mr. Harris. I am a living, breathing example that you can get past all of this. So, I choose to spend my time helping these kids be like me and have a future. The way I do that is to concentrate on them. I don't do much socializing. Nothing personal. I just work with my kids. So if you're looking for a date, Mr. Harris, you've come to the wrong place. Not interested. If you want to help with the Foundation, that's great. Just let us know. Good day."

As she turned to walk away, Nick finally spoke.

"You were here in 1972, weren't you, Doctor?"

She stopped and faced him, but as she spoke, she slowly backed toward the staff entrance. "Yes, I believe that's what I told you the other night."

"Four months, right?"

"Mr. Harris, as I told you, I am —"

"You met a kid in Room 1648," Nick interrupted. "Remember him?"

"To tell you the truth, not really. That was a long time ago."

"He was in Room 1648 and he was about ten. His name was Chucky."

Shelly stopped and raised her head. The boy she had met in the hall. He was one of the lucky ones, too. He went home before her.

"You see, about a week or two before you went home, Doctor, Chucky died," Nick continued. "He never got to go home. His family mourned his loss, they picked up the pieces, buried their brother and son, and went on with their lives the best they could. But they never forgot Chucky. You remember Chucky's doctor? I believe it was Dr. Wall who treated him."

Shelly stood frozen in time, stunned by what he was saying. A flood of memories rushed in, especially of Kristen. Looking back was so painful. The past was full of death and sadness.

Nick began walking back to his car, but partway there he turned back and stopped.

"I got news for you, Dr. White. "There are a lot of us who have had cancer steal loved ones away, and all we can do is raise money so you can fight your war. Your private war. You want to make it personal, Doctor, because you survived, and I respect that. I intend to help you, Doctor. That's what I came to tell you. I'm wondering, though, if you'd let anyone do anything for you. Open your eyes. Look around. There is an army of people who would do anything — anything — to stop this," Nick said. He pointed to the playground. "It's not just the Foundation. Let others help. Open up."

He put his hands in the pockets of his coat. "So, I'm not here for a date. I'm here to help. Sorry to have bothered you." He turned back around and walked away.

"Mr. Harris!" Shelly finally spoke up as he was about to get into his car. He stopped but did not turn around. "Nick! Please! How do you know Chucky?"

Nick turned his gaze back to her. Shelly stood in the same spot, unwilling to move.

"He was my brother." He stepped into his car without looking back and drove away.

Shelly felt the weight of what she had said to him, and even more, what he had said to her.

“He never went home,” she spoke aloud. “Chucky never went home.”

She stood paralyzed in confusion. Rolling clouds suddenly darkened the sun.

CHAPTER 7

Dr. Wall entered the office behind the nurses' station and saw a troubled Doris at the fifth-floor window overlooking the doctors' parking lot.

"Looking for the guy who dinged my car?" he asked.

"Not especially, but I think we may have a problem."

"We?"

"I sort of set Shelly up."

"Set her up?"

"With Nick Harris."

"Good Lord! Are you joking? That man is a playboy. You're playing matchmaker with a pack of matches." He grunted and joined Doris at the window.

"Look, he's not what you think. Anymore, at least. I had talked to his mom about him and there are things that make him perfect for Shelly. We treated his brother the same time we treated Shelly, you know."

"I know that. But Shelly doesn't."

"Those kids are perfect for each other. I can feel it."

"I told her Chucky went home," he said to Doris.

"You what?"

"When I was pushing her in the hallway one day, she asked about Chucky, and I told her he went home."

"Greg, that was more than thirty years ago. You and I were fresh out of the Navy. This place was brand-spanking-new. A lot has changed over time. She's not going to remember that."

"Well, let's hope not. If she does, we're in trouble."

"We're?"

"I'll just play dumb. My wife says I'm really good at that." He glanced down at the file in his hand. "Oh, no."

"Now what?"

"Remember the anonymous check we got for twenty-five thousand dollars after the reception?"

"Dr. White mentioned it. Why do you sound like it's a bad thing?"

"It's from Salvatore and Nicholas Harris." He held up the printout of donors.

"What? Wait, I thought it was anonymous?"

"Not now, it's not," he said just as the door flew open.

"May I have a word with you, Doctor?" Shelly asked.

Doris' eyes grew wide. "Uh, oh," she whispered. That was her cue. "I'll get right on those files, Doc." She stepped around Shelly without making eye contact.

"Something wrong?"

"You could say that," she said. "I just found out something that caught me off guard." She put down her soft-sided briefcase. "I ran into Nick Harris. In the parking lot."

"What's he doing in the doctors' lot?"

"Waiting for me."

"My God."

"Well, I thought he was trying to use a line on me to get a date. So I chewed him a new one. He listened, but then he proceeded to tell me he wanted to help the Foundation. After that, he brought up a little boy named Chucky. Remember Chucky, Doctor? Nick even knew his room number, for God's sake."

Dr. Wall sat, hoping Shelly would follow suit. She remained standing.

"Turns out Chucky was Nick's brother," she continued, "and I'm betting that he was the same Chucky who went home right before I left here back in '72."

"Look, Shelly, I ... um." He stopped to collect his thoughts.

"Just tell me, is that the same Chucky, Doc?" She crossed her arms.

He understood her wanting to know. It was her past as much as it was his. Back then, he wanted to make all of them well, even though he lived by those two rules of medicine. One: patients get ill and patients die. Two: you can't change rule number one. He had been a young black physician in the deep South. He had told Shelly how he always felt like he was walking on eggshells trying to make everybody happy. But it wasn't easy, especially when dealing with death. Some people refused to let him treat their kids because of the color of his skin. But not Shelly's mom. They showed up and she let him carry Shelly to the front desk. He had felt just as important as any other doctor. And he had to be. He had to make the little girl better.

"The last thing I wanted to do was let you down," Dr. Wall began. "I knew Kristen was not going to make it. But you were so good for her. So, when we lost Chucky, I didn't think it was so wrong to have you believe that he went home. And the fact that Nick Harris is his brother is just a strange coincidence being played out thirty years later. You know I love you as my own, and the last thing I would ever want to do is hurt you. Or lie to you."

Tears welled in her eyes. "I know." She sniffled. "But is there anything else you haven't told me? I did have cancer, didn't I?"

"Of course you did, Shelly." He sighed. "I only lied about Chucky to give you a boost in confidence and reassurance that treatment does work. I felt you might need an extra push to fight off the cancer. And you did." He paused. "But there is one thing you need to know."

She waited, her stillness and eye contact telling him he had to continue.

"It's not about the past—well, I guess it is a little." The words stumbled from his mouth. "You know that twenty-five thousand dollar donation that was earmarked for the playground?" He held up the printout and let Shelly read the names next to the donation.

"Salvatore and Nicholas Harris? You can't be serious."

"As God is my witness. The anonymous aspect pertains to the general public. For our purposes, and purposes of accounting and taxes, the names must be registered with the Foundation. That being said, mum's the word. Neither Nick or Sal are to be told we know."

"Great, I just told off a guy who lost a brother to cancer and gave us twenty-five grand. And to thank him, I told him to get lost."

"Look, Shel, don't let it bother you. Let sleeping dogs lie and get back to your caseload. Mary Tompkins is coming in today, and I want you to see her. Her mom says she's tired and weak. I don't like the sound of it. And her mother doesn't like people of color."

"Are you kidding?" she asked. "We still have patients like that in this day and age?"

"Yes, especially here in the South. Anyway, let's do full blood work and hope for the best."

As he got up, he put his arms out for a reconciliatory hug. She stepped forward, melting into the embrace. "I love you, my little miracle," he said.

"I know."

"And maybe it's none of my business," he added, "but you can do better than Nick Harris. You really can. He's a nice guy, obviously cares for the Foundation, but I don't think he's for you."

"I don't know." She turned to leave.

"Curious. How did he know what time you came to work in the morning?"

"Good question." Shelly shrugged, then reached back to close the door behind her.

Dr. Wall walked back to the window. "I'm getting too old for this crap."

Shelly made a beeline to the nurses' station. "Doris, Mary Tompkins is coming in this morning. We'll need full blood work. Can you take care of that for me?"

"Be happy to, Doctor." She wrote down the order on Mary's file. "Anything else?"

"Yes, I need to see the file of a patient from 1972."

"Chucky Harris?"

"How on earth did you know?"

"Just a guess. It was you, Kristen, Chucky ..."

"I need the file when you get a chance," she said, trying to stop another painful trip into the past this morning before it got too far. But Doris was in her own land of memories.

"I remember all the kids back then. We were all so young and new at this place. We didn't have a lot of successes, but how we tried."

"Well, fortunately, things have changed, and we save a lot of kids here now," Shelly interjected. "But as long as we are on the subject of Chucky, what else do you know about him?"

Doris broke eye contact. "He was a patient here..."

"I know that, Doris. Did you know his brother was Nick Harris?"

"Well, you know ..." Doris attempted to beat around the bush, but what she made up for in charm, she lacked in finesse.

"Doris?"

"Okay, yes. Of course I did. I told you Mrs. Harris was in our breast cancer support group. She had stage IV. And the woman did everything right. Mammograms every year. It just must have been her time. But from what I was told, she has a great son—*sons* I should say."

"Oh, one more thing." Knowing her well, she could tell Doris knew what was coming next. "You don't know why Nick Harris was in the doctors' parking lot this morning, do you?"

"Our doctors' lot?"

"Yes, here. Outside."

"Maybe he just wanted to talk to you?"

"Hmm, that's exactly what he said."

"Well, I think the man must have had something important to say if he went to all that trouble."

"You'd think, huh?" Shelly shook her head in amazement as she walked away. Doris was so bad at hiding the truth. She turned down the long hall, now filling with light from the returning morning sun.

That afternoon, Shelly walked into an exam room to find eight-year-old Mary Tompkins and her mom, who reeked of stale smoke.

"She's just not feeling well," Mrs. Tompkins explained with a heavy Southern accent. "Same kind of symptoms as before. Really tired." She stroked her daughter's hair. Mary attempted to move away.

Mary was recovering from leukemia. Shelly looked at her and was reminded her of herself at St. Theresa's, about the same age, feeling tired all the time. The difference, though, was heartbreaking. Shelly's mom never drank or smoked and didn't see color the way Mary's mom did.

"Has she been taking the medication that was prescribed for her?" Shelly asked.

"Oh yes, ma'am, she's been taking it right along the whole time."

"But not all the time, Mom," Mary interjected. "Sometimes, well..."

"Oh, don't be silly," her mother interrupted. "She takes it every day like she's supposed to. The poor child is confused."

"Well, Mary," said Shelly with a smile, "we'll let you know what we find out, and we'll get you all better. Okay? Is that all right with you?"

"Yes, ma'am," Mary politely answered. Shelly gave her a pat on the knee and left to continue her rounds. Her stomach ached for Mary because of Mrs. Tompkins and the realization that the past never goes away. Forgiveness. That's what Shelly need. Not to be forgiven but to forgive. To forgive God for what happened to her. Even more, to forgive God for what happened to Kristen. Maybe she was seeking revenge, as Nick had said. Shelly's mother was fond of saying, "Forgiveness is being able to realize you can't change the past." It just wasn't that easy.

As a doctor who took the Hippocratic Oath, it hurt her deeply every time she lost a patient. Each time, a little piece of her died with them. These were children, the world's future. Each time a little girl or boy was lost, she felt she was failing God and failing society, letting this disease strip the world of the next Einstein or Gandhi.

Before returning to her office at three p.m. from a full day of mentally exhausting rounds, Shelly stepped into the back of the

nurses' station. As if Doris knew she was coming, she raised a file – old and yellowed – in the air for her to grab.

"That is one battered file," Shelly said, gripping it with her free hand.

"Yes, it is, Dr. White, and if the notes look familiar, it's because it's my writing! And Dr. Wall's. Sort of a time capsule. Let me know if you need anything else before I leave."

"Thank you, Doris," she said as she retreated to her office and securely closed the door. She sat at her desk and felt her heart beating a bit more rapidly than normal. A musty smell filled her nostrils when she opened the thirty-five-year-old file.

There was a picture of Chucky, his face just like she had remembered, which struck her as odd since she'd only met him once, maybe twice in her short stay at the hospital. She must have been seeing the features of Nick Harris in his brother.

The case file was loaded with notes from Dr. Wall and Doris. He was right, she thought, he did try everything to save Chucky's life. And Chucky seemed to have done his part ... *And although he continues to deteriorate, his parents and younger brother work to keep his spirits up. I have requested for this family to receive a rollaway bed so his mother and brother can stay overnight ...* The memos and forms went into great detail about how Chucky responded to and didn't respond to the drugs he was given. How the primitive chemo sessions took their toll. How morphine was used to mask the pain ... *most of the time the patient sleeps through it ...* was noted in the file. Shelly thought back to Kristen. The file proved that Nick Harris was telling the truth. He did know the pain she'd felt and she had been very ugly to him. Her eyes welling with tears, she closed the file. She placed it face up on her desk, patted it as if it were a patient, and picked up the phone.

"Yes, Doctor?"

"Doris, there is one thing I need from you before you leave. Get me Nick Harris' phone number."

CHAPTER 8

The office was a madhouse, and Nick's department, a zoo. Colleagues pored over artwork for a new hotel in Atlanta. Jerry floated about like a proud papa, pointing out how the artwork tied in to the hotel's amenities.

"That looks like a fish," one of the associates pointed out.

"That's the spa," said Jerry.

Nick stood in the back of the room. He'd watched the team work through the creative brainstorming session and provided moral support for Jerry. His mind, however, was still on the events of this morning. There was a soft knock on his office door.

Bella eased into the room. "Nick? There's a Dr. White on the phone."

"You're kidding me."

"Isn't she the one from this morning?"

Nick glared.

"Jerry kinda told me about it." Her eyes offered him an apology.

"Jerry's got a big mouth."

"Yeah, but it's a cute big mouth," she replied.

Nick shook his head. "I'll have to take your word for that."

He waited for Bella to exit, but she seemed to have grown roots.

"Can you close the door on your way out, please?"

"Um, sure." Bella looked disappointed.

Nick settled into his comfy leather chair and stared at the phone for a moment. He inhaled deeply, then picked up the receiver.

"This is Nick."

There was a slight hesitation before Shelly spoke. "Hi, Nick, this is Dr. Shelly White. Do you have a few minutes?"

"Funny, that's what I said this morning."

"I know, and I want to apologize for this morning. I was taken off guard. I just didn't expect to see you in the parking lot. It was only seven a.m. That's a bit strange, isn't it?"

Nick stared out the window. "Yes, Dr. White. A little strange. Perhaps a little crazy too."

"Well, the thought did cross my mind," she said, a somewhat jovial tone to her voice. "Nick, I focus so much on my work here, I tend to avoid anything else. I haven't dated much because I really haven't had any luck at dating, and since my mom died, I tend to avoid anything that takes me away from the kids."

"I understand, but life is too short. In any moment, anyone can just disappear," said Nick. "I'm sure you see that almost daily. I thought I learned that when my brother died, but when my mom died suddenly it made me realize how temporary life is."

"I lost my mother too. Suddenly."

"I'm sorry," Nick said softly.

"They found her in the backyard. She had been there all night. We lived in a very rural part of Georgia." She paused, then continued with a catch in her voice. "She was hanging clothes on the line and had a massive myocardial infarction. We had her on all sorts of meds, but she always said she felt fine and as long as she knew I was okay, she was okay. When our neighbor found her, he called me, so I called Dr. Wall. He and his wife, Dottie, met me at the funeral home. He is my rock and Dottie is like a mom to me. And Doris, I think you may have met her the other night, well, she's like a sister to me. A big sister. That's my family. And the kids. You know, every time I lose one of these kids, I feel so helpless. Dr. Wall is the same way. I guess I get a little guarded when something or someone gets between me and our kids. So seeing you trying to get close to me made me a little defensive."

Nick understood. He knew from personal experience the pain of losing somebody.

"The reason why I'm alive," she continued, "was Mom's decision to get me to St. Theresa's. I came here in '72. I was just eight

years old. I guess I've never left. I want to stop cancer and turn the lights off in this place for good." She paused. "I'm rambling, huh?"

"I wouldn't say that. I just found out more about you than anyone else has told me – and I have been asking."

"Well, it's more than that," she said. "I heard stories about you."

"Let me guess. That I'm a playboy who parties all night and sells ads during the day? That life's one big festival for me? Well, that *was* me. Then my mom got sick, and it brought back all the pain from brother's death. Life began to look different to me. Most of all, I want to be there for my dad."

"From what I understand, your mom was in a support group with Doris."

"That's right. Mom used to talk about her. She came to the funeral. Nice woman."

"She's a character, but a great nurse. I am so sorry. I didn't know about your mother."

"Not something we talk much about, just something that happened a long time ago that we'll never forget. Let's face it, I sell advertising, and you save lives, so there's not much in common between us."

"I had no idea about your brother. Dr. Wall never told me, and all I ever heard was about you being a ladies' man. So, I guess I might have been a little standoffish this morning."

"You definitely were standoffish, but yes, I was a player. Now I spend a lot of time focusing on my dad. I do the things my mom wanted us to do. Believe it or not, helping the hospital and your Foundation is part of it. And as long as we're being honest, I decided to go on the web and read up about you. You have quite an amazing story, Doctor. You're a modern day miracle."

"Well, not as much a miracle as one lucky human being. I woke up one day and the cancer was gone. Lucky, but not a miracle."

"We don't know what happened," she continued. "I wanted to go home. But it's interesting; I was free of cancer, but I wasn't old enough to understand what that meant. All I really knew was I had to leave Kristen, and she'd become such a good friend. So getting a clean bill of health was kind of lousy because I had to leave her. But as I was walking out the door of the hospital, she died." She sighed.

"I guess I make it sound like recovery is so normal around here, but it's not really. Every day we work with kids like Kristen, and

we always start off positive and believe we're going to beat this thing. From there, I watch these brave little souls fighting for their lives, losing their hair, and getting sick, while their parents observe from the sidelines, helpless to do anything except hold them when they're getting scared. When the parents aren't here, we hold them. You know, I've spent the last eighteen years here, and I find myself looking at these kids asking, 'Why did I walk out of here alive?' What happened to make my cancer—a very aggressive one, at that—just disappear overnight?"

Nick sat and listened. He was getting to know the real Shelly White. She had his undivided attention.

"How many people do you know who wake up and their cancer has just disappeared?" she asked. "The good thing is, cancer's treatable in most cases now. If we can get these kids early, we can treat them, and the prognosis is so much better. It's amazing how a simple exam can save a life."

"I can attest to that."

"What do you mean?"

"A couple of years ago. Just a scare," he said. His doctor had suggested a colonoscopy since there was cancer in the family. Sure enough, they'd found a polyp in the ascending colon. Big enough that it was about two years from becoming cancerous. His doctor told him he might not have made it to forty. "I just know it's important to be tested depending on the circumstances."

"Our problem," she said, "is getting children here in time. Too often parents think their kids have the flu or something. The good thing is, we save more than we lose at St. Theresa's. I am so proud of this hospital's work."

Bella interrupted Nick on the intercom. Two quick buzzes. That meant Bongero was on the warpath.

"Uh, Shelly, I mean, Dr. White, I have to run."

"Okay, but, Nick, can we try this again?" she asked before he could hang up. "We can meet for lunch, dinner, feed pigeons in the park, I really don't care. I think you'll find I'm a good person—a little gun shy—and someone who might misjudge others once in a while."

For the second time in the same day, she had caught Nick completely unawares. This morning she told him off and now she was asking him out.

"Well, only if you promise to be nice to me," he said with a soft laugh. "And I promise to be a gentleman."

"Deal. Where would you like to meet?"

"There's this small Italian restaurant on the north side of town," he said.

"Fazio's?"

"You know it?"

"Sure do. Joe's daughter is one of my patients in remission. That's a perfect place. I'd love to see Joe."

"About seven o'clock okay with you?"

"Do you think we can get reservations at the last minute like this?"

"I think we can make that happen."

"Okay, then. I'll see you at seven."

Just as Nick hung up, Jerry popped his head through the door. "Hey, uh, Bella said that Shelly White called for you? And Bongero's on the warpath again."

"Yes, I know, and yes, she did," said Nick. He leaned back in his chair. "Why'd you tell Bella about our little conversation this morning?"

"I didn't think it was hush-hush," Jerry answered. "Did she really call?"

"Sure did. We're having dinner at Fazio's at seven." He smiled.

"Fazio's at seven with the very chick who gave you a bad time this morning? What a strange woman." Jerry took a seat in one of the matching tan leather chairs that flanked Nick's desk.

"Same one."

"Wow, what the hell happened for her to change her mind so fast?"

"I don't know. As I said, she called me. I did tell her about Chucky this morning. Maybe she checked to make sure I was telling the truth."

"She checked all right. That's the way she is. She works on the old Reagan theory."

"What's that?"

"Trust, but verify."

"You know Dad had to disclose our names with that donation we made. Taxes or something. I hope she's not being nice because of that."

"She's not all about the money. I think you may just have surprised her. What's it been? Thirty-five years?"

"Thirty-five years last month." Nick nodded. "Dad's at the cemetery right now changing out the flowers at his headstone. He never misses a week."

Nick sighed then changed the subject. "So, how are you doing on the new campaign?"

"Half of the office likes it, half hate it. Bongero thinks we don't charge enough to get what everybody likes."

"Great," he grumbled. "So what are you doing for dinner?"

"Well, I'm not going with you – am I?"

"No, you're not."

"Okay, then I think I'll take Bella to her favorite dining establishment."

"Where's that?"

"White Castle."

"You're not serious, are you?" Nick laughed.

"What can I say? She likes White Castle."

"Jer, you got to take this girl to the next level. At least to the Olive Garden."

"Oh yeah. If your dad finds out either of us ever went to Olive Garden, we're both in deep shit. You realize that, right?"

"You speak the truth, my friend."

"Hey, good luck tonight. No funny business."

"I can handle myself. You just enjoy the Castle."

"Oh, I will. I will."

Nick admired Jerry's carefree lifestyle. "But, White Castle?" he asked aloud, reaching for the phone to call Fazio's.

Nick arrived at Fazio's at six forty-five. The aroma of Italian spices steeped in garlic seeped through the doors and into the parking lot. The restaurant had been a fixture on the north side of town for many years.

Old-world Italy permeated the restaurant, from the pictures on the walls to the music in the background. The food was known for miles around, and people flocked to Fazio's to delight in what Joe was cooking in his big pots in the kitchen.

With his black mustache and short, stocky build, Joe looked just like people expected. His Italian accent was classic.

"Nick! So good to see you, my friend!" He kissed him on both cheeks in true European style. "I was happy to hear that you wanted to have dinner with us tonight. I made sure we saved the best table for you."

"Joe, it looks great," said Nick. The table was covered with a traditional red and white checked cloth and bathed in the light of the candle positioned in its center. "I like your attention to detail. Grazie."

"So great to have both you and your father with us this evening."

"Uh, no, it's not my dad I'm coming here with, Joe. I have a date. Honestly, I have no idea what Dad is up to tonight. 'Going out' is all he told me."

"Oh, I know where he is."

"You do? Where?"

"In my kitchen, stealing more of my recipes!" He winked.

"He is? Oh, Joe, he shouldn't be bothering you. I can tell him to stop doing that."

"No, no, he is always welcome. Tell you the truth, he's not a bad cook."

"I know that," said Nick. "Certainly makes coming home after a crappy day worth it."

"So, who is the lucky lady tonight?" Joe asked. He turned away when he heard the bells on the door tinkle. "Excuse me one sec. He greeted another customer. "Dr. Shelly! Welcome! What a wonderful surprise." He kissed her on the cheek.

Nick stepped to the two. "Well Joe, you asked, and here she is. My date. Dr. Shelly White."

Joe smile became an ear-to-ear grin. "You have a date with an angel, you know. She saved my Elizabeth."

"Let's give the credit to Lizzie," Shelly said. "She was the real trooper. She's the one who did all the work."

"I am sorry, Dr. Shelly, but I know what you did. I know you save my baby. It was you. And that, as they say, is a fact."

"She's a doctor on a mission," Nick piped in.

"And you?" Joe asked.

"Me? What about me?"

"You are the reason I could afford to get her the treatment. You and Sal."

"Sal?" Shelly asked. "And who's Sal?"

"My dad."

"Wait, so it was you who sent Lizzie to me?" Shelly asked, pointing at Nick and then at herself. "Small world."

"Well, not you in particular," Nick answered. "But to St. Theresa's. And we only helped with the co-pay."

"Co-pay, schmo-pay," said Joe with the help of his hands. "Lotsa money. And now my Lizzie is in the ninth grade, healthy and happy thanks to both of you. Now, enough of this talk. Let's get you seated."

Nick and Shelly exchanged looks, fully realizing that, yes, they were on a real date. Together. Go figure.

Joe walked them back to the table by the window and gestured to his waiter, Tony. As they sat, Nick looked around for his dad.

"Beautiful view, beautiful night, and from the bottom of my heart, thank you for what you have done for my family," Joe said to Shelly. She appeared touched by his graciousness, something Nick never got used to either, but that was Joe's style—a true heart-on-his-sleeve type of guy.

"You would do the same for any child, Joe, so pass it on," said Shelly.

Joe made his way back to the kitchen. "Pass it on, huh?" Nick asked.

"It's from an old folk song from the '60s. I've always liked it."

"That's the same song my mom would sing to me."

"Do you remember the lyrics?" she asked.

"Well," he said, "I'm not going to sing, but it begins 'It only takes a spark to get a fire going ...'"

Shelly smiled, nodding. "I heard that one at the hospital during Mass," she added. "It's a great song."

As Tony took their order, Shelly looked toward the back of the restaurant. "Who is that guy?" she asked. "Do I know him?"

"Who?"

"There's a guy back there waving at us."

Nick turned around. There was Sal, in a cook's hat and an apron, now waving a spoon.

"Ah, Poppa Sal," interjected the waiter.

"Poppa Sal?" Nick asked.

"Oh yes, a visiting chef, from what I have heard."

"Is that right?" Nick laughed.

"He's kind of cute," said Shelly as she waved back, prompting the visiting chef to walk toward their table.

"Hiya, son," he said.

"Son?" Shelly hiked an eyebrow.

"Shelly White, my dad, Salvatore Harris," Nick introduced them.

"Well, I guess this morning musta gone well, huh, son?" Shelly gave Nick a look. "He tells me everything," Sal said.

Shelly smiled. "To tell the truth, Mr. Harris, this morning was a train wreck," she said, taking a sip of water from her glass.

An anxious expression appeared on Sal's once-smiling face. "Then I must have missed something in the story."

"Hey, Poppa Sal, may I ask, what the hell are you doing here?" Nick asked.

"I thought I'd try out one of my recipes over here and Joe said it would be okay. What's it to you?"

"Are you a chef, Mr. Harris?" Shelly asked, putting her water glass back on the table.

"Please call me Sal. And no, I'm not. Just a retired insurance exec who likes to cook. Anyway, I'll make myself scarce. Got work to do in the kitchen. And if I were you, I'd order the special."

"We just ordered the special, so let's see how good you are," Shelly said as Sal walked away.

"I'm very good, my dear," he yelled back.

"He's adorable," said Shelly. "Reminds me of a friend of mine at UF."

"UF?"

"The University of Florida. The Gator Nation. Your dad sorta reminds me of an older version of a dear friend of mine, Barry, who runs the School of Pharmacy and heads up the biochemistry lab. Incredibly brilliant man."

"Just sorta?"

"Well, Barry's gay."

"That wouldn't be my dad, but I'll take the comparison as a compliment. So you went to Florida?"

"Sure did. They gave me a full ride and in return I have to buy a lot of Gatorade."

"Cute."

"Not to change the subject, but I do have a question." Shelly hesitated for a moment. "Something that has been bugging me ..."

"What's that?"

"How did you know I was going to be in the parking lot this morning?"

"Well. I got this call from someone who shall remain nameless, who thought I should try to meet you and show you the real Nick Harris."

"And that person would be?"

"I promised I would not reveal the person or persons involved."

"I can't persuade you?"

"Nope." He zipped his lips with his thumb and forefinger. "My lips are sealed. Of course, my caller may be feeling pretty bad after what happened. Maybe tonight will make up for it."

"I hope you don't mind," Shelly said, "but I did a little research on you. I guess the ad business is treating you pretty well, huh?"

"Oh, I love the ad biz, but my boss is a complete ass, to be blunt. One day, Jerry and I are going to do it ourselves. Go off on our own. But for now, I just want to be sure Dad is taken care of and do the things my mom has asked me to do."

"That's sweet," she said.

"She fought cancer for about four years, and we would talk about how we still can't stop it. We can send guys to space, develop smart bombs, and there are deadly diseases that are curable. But cancer, for some reason, is not on that list."

"Not true," Shelly interjected. "We're making progress. What we're doing at St. Theresa's is amazing. We have a wonderful team of people, and really, it's a great time to be a doctor."

"I know it's a slow process," she continued, "but as I said before, if we can get people in early to be treated, we can save them. But sometimes people don't know they have cancer until it's too late. It's a give and take every day. And it's a fight."

Nick nodded. "I watched my mom go through it. She did everything she was supposed to do. Ate the right food, exercised daily, always taking vitamins, and made sure our fried food intake

was limited. Mom always made sure everyone was taken care of. So now, it's sort of my job."

"Again, I'm sorry about your mom—and about Chucky."

"Chucky was a long time ago," said Nick as he sipped his wine. "We used to play catch in the front yard. He would get so tired. It was just when they had opened St. Theresa's. So off we went." He paused. "We used to stay in his room. It was like camping. Doris yelled at us for playing catch. I would stand in the hall and Chuck would throw the ball from his bed." Nick returned to his wine, lost in thought for a bit.

"Now he's buried next to my mom over at Liberty Point," he continued.

"That's where my mom is," Shelly said. "Next to the cross. I buried her here so we could be close. A little selfish, I know."

"Not at all. Mom and Chuck are on the big hill. She always wanted a view."

Two plates of steaming noodles, chicken, and sauce appeared in front of them, halting the conversation. Shelly gave a big sigh. Nick looked up to see Sal standing outside of the kitchen waiting for a review.

"Wow," said Shelly. "If it tastes as good as it smells..." She took a forkful and sighed again in bliss. "It does," she said to Nick, then kissed her lips to her fingers in traditional Italian fashion. "That's for you, Sal."

Wilshire Park, across the street from the restaurant, was a popular place for families to sit or stroll along cobblestone pathways. The greenspace was well lit, and although this was a cool evening, a fair share of locals were out and about.

"So, out of curiosity," Nick said as they walked along the path, "how's the evening going so far?"

"I must say, the company was great and having your dad cook that wonderful meal—it's not a bad night."

"If Dad had cooked that meal at home, it wouldn't have cost me thirty dollars a plate."

"Does he cook like that at home?"

"Almost every night."

"Let me know if he ever needs any guinea pigs to sample new recipes, will you?"

"You'll be the second person I call."

"Second?"

"Well, Jerry is always number one for food. Except for tonight. Tonight, he's taking his way-too-young girlfriend to her favorite restaurant – White Castle."

"I don't go there. Gives me heartburn." She smiled as her ears picked up the chords of a guitar in the distance. "You said earlier you like music. What do you listen to?"

"I like vocals that have a message or a powerful string arrangement."

"Like?"

"Like 'Ain't No Mountain High Enough,' or 'I'll Always Love You.' That kind of stuff. But my all-time favorite is 'Nights in White Satin.' The end is so powerful. The lyrics tell such a haunting story – just love the orchestration and the end. The Moody Blues were the best. What about you?"

"Promise not to laugh?" She flashed a big smile. She hadn't been this relaxed with a guy in quite some time, and she was feeling good inside. She'd almost forgotten how much fun could be had on a date that actually was going well. For once, she had no desire to end it right after dinner and go home and curl up in bed in front of the TV. Or worse, a medical journal.

"Promise." He smiled back. She could tell – or at least hoped she was reading the signals correctly – that he was having a good time as well. Plus he was having quite the effect on her. She looked into his eyes.

"Musical stuff. Songs from musicals, you know." She giggled – she hardly ever giggled this much – then pushed him away ever so slightly as he pretended to suppress a laugh. "You promised!" She stopped mid-step. "Oh, and Motown."

"That's quite a combination there," Nick said, facing her. She felt that familiar awkwardness as they really looked at each other. He broke the trance. "Well, then, Doctor, tell me a few of your favorites."

"Well," she began, feeling her cheeks flush, "as far as musicals go, it's a toss-up between 'Climb Every Mountain' from *The Sound of Music* ..."

"I love that song!" Nick interjected.

"Which is sort of like how I 've lived my life so far," she continued, "and 'All I Ever Asked of You' from *Phantom*."

"That's a good one, too. Okay, what about Motown? What's your favorite song?"

"All of them!"

"All of them?"

"You can't go wrong with Motown, Mr. Harris. I grew up with Doc Wall, and to a certain extent with Doris, and I kind of latched on to the music they were listening to. It's great."

"No argument from me."

"My turn," Shelly said, getting a kick out of this getting-to-know-you game. "So, how'd you get into the ad business?"

"Let's see. I was fresh out of college, Georgia Tech, and a friend of mine was working on a campaign for a young senator who was just starting to get off the ground. He asked if I wanted to work with him, so I made a few commercials and wrote a few speeches. It really got me into the art of selling product and people. That was fifteen years ago. And the rest, as they say, is history. Funny, I still talk to that senator now and again."

"Is he still a senator?"

"Nope." Nick paused. "Now he's the president."

"The president? Like President Riley, the president?"

"That's him. President William Riley."

"And you know him? You talk to him on the phone? You know President William Riley?"

"Yes, but I call him Bill." Nick smiled. "He wanted me to work on his campaign, but with Mom's health, I had to say no. Good guy, Bill. Actually owes me a lot of favors, but that's a whole other story."

Shelly stood staring with wide eyes, trying to figure out if this guy was pulling her leg. The truth was, she didn't know him that well. Just this morning she had him pegged as a player. But he seemed so sincere. Why would he make up something so huge? *To impress me?* "You know the President of the United States," Shelly half-asked and half-repeated.

"Sure do. Why would I make something like that up?"

She began to walk again and Nick followed. She had the strangest urge to grab his hand, but thought better of it. She put her hands back into her pockets for safekeeping.

“What else do I need to know about you?” she asked, looking ahead as they walked.

“Well, let’s see,” said Nick. “I’m a Leo, I love warm puppies, quiet sunsets, and it’s past my bedtime.”

Shelly glanced at her watch. “Wow,” she said. “How did it get to be twelve-thirty? Time flies when you take a leisurely walk in a park, doesn’t it?” They turned down the next path leading toward the street.

They returned to the spot where Shelly had parked her car. “Thanks for a lovely evening, Nick.” She turned to face him. “And tell your dad dinner was wonderful.”

“I’ll be sure to tell him. May I call you for coffee once in a while?”

“That would be wonderful,” she said, flashing her knee-melting smile. She knew her best attributes; she just chose to use them sparingly. “And thanks for not telling me to get lost after I told you off this morning. As I said, I don’t go out much, so a lot of this is pretty foreign to me. But, it’s something I think I could get used to. Especially the food.” Her eyes dropped a bit.

“I think you’ll find I really do like warm puppies,” said Nick.

“Well, I’m glad to hear you’re not a cat person.” She stepped into her car as Nick held the door. “Cat people need to be with cat people and dog people need to be with dog people.” She started her car and closed the door, but rolled the window down before driving away to thank him again and wish him pleasant dreams.

She looked back in her mirror. Nick stood in place, waving his hand in the air until he was out of sight. He had not kissed her goodnight, something she usually expected after a date. But the smile he left her with felt better than a kiss. It felt real. It felt sincere. It felt right.

She kept the window down as she drove away. The crisp night air made her feel alive. She couldn’t get “Ain’t No Mountain High Enough” out of her mind.

CHAPTER 9

Early the next morning, Nick rattled a couple of cups getting his favorites out of the cupboard.

"Late night, son?" Sal asked.

"Yes, and it was a very nice evening." He poured coffee from the glass carafe for the two of them. "You know, Dad, her eyes are just as blue as Mom's."

"I know. But how was the meal?"

Nick smiled. "It was great. But you owe me like sixty bucks."

"Whine, whine. Did she like it?"

"Yes. She specifically made a point that I tell you it was wonderful."

"Then you can have her over, and I'll cook something just as spectacular."

"She'd love that, but let's not push it. I barely know her. A little time is in order." Nick brought his fork to the eggs his dad had prepared.

"Just tell me when," said Sal. "You are so right about those eyes. And that body is not bad either, son."

"You're a pig," Nick retorted. "Back off, Poppa Sal."

"Oh, you like my pseudonym?"

"I didn't say I—"

"All great chefs have to have a great name, you know," he interrupted.

"And Poppa Sal was the best you could come up with? Really?"

"Well, Joe and I had been through a few glasses of wine when we came up with it."

"A few glasses?"

"All right, maybe it was a bottle," admitted Sal. "So what did you learn about her?"

"From what I can tell, she's been through a lot. Pretty much all her time is spent at St. Theresa's. Never dated all that much. Hell, Doc Wall had her learning cancer treatments at the age of fourteen. And she loved it."

"You were trying to nail Mary Beth Lansbert at fourteen, weren't you?"

"Guilty as charged. And if her dad hadn't stopped me, I might have done just that."

"As I recall, that's why we had to get you braces."

"I've moved on from that, Dad. Thankfully."

"Yes, you have, and now you're seeing a doctor."

"I've only had one date with a woman who earlier told me to go to hell. So, a little patience would be nice."

"Well, when you're ready to bring her over, I promise Poppa Sal will behave."

Shelly drove into the doctors' parking lot as Dr. Wall was emerging from his car. He'd been putting on some weight and was having trouble getting out of the driver's seat. Shelly dared not say a thing. She watched quietly as he pulled himself through the door frame. It was Dottie who had convinced Dr. Wall that a smaller car would be better for the environment than the Cadillac Escalade he'd had in mind.

"Good morning, Doc!" Once he'd made it out, Shelly closed her car door, pulling on the handle to be sure it was locked. A little quirk she had – she always had to double check the doors at home before going to bed or leaving for work. *Safe not sorry*, she always whispered to herself.

"Good morning, Shel. Quite a scene, huh? Me trying to get out of that damn car. You know Dottie loves that thing, but it's just too small for me." Shelly gave him that *change your mental attitude* look.

"Sorry about that," he said. "So, how are you this morning? You look ... rested?"

"Well, kind of. Believe it or not, I went on a date last night."

"You had a date?" He stopped dead in his tracks and grabbed her arm. "With whom, may I ask?"

"I'm almost afraid to tell you," she said. Dr. Wall stood his ground in silence, waiting for her to speak. "Okay, it was with Nick Harris."

"Oh, dear Lord." He shook his head and turned toward the hospital entrance. "Tell me you're joking! The man's a playboy, for God's sake."

"Well, he used to be. But that was before his mom died. He's changed his life."

Dr. Wall held the door open. "Here's a little secret: men don't change. He won't. I won't. We won't. We just don't change."

"You have a low opinion of your gender."

"It's the gender I know best." He took a breath. "You think he's going to change from a skirt-chaser to an altar boy? Really, Shel, please. Be careful."

"He walked me to my car last night and didn't even try to kiss me. Not even on the cheek."

"It wasn't your cheek he was after."

"I think you're wrong on this one, Doc," she said, picking up her step so the door didn't hit her as it slammed shut. "That thing still not fixed?" she said aloud. "Anyway, you just might be as surprised as I am."

"Isn't this the same guy you told to jump in a lake yesterday morning?"

"Yes, it is." She smiled.

"I thought he was a stalker."

"Didn't we all. Now, enough."

As they approached the nurses' station, Doris stood up with files in one hand, phone messages in the other. "These are for you, Dr. Wall." She then scooped up another pile of papers and messages and held them out for Shelly. "Why so happy this morning, Doctor?"

"I had a date last night."

"Praise to Jesus. And with whom?"

"The animal they call Nick Harris," Wall interjected.

"Oh, child, that is one fine hunk of a man."

"He was very nice. So now I feel bad that I jumped all over him yesterday morning."

"I'd like to jump all over him as well!" Doris exclaimed.

Dr. Wall shook his head with that disgusted look Shelly knew so well, especially when it came to her personal life. He took his files and stepped away from the station.

"Oh, Dr. White," Doris said, "the full report on Mary Tompkins is done. And you were right. The leukemia is back. Pretty aggressive."

"I was hoping I was wrong."

"Well, Doctor," Wall said to Shelly, "you wanted to change the world? Start with Mary."

"Mary and I are going to do it together," Shelly answered. "Like me and you. I just can't figure out why it came back."

"I would never tell you how to do your job," he said, "but you have a mother who drinks an awful lot. Might do drugs. Sometimes the medication we give our patients is worth good money on the streets. You likely need to find out whether she has been taking the medication or not. If she wasn't taking her script, that's your answer to why it came back."

"I know it's a big problem?" she asked.

Dr. Wall and Doris both lowered their heads, nodding in unison. "Happens all the time," said Doris. "They go into the city and sell the drugs for good money while the kids at home suffer. Then they bring their sick kids back for more meds. It's not rampant, but it does happen."

A mother who stole her child's medications for her own habit, while her child would die in the process. Shelly felt like throwing up.

Nick whistled as he emerged from his car and headed into the AdWorks building. The sun was shining, the sky was blue as nature intended, and the flowers flanking the building looked especially beautiful. As he got to his office, Jerry and Bella were waiting with wry smiles and inquisitive eyes.

"What?"

"So, how was your night?" asked Jerry.

"We had a nice dinner, a nice walk, and we got to know each other."

"What's she like?" asked Bella.

"She seems to have a soft side once you get to know her and get through some of the defenses she's built up. So, how was White Castle?"

"It was great!" bellowed Bella. Nick smiled. He had yet to meet someone so entranced with the mini-burger place as Bella. "We got free coupons, so the next time we go, it'll be free! You can come too!"

"To White Castle? I don't think so," Nick said. Jerry scowled. "But thanks for the invite. And Jerry, Dad wants to know if you're coming over tonight for dinner."

"That would be great. Bella's working out tonight."

"Cool. Be there by six forty-five, or he'll start eating without us."

The doorbell rang at six forty-five on the dot. Sal was putting the food on the table.

"Big Jer is in the house," he announced.

"Yes, I am, and I'm looking forward to this evening. Last night I did something I was not proud of."

"Oh, yeah? Like what?" asked Sal.

"I had dinner at White Castle."

"What kind of sick bastard are you, Jerry?" chided Sal. His plate of pasta encircled his face with steam.

"Funny you should ask, because that's exactly what happened to me after my meal."

"Well-deserved," said Sal. "Sit down. Eat some real food."

For twenty minutes, the three men were virtually silent. Sal's meal left no room to use the mouth to speak. After some dishes had been cleared, Nick took a sip of his coffee and sat back in his chair.

"Any calls from the good doctor today?" asked Sal.

"She left me a message thanking me for dinner last night, but she was busy with cases, so that was about it."

"So what's your next move?" asked Jerry.

"My next move?"

“Yes, in the get-to-know-Shelly-White saga?”

“I told him to have her over for dinner,” said Sal. “But he wants to wait.”

“You know,” said Nick, “I’ve been thinking of how I can help her and the Foundation, and it always comes down to money. But I’m tired of just raising money for charities.”

“That’s what makes them happy, son. Money.”

“Yeah, I know. It’s always spent on research, yet we never know what happens. All these clinical trials that get us excited and fizzle out. I agree with what Mom used to say. Why do we even have to deal with cancer? It should be cured by now. Look at our society. If there were a bird flu killing half a million people a year, the media would be going nuts, demanding a vaccine.”

Doing some research in preparation for his date with Shelly, Nick had discovered that more than five hundred fifty thousand people die of cancer each year—fifteen hundred a day. The public accepted it like cancer, with all its pain and suffering, had become normal.

“But with cancer, it’s different,” he continued with his mini-rant. Sal and Jerry sat sipping fresh-brewed coffee. In the old days, Sal would break out the cigars after such a fine meal, but since cancer struck Jane, smoking of any kind went out the window. “Nobody says anything. Cancer is just cancer. I find that attitude extraordinary.”

“That’s part of life.”

“Well, that’s just plain bullshit.”

“There’s too much money in treatment,” Jerry spoke up. “Look at GE, Siemens, and all the major companies that make the big equipment. Look at all the doctors in radiology. They make a fortune. You find the cure for cancer, you’ll put them all out of work. Hell, I wouldn’t be surprised if the cure were sitting in a vault somewhere.”

“It’s a damn game, isn’t it?” Nick asked aloud. “Probably why we’ll never see a cure.”

“I don’t want to see a cure,” Sal said. They looked at him with odd expressions. “I want to see a medication that prevents the disease before it starts. That way you won’t need a cure.”

“Good point, Dad,” Nick said. “I just want to do something that’s a game changer, and I don’t know what to do. When you

think of cancer, all you think about is raising money, but money doesn't seem to get us anywhere."

"I got an idea," said Sal. "It may sound nuts, but I have an idea."

Nick and Jerry waited. As creative people in a creative business, they knew that when someone trustworthy has an idea, it's best to stop and listen.

"Son, I got something to tell you," he began. "The world is driven by money, if you haven't figured that out already. Greed. Everybody wants to be rich. Most people want to be filthy rich. Every university, every research group wants to score the big medical breakthrough. They want to be the modern-day Jonas Salk. They want to make the big drugs. They want to make billions. They are all chasing a dream. It takes years and years to get a cure for anything. And in the meantime, a lot of people die. So, I think everybody is going about it all wrong. Want to hear my idea?"

"I wouldn't want to miss this." Nick sipped a glass of wine, a Chianti Sal had brought home from Fazio's. "Whatcha got, Dad?"

"In a nutshell, gentlemen, you're right. There is no cure because there is too much money involved in treating cancer. To say it's a billion-dollar business is an understatement. It's close to a trillion. I ran the Million Dollar Roundtable for twenty-five years. I know what insurance companies pay for the treatment of cancer. It boggles the mind. The number one expense insurance companies face is treating a disease that nobody seems to be able to stop. So, you're right. We should have a cure. We should have a vaccine. But we don't. And although there is a little progress made here and there, what's the one thing we keep hearing?"

Nick looked at Jerry and then they both shrugged.

"Just what they told us about your mother. 'There is nothing more we can do.' So people get frustrated, they make pledges, they raise money, give it to research, only to hear the same thing. We can save people from some cancers, but others, forget it. Pancreatic? Get your affairs in order, because no one is going to be able to help you. Sure, they can treat you, but they can't help you. So, here's my idea. I was talking to Robert Smith the other day."

"Robert Smith?" Nick asked. "Sounds familiar."

"He took over my job as CEO of the Roundtable. His wife is being treated for pancreatic cancer. No one can do anything more than they have done so far. So, I passed something by him. What if

we got some money together, like a reward, and dangled the carrot in front of the world? Bring us a vaccine, we give you this money.”

“People are always raising money, Dad. No disrespect, but that seems to be the problem, not the solution.”

“I’m not talking about fundraising dollars. I’m not talking about millions, either. I am talking billions.”

“Billions?” asked Jerry. “You want us to raise billions of dollars?”

“Yeah, and here’s the thing. I know where we can get it.”

“And where is that, Dad?”

“My industry. The insurance industry pays a fortune for cancer treatment around the globe. The Roundtable has hundreds of members and each one is worth billions of dollars. Not chicken feed, son. We go to them and try to get a hundred companies to pledge ten million apiece. And what’s a hundred times ten million?”

“One billion dollars,” Jerry said.

“That’s correct. And the beauty is, we take that billion and you guys do a press thing – whatever you call it.”

“A press conference?” asked Nick.

“Right. A press conference. But huge. Broadcast it all over the world. Hold up a billion dollars. You tell people if they bring you a vaccine, they will get a billion dollars.”

“Do you think that’s really possible, Dad?”

“If I went up to any insurance company in the world and said they could have the opportunity to wipe cancer off the face of the earth and it would cost them ten million, that would be the deal of the century. Can you imagine?”

“Can you imagine?” repeated Jerry. He leaned back in his chair. “The cure for cancer being supplied by the insurance industry.”

“Bingo,” said Sal.

“Holy shit, I get it,” Jerry said. “They’re the big, bad insurance companies. Everyone hates insurance companies. Politicians, especially. Everyone is thankful they have insurance, but some still consider them evil.”

“Until this ...” Nick thought aloud.

“Has an interesting play to it, doesn’t it?” Sal smirked.

“Let me get this straight. You’re talking about having the insurance companies fund a billion-dollar reward at ten million

apiece that they don't have to pay unless a cure, or for that matter, a vaccine for cancer is discovered? But still, wouldn't there have to be a whole system in place? Seems huge."

"Absolutely," said Sal. "You guys have to figure out how all this comes together. The logistics. You need someone in the medical profession. Maybe that's where your Dr. Shelly White comes into play. Have her coordinate the medical side. You'll need someone in chemistry. You'll need someone to act as a clearinghouse. I'm telling you, you guys want to start your own agency, this could be your ticket."

"You know what?" Jerry said. "That's a hell of an idea."

"In one aspect it's brilliant," said Nick, "but we need a buy-in from St. Theresa's."

"The Board of Directors," Jerry added.

"We tie it all in to St. Theresa's or the Kristen Foundation," said Nick, "and can you imagine the publicity? The hospital would love that."

"Just an idea," Sal said. He leaned over the table and poured the last of the wine into their three empty clear-stem glasses.

"So, how many companies are in the Million Dollar Roundtable?" asked Nick.

"About four hundred thirty," Sal said.

"And how would we get them to pledge this money?"

"Conference is next month. It's in Vegas this year. I bet Robert would let me get you in front of them. You could make your pitch. See what they think."

"Conference?" Jerry asked.

"Annual convention of the Roundtable. Your buddy, little Nick here, grew up running around those people. They all know him."

"Some good times." Nick nodded to Jerry. "Dad would run the meetings and Mom and I would go on all these spouse programs. I grew up among those people."

"Look, boys, I have to talk to Robert tomorrow. I want to ask him about Jill. See if he needs anything. As I said, pancreatic cancer is a death sentence."

Like Sal, Nick never forgot how Robert and Jill were there through all of their ups and downs, particularly the downs. A comforting phone call, a drink when needed most, or just the company of a couple of old friends to take the edge off. The Smiths

had to repeat that twice; first for Chucky, and then for Jane. He and Sal owed them so much, especially to be there for whatever it was: Robert needing to talk, Jill needing to cry. That's what friends are for.

"If I can be of any help, or if you'd like me to come along ..."

"Thanks, I'll let you know." He reached out and patted Nick's hand. "In the meantime, you need to make some headway with the hospital. Start with Doc Shelly and her boss. You're right. We need this to be based at St. Theresa's to pull it off. They have the name. That is, if you're okay with this. Think you can pull it off?"

"I think we can, Dad. By the way, how long have you had this idea?"

"Since your mother died. Always thought it was a long shot, but there's only one way to fail."

"Not try." Nick nodded. "Okay, I'll talk to Shelly. I don't think she'll be much of a problem. But I'm not sure about Dr. Wall."

"We'll both talk to Wall," said Jerry. "And as fate would have it, the Board meets tomorrow at St. Theresa's. Maybe I can pop in and let Marie know we have an idea that we want to go over with her when she has a chance."

Nick leaned back, taking it all in. Two dinners in a row had shocked him, baffled him, and moved him. Thousands of dinners had come and gone and then this week, lightning struck twice.

Sal collected some dishes and left the boys to talk.

"Wow, a billion dollars," Nick said. "That's a lot of money, huh, Jer?"

"Makes me want to go back to school and learn biochemistry."

CHAPTER 10

A grumbling Bongero was waiting for Nick when he arrived on Monday morning. This time he ragged about Nick being late.

"I was in the lobby talking with a client," Nick said. "Is that okay?"

"Who?"

"The folks from John Deere. They have a problem with one of our people. So I thought I would try to sort things out."

"You?" he yelled. "That's my account!"

"Yes, it is." Nick kept his composure. He had to fight off his alter ego that wanted to deck the son of a bitch standing before him. "Truth is, they don't really like you, sir."

"You saying I am the one they have a problem with?"

"I am, sir."

"What have I done to cause them to not like me?"

"Well, from what I gathered, you just don't run like a Deere, so to speak."

As a fuming Bongero stormed away, Nick threw his hands in the air at Bella. "Another great start to another great day at AdWorks."

He made a beeline to his office, threw his briefcase down in the empty chair in front of his desk, and immediately picked up the phone.

Doris snapped up the phone on the first ring. "Fifth-floor nurses' station. Doris Powers speaking."

"Hi Doris, it's Nick Harris."

"Well, bless my soul. Jane's boy. How are you, darling?"

"I'm good. Thanks for asking. And I want you to know I still haven't told anyone that you told me to meet Shelly in the parking lot."

"I thank you, honey, because I would like to keep that hush-hush if you don't mind."

"No problem. Anyway, could you let Dr. White know that I called?"

"I can do better than that," Doris said. She handed the phone to Shelly, who happened to walk up to the station at that moment.

"It's Nick Harris," Doris whispered. "Be nice to him."

"Hello?"

Shelly smiled at her matchmaker.

"Hi, Shelly, Nick Harris."

"Hi, Nick, what's up?"

"I was wondering if you had time for a quick lunch today."

"I might be able to break away for a half hour or so."

"Can we eat at the hospital to save time? You have a cafeteria, right?"

"I admit it's nothing like your dad's cooking, but it's not too bad. In fact some, people eat way too much there," she said, looking at Doris.

"That's not very nice," Doris whispered. Shelly was always on her case to go on a diet, particularly one that didn't involve so much hospital cafeteria food. But to no avail.

"About twelve would work for me, Nick."

After she had hung up, Shelly handed the phone back to Doris, who put the receiver in its cradle without looking up. Shelly watched her nervously shuffling papers and avoiding eye contact.

"Maybe they should do something about the food here if it's gonna make people fat. What do think, Dr. White?"

"I think ... " She paused and smiled. "You were the one who told Nick to meet me in the parking lot. That's what I think."

"Me?" She lied terribly. "Why on earth would I do that?"

Shelly kept smiling.

"I think he is a very kind and talented man who loved his mother, that's what I think," said Doris. "To me, he is someone special. Someone you should notice."

Shelly saw Doris's dark eyebrows raise up.

"It was you, Doris!"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

Shelly stood, still smiling, with her arms crossed, not giving in.

"Don't you have rounds to do, Doctor?"

"Yes, I do. And my files are where?"

"Right in front of you."

"So they are. By the way, that phone call? I have a lunch date with Nick Harris in the cafeteria at noon. Want to join us?"

"Why would you want me to go and ruin your meal? You know me. I may eat everything at the table while you're not looking."

"Ha ha, Doris. Ha, ha."

Shelly grabbed her files and turned down the western hallway, beginning yet another day of trying to keep some of her sanity among sick children, all the while trying to make them smile and forget their troubles. Day in and day out, like it or not, that was her job.

Shelly found Nick waiting in a hospital-issue chair outside the cafeteria.

"Ready?" she asked.

"Oh, hi, there, Shelly... um ... Dr. White," Nick stood like a gentleman and adjusted his shirt. He checked his watch. "You're two minutes early."

"I'm starving," she replied. "Let's go."

Nick held the swinging door and they entered to the distinct smell of cafeteria food. Shelly looked over and smiled, knowing by his expression it had hit him right in the face. Not that the smell was bad, just the aroma of so many items being cooked and served in a confined area. As with most cafeteria style dining rooms, the proverbial trays, damp from being wiped down, waited by the chow line entrance. He grabbed one and handed it to Shelly.

"Thank you, sir."

"My pleasure. So what's good here?"

"Just about everything. But I would stay away from the meatloaf. Not sure what meat ..."

"Enough said," Nick stopped her.

As they moved through the line, Shelly pointed to what she considered the top choices for the day. As she did, her hand brushed his. The touch sent a jolt through her body. She felt like a schoolgirl, all warm inside.

Nick looked through the sneeze guard. "Is that chicken? Wait, it's that meatloaf thing, right?"

Shelly laughed. Nick had a way of making her smile. One minute she was obsessing about a patient and just like that, he took her mind off her work. After paying with her hospital meal card, she led Nick to an empty table that looked over the playground.

"Mary had a relapse," she said as they sat down. "The one I told you about who's returned to St. Theresa's. We think Mary's mother is selling the drugs for money to feed her own habit."

"How could someone deprive her own child of medicine she needs to get better?"

Shelly nodded.

"Well, I bet if anyone can find a way to save her, it's you. You'll figure something out."

Shelly nodded again, and thought about the cold weather approaching and wondered if Mary and her mom were long from living on the streets. That thought saddened her. She considered all the children as her own. She couldn't let them go. She worried about the ones that went home and worried about the kind of conditions they lived in. Was it in squalor? Was it a healthy family structure? The latter wasn't the case for Mary, that's for sure. She heard Nick say something about the new grocery store opening downtown.

"What was that?" she muttered, picking at her chicken. "Sure isn't Fazio's."

"I've been on plenty of campaign stops where the food was much worse," said Nick. "This isn't too bad."

"That must have been exciting: working on campaigns, doing rallies, and stuff like that." Shelly smiled. "I can imagine the energy, the electricity."

"Oh, it was fun back then, but now with added security, the Secret Service so ultra-focused on their job, the fun part disappeared. Great guys who enjoy their time before and after events, but the day of, it's a totally different story."

"So why did you want to stop by, Nick?" Shelly was dying to know. It was great to see him and be courted, but he seemed to have something else on his mind.

"I was hoping to get a few minutes of your time in the next few days. And Dr. Wall's. I have something I want to run by you."

"What?" She nibbled a piece of chicken.

"I have an idea. Well, it's my dad's idea actually, which I think is brilliant, and it affects your Foundation, St. Theresa's ..."

"Some sort of fundraiser?" she interrupted, allowing him to finish the mashed potatoes resting on his fork.

"You could say that, but I need to get your blessings first."

"You can't tell me now?"

"No, not now, and not here. Not enough time," he said, looking at his watch. "You have to go be a doctor, and I have to get back to being an ad man."

"Okay," she said. "But I still can't understand why you can't come right out and say what's on your mind."

"Trust me on this one. We could have dinner at my house tomorrow night?" he offered. "I am sure Dad would love to have you over."

"That would be wonderful! I accept." All smiles again, she grabbed her glass of milk and gulped it down, rising from her chair. "Well, I hope you enjoyed the grub, Mr. Harris. Now if you'll excuse me, it's time to make my rounds."

As she walked toward the exit, she noticed Doris in the far corner pretending to read a book. Shelly smiled and waved. Doris reluctantly waved back. That made her smile, too. And this all had to do with Nick Harris. She found herself humming "Ain't No Mountain High Enough" as she got into the elevator and pressed five.

CHAPTER 11

Shelly drove through the open gate to Nick's house, noting that the beautifully landscaped yard contained many of the trees her mom used to love. As she pulled through the circular driveway, she saw an American flag floating in the cool breeze and below it, a pink ribbon flag in honor of Nick's mom. She pulled her shawl over her bare shoulders as she got out of the car. She had put on her best dress and taken some extra time primping, as she wanted to make a good impression on Sal.

When she rang the bell, Sal appeared at the door.

"Good evening, Dr. White. It's an honor to have you dine with us."

"Thank you, Mr. Harris."

"Nick is upstairs on the phone talking with Jerry on a personal matter, so I am the official greeter. Come on in and make yourself at home."

Shelly was immediately taken aback by the array of hand-blown glass and art. The place was awash in the objects, not in a tacky sense, but nicely appointed throughout.

"These were my Jane's passion," Sal said. "We collected them from all over the world. I brought them all with me when I moved in."

Shelly smiled. "These are beautiful, Mr. Harris."

"Please, call me Sal."

“Okay, Sal. I want to personally thank you for the donation to the Foundation. You remain anonymous to the public, but as the founder, I need to know such things for tax filings.”

“Happy to do it,” said Sal. “I figured the anonymous bit might leak. I just didn’t want any hoopla over it. And I must say, it was Nick’s idea.”

“Your son is full of surprises.”

“That kid has always done things everyone said he couldn’t.”

“How’s that?” Shelly asked as they made their way to the center of the house, her head slowly swiveling left to right.

“Well, he was kind of small as a boy, so they said he wouldn’t be good in sports. He proved them wrong and became captain of the basketball team. They said he never had a chance to be involved with the high school yearbook because he lacked creativity in art class. He became the publisher. No one thought he was good enough to be on the debate team—instead he became class president. Hell, he even got the prom queen to go out with him. And she didn’t really like him at first.”

“At first?”

“Well, they were quite the item for a few years.”

“Oh, really? Why’d they break up?” As soon as she spoke the words, she reprimanded herself for asking such a silly question and for sticking her nose where it didn’t belong.

Sal glanced toward the stairs, then turned to Shelly and leaned in. “She was killed by a drunk driver in her first year of college,” he said in a hushed voice. “They went to the same school. Poor thing. She will always be twenty years old. I bet Nick still thinks about her every day.”

“Oh, God, that’s horrible,” Shelly said in the same hushed tone and hung her head slightly as Sal had done. They stood looking at framed photos on a round wooden table in the living room. She picked up the one of Nick at his prom, presumably with the girl Sal was talking about.

“That’s her,” Sal said. “Her name was Kristen. With an e.”

“Kristen? Really?”

Sal nodded. “Nick lost his brother when he was seven, then his girlfriend, and then his mom. But he never lost the mindset that he could make a difference each day he woke up.”

“He must have got that from you, Sal.”

“Got that from his mom.” Shelly followed Sal to the dining room. “I just loved him the best I could and bought very expensive glass for his mother to keep her happy,” he joked.

“Smells wonderful,” Shelly said as the aroma of home-cooked Italian fare wafted from the kitchen.

“Hope you’re hungry,” Sal said.

“Sorry, Shelly, Dad,” Nick called. Shelly smiled as she heard him stumble down the stairs. “Jerry had an issue with his girlfriend.”

“Jerry’s girlfriend?” asked Shelly.

“Yes. She wants him to get a tattoo.”

“That boy is really going to get a tattoo?” asked Sal.

“I told him to get one of hair on his head.” Nick quipped. He made his way around the table to face Shelly. “Wow, you look great.”

She could tell he was pleased with her extra primping and choice of dress. “Thank you.”

“Stunning,” he said.

“Elegant comes to mind,” said Sal. He made a gesture for his son to stop ogling and offer Shelly a seat. Shelly loved the way he talked with his hands, replacing words with those Italian gestures known for generations.

“I hope you don’t mind me being so casual,” Nick said. She looked at his clothes—jeans, brown polo shirt, and brown slip-on shoes.

“Not at all. By the way, Dr. Wall said Friday at two would work for him.”

“Sit down already, you two.” Sal emerged from the kitchen with a platter of veal.

“This looks amazing, Sal,” said Shelly.

“You should taste it! Then let me know what you think.”

The three began to feast on yet another masterpiece à la Poppa Sal. A lady was in the house, and she could tell both men were very conscious of being on their best behavior. The fact that a Kristen—with an e or i—had been so significant in both of their lives was foremost on her mind, but she really didn’t know how to go about bringing it up. Luckily, Nick was the first to utter the name.

“So, I know a little bit about the Foundation, but tell me more about its namesake, Kristen.”

Sal glanced up from his plate, almost cleared save some trails of sauce, at Shelly and then Nick. Shelly gave him a reassuring look.

"Well, she was such a sweet girl," she said as she put down her fork and dabbed the sides of her mouth with a napkin. "With a beautiful smile. She always said she wanted to be a nurse, and I always joked with her that I would be a doctor like Dr. Wall. She was so scared. Doris had just started at St. Theresa's, and she would come into our room and be like a big sister to me and like a mom to Kristen. She knew Kristen was alone." She paused and took a sip of her water. "One day I made a promise to her that we would work together at St. Theresa's. Later, as I got older, I thought of getting a statue commissioned of her holding hands with children. But I didn't." She shrugged. "Anyway, on the day I went home, as my mom was pushing me out the door, I watched Doc Wall and the crash team rush into my old room. And that's the last time I ever saw her."

"God, that must have been awful," said Nick.

"You know, her death was the driving force of who I am today. I really feel my calling is to help sick children, some of whom are just like Kristen. And if I don't save their lives, no one else will. Just like Mary, Nick. Mary's alone and she's scared. I won't give up. That's the way I am. But it tears me up sometimes."

"This Mary, she has no one?" asked Sal.

"Besides her mom who drinks too much, doesn't like black people, and smells like a stale cigarette? I wouldn't be surprised if Mary is in state custody any day now. They'll probably put her into a foster home. It's sad."

"What's the prognosis?" Sal asked.

"Not good, as it's her second time around with us. Doc Wall saved her, but we're pretty sure her mom ignored her symptoms and her leukemia came back."

"Why would she do that?"

"Why *would* she do that?," Nick interjected. Sal hung his head, shaking it in disgust.

"So, what was it you wanted to discuss with me, Nick?" Shelly asked, changing the subject.

"Yes, we have an idea I want to run by you," said Nick. Sal sat silently sipping his coffee. "Now, I'd like you to keep an open mind. Okay?"

"Sure."

"Have you ever heard of the Million Dollar Roundtable?"

"No," Shelly replied.

"It's the largest insurance association in existence. A group of the most successful companies. Pretty much anybody who is an anybody in the business. Right, Dad?"

Sal said, "It's the top-selling people from around the world. They represent every insurance company out there."

"You were a member of the group?" she asked.

"I was the CEO for twenty-five years."

"Anyway, we have an idea to raise some money," Nick said. "And more. The plan is to go to the Roundtable's annual convention next month and get a hundred of these companies to pledge ten million dollars each. That will get us a billion dollars."

"A billion? You can get us a billion dollars?" Shelly exclaimed.

"Well," said Nick, "we have a reason to raise the billion dollars." Shelly leaned forward.

"The deal is, we raise the billion dollars, then hold a press conference at St. Theresa's tying the Kristen Foundation into it, and we tell the world we are looking for a cure for cancer. The reward? One billion dollars. You bring us the cure, we hand you a billion dollars."

Shelly sat in silence for a moment. She loved the idea of one billion dollars being raised to help her kids, but she knew that billions upon billions had already been spent and there was still no cure.

Sal clasped his hands together. "What my son is trying to say is that we make the pot of money so big that people all over the world would take notice. We all want a cure, right?"

"Of course we do."

"If we use your Foundation as a base camp and try something that has never been tried before – I mean a billion dollars," said Sal. "Who wouldn't pay attention to that? In one lump sum to the first ones to bring us the cure?"

Playing the devil's advocate as she did so well concerning this topic, Shelly sighed. "Do either of you know what cancer is like?" There was a sudden silence in the room, a room that had seen more cancer than most family should ever have to endure. "I'm sorry, that was insensitive." Shelly backtracked. "What I'm trying to say

is that there are so many types of cancers out there. Some treatable, some the kiss of death. There are a ton of universities working at cracking DNA codes and creating new therapies to figure out how to stop it. And, of course, to cure it. But to dangle a billion dollars out to the public and say, 'bring me the cure,' that's a little over the top, don't you think?"

"I heard this type of doubt many times in the insurance business," Sal said, then turned to Nick. "And what do I always say?"

"There is one good way to fail, and that's not to try."

Shelly smiled, knowing full well the response she would get from these two hard-headed, passionate Italians bent on retribution for Chucky and Jane. She had revenge in her own heart. "You really think this has a chance of working?"

"Look, Doc," Sal said, "I think we can get the money. This guy and Jerry can get it on TV all over the world. Flood the magazines, newspapers, the Internet. I don't say that because he's my son, it's because he is good at what he does. And I believe it. We spend our lives fearing a disease, a disease that took my son, his brother. And my wife. We've been on cancer walks, made tons of pledges, and what happens? We get to hear doctors tell us the same thing over and over again: 'There is nothing more we can do.'" He paused for a moment. "And every year we hear the same thing that we are closer than ever and in a few years we'll beat it. And a few years later, we hear again: 'There is nothing more we can do.' I do admire your work, Dr. White, and how you can smile with a child you know won't make it. We need more people like you. But you have to understand there is an army of us out there, and we have had it with losing the ones we love to something we should have stopped years ago. So, please take a moment and think about it. Think about all of us who want to help, who want to do something." Sal sat back. He seemed pleased with his little speech.

"Some of the craziest ideas have changed the world," Nick chimed in. "I'm not saying it's perfect. But it hasn't been done before, has it?"

"I'll give you that," Shelly responded.

"The world is run by greed," said Nick. "Greed will notice a billion dollars. Every university, every bio-research company is going to take notice. It's a billion dollars."

"And there is that," Shelly said. "You really think these hundred companies will give you ten million dollars apiece?"

"Yes, I do. And so does Poppa Sal here." Nick smiled. "He knows every one of them. And the great thing is, they're not giving us the money. They are pledging ten million dollars. They sit back and wait until something is found. When we prove it works, bang, they pay up. They only have an upside."

"You're going to need someone to act as a clearinghouse," Shelly noted.

"That's where you come in," said Sal.

She felt like a fish being reeled in. A fish that wanted more to be on their boat than on the hook. "I guess I could base the project through the Foundation," she said. "I could even ask Barry to help."

"Barry?" asked Sal.

"College buddy of mine I was telling Nick about. He runs the pharmacology school and is the Dean of Bio-Research at UF."

"Can he be trusted?" Sal asked.

"He is a brilliant man. I would trust him with my life."

"So, will you give this idea some consideration?" Nick asked.

The pitch was complete. She wanted to believe, but she had a hard time believing in much. But who was she to allow her beliefs to squash a passionate idea about killing cancer? There were plenty over her head that could do that. Besides, this was Nick, a guy who had some kind of hold on her. Again, she sighed. "You guys really think this will work?"

"It's worth a shot, Doc," Nick said.

"I need to sell Dr. Wall on this because he'll think it's plain nuts. I know him. He can be a tough old bird."

"But a man of reason, I imagine," Sal said.

"A man of reason, but a man of ethics, so if he thinks this will make the hospital, him, or anyone associated with the Foundation look bad, he won't go for it. You're going to have to put everything on the table."

"I think we can do that," Nick said.

"I would love to sit in when you make your pitch," said Shelly.

"I would love to be there too, son, but I already have plans Friday afternoon. I got a date."

"A date? In the afternoon?"

"With Tanya. Going to the movies. It's a matinee. They're cheap. You know, I get the senior price."

"Unbelievable."

"I think that's sweet," said Shelly, giving Sal one of her sincere smiles.

"Thank you." Sal eyed his son. "At least *somebody* likes my taste in women."

Nick grabbed his glass of wine, opting to drink down any further comments.

Shelly sat on a loveseat at the back of Dr. Wall's office, nervously playing with her fingernails as the Nick and Jerry show spelled out the campaign. At his desk, Dr. Wall sat with his hands clasped, listening to the two ad men pitch their cure-for-cancer proposal. Her earlier thoughts about Dr. Wall being receptive to the idea had faded when she saw the look on his face. She had seen that look before. The first words out of his mouth were not going to be particularly encouraging.

"Are you mad?" Dr. Wall asked. "Is that what this is all about?"

"Yes, it is," said Nick.

Shelly sat up on the edge of the couch, fearful of what would come next. Dr. Wall's eyes bugged out as he took off his reading glasses and tossed them onto the desk.

"Do you two know anything about the disease we call cancer and how complicated it is? Anything?" Shelly cringed at his rhetorical and condescending speech.

"I know it kills people," said Jerry.

"That's the easy part," said Dr. Wall. "It does that unless we stop it. To think you could come up with some sort of magic potion that just cures cancer is plain crazy."

"Why can't it be done?" Nick asked.

"Because it acts differently in every person. Every patient responds in a different way," he said. "It is any cell whose coding allows it to grow unhindered too quickly and multiply. Cancer travels through the body and destroys everything in its path. It happens on the inside and it's a goddamn war! We have been trying to stop it since the dawn of man."

"But how much progress has been made?" Nick asked. Shelly loved his confidence in the wake of Wall's tirade. Dr. Wall didn't like him as a person and that was fine. Nick, she was learning, could be a determined man. He would not lay down the idea without a fight.

"We've made progress," he retorted. "It just takes time."

"I don't think you're following us here, Dr. Wall," Jerry piped in. "I know what you're saying, and it is a long shot, but I have seen you and Shell—excuse me, Dr. White—and others here pull off miracles every year. There is a reason St. Theresa's saves lives—and you are right—it takes time. All we're saying is we want to do something to help. And this idea is unique. It can't help but shed huge light on the hospital and all you do here. And we are talking about global attention." Jerry stood. "We just think there is another way to win this battle. You're waging your war. Let us fight it a different way. If nothing else, the Foundation could really benefit from the publicity. There is no downside for the people who pledge the money. They look like heroes. Word gets out that there is a shitload of cash for anyone who gives us a cure. No downside for anybody ..."

"But there is a downside," Dr. Wall interrupted. "And that would be our fellow doctors and oncologists who just might think we have lost our minds. There are so many variables. There is no magic bullet or potion for all cancers. At least that we know of."

"Yes," Nick said, "but what if something happens? What if, somewhere, somehow, there's a guy or a gal who's in a lab and sees what we are asking, and they decide to work on an idea, a formula. And maybe they take it to their boss and say, 'I have an idea.' What then? At that very moment, it could start a chain of events that changes everything. It's the 'What if' that drives this deal. It's the 'I never tried this before.' It's that moment that makes the difference between just being a crazy idea or a brilliant one. I know you think we're nuts, but if this becomes part of a global effort that brings us even one step closer to stopping just one type of cancer in its tracks, then you, Dr. Wall, have a second miracle in your life."

"Second?"

"I thought Shelly White was your first one," Nick said. Shelly looked over and smiled.

"Yes, she was," replied Dr. Wall. He returned her smile. "So, what do you think about all this?"

She paused, not wanting to take sides, and wanting to choose her words diplomatically. "Well," she began, "first of all, everything hinges on getting a billion dollars. And I am not sold on that happening. But, if they can pull that off, what they're saying is worth a try. It costs us nothing. It gets our name out there. And if it gets us one new discovery, saves one more life, that's what we do here. And it breathes hope. Hope that someday, somehow, cancer will be a fading memory."

"Okay, then, let me give you a for-instance, Mr. Harris," said Dr. Wall. "Let's say we do what you're saying. We have an announcement and some mad scientist thinks he's got a cure for cancer sitting in his lab. How on earth would he be able to share that information with us without fear that someone else would steal it? Keep in mind, Mr. Harris, we are doctors, not bio-scientists. For that matter, we're not lawyers either."

"Actually, I've got that covered," Shelly said.

"You do?" Wall asked. His brow furrowed.

"I asked Barry Hayes to help out with that. He's the Dean of Bio-Development at the University of Florida. Head of Pharmaceutical Studies. He can serve as a clearing house for UF's military testing program. It's very secure."

"You realize if you want this hospital involved, then you'll have to get the Board's approval," added Wall. "And it will need to be unanimous."

"I know," said Nick, "but we thought we would ask you and Dr. White first."

"So, Doc?" Jerry asked. "What do you say?"

"Look, guys, you want to help. I get that. But this is so far out in left field that it's a little hard to wrap my head around it. I mean, we are talking about our children's lives here. And using that as a backdrop for an off-the-chart idea borders on exploitation—something the Board takes very seriously. You realize that?"

"No, sir," Nick said. "No child or anyone else with cancer will be exploited. Any treatment done here must meet your standards. No one is suggesting testing on patients. I don't have to tell you that there are laws against that. Our idea may be outlandish, but we play by the book."

Wall rubbed the back of his neck. "Let's see if you can get board approval to tie the hospital and foundation into all of this. Then let's see if the funds become a reality and move on from there."

"So we have your blessing?" asked Jerry.

"Yes. But remember, this hospital has a lot of sick children and an incredibly dedicated staff of professionals. If you do anything to make our kids or staff look foolish, I'll stop this in its tracks." He looked the two men straight in the eyes, one at a time. "Got it?"

"Got it!" they said in unison.

Nick and Jerry rose quickly from their chairs. Shelly stood and began to follow them out the door when Dr. Wall stopped her.

"Shelly, you really think these guys have a clue what they're asking for?"

"They want to help, Greg." Shelly had come to realize that they spoke from different vantage points. "They don't see people die every day. They don't understand cancer the way we do. They just want to do something, and this idea has never been tried before, so why not? And I give them a lot of credit."

Dr. Wall looked at her. She wanted him to believe again, the same way she was starting to believe again. Having someone save your life and being with them throughout its course can be challenging, as Shelly had found out. He was her hero, her lifesaver. But that was over thirty years ago. Seeing the passion in his eyes again would breathe some life back into the hospital.

"And just so you know, this is not their idea. It's Nick's dad's idea—the man who recently lost his wife to the very disease we fight every day. The man who lost a son to cancer. How many times did he hear, 'There's nothing more we can do'? He wants to help. That's what motivates him and Nick and Jerry. Helping is what motivates us."

"Yes, it does."

"Nick's right. There is an army of hurting people out there that are tired of hearing, 'There is nothing more we can do.' And his father has this idea and connections that at least will get people to stand up and take notice. What is it you always tell me? 'Our job is to save lives, no matter what it takes'? And what if they are right and something happens and God gives us something we never expected? Somewhere, someone comes up with the idea that ends

up being the missing link we've been searching for? You know what you'll have then, Dr. Wall?"

"My second miracle."

"You'll be that doctor who oversaw a giant step in cancer treatment. You might even become famous! Or somebody's hero."

"I don't want to be somebody's hero."

"Too late." She leaned in and gave him a peck on the cheek. "Let's just see what happens."

"Okay, okay," he said. "But for the record, I still think you're all out of your minds."

Friday night, Nick pulled into the driveway of his dad's house about seven fifteen. Jerry got out of the car with him.

"You're late," bellowed Sal as they ambled into the dining room and sat in their respective seats.

"Well, we did our big pitch to Dr. Wall today."

"And how'd that go?"

"Great," said Jerry. "He thinks we've lost our minds."

"But did he give you his blessing?"

Nick poured a glass of Chianti and handed it to Sal. "He thinks we'll embarrass the hospital or their Foundation or both."

"How in God's name would you do that?" Sal seemed miffed to hear that his idea was being ridiculed by only the second doctor to hear it.

"By getting up in front of a live microphone and announcing to the world that we want a cure for cancer," said Nick. "That's how."

Sal shook his head in disgust.

"But we got his blessing anyway to bring the idea to the Board," announced Jerry. "Good thing. I already have some artwork ready for the campaign."

"You couldn't just come out and say that?" Sal barked. He dished out the meal du jour – stuffed manicotti.

"Any luck on the money end of this idea, Pop?" asked Nick.

"First of all, never call me Pop," Sal quipped. "Second, I talked to Robert Smith today. Jill's not gonna make it. Cancer is going to win another one."

"Let me guess," said Nick. "There is nothing more they can do."

“Good guess, but there is something you can do,” he said. “You can ask for the funds next month at the convention. Robert said he’s throwing out Robert’s Rules for this one and giving you the opening time slot.”

“Really? The opening time slot?”

Sal grabbed the basket of bread and passed it to Nick. “Remember that army we talked about that wants to stop cancer?”

“Yeah?”

“Well, it’s getting bigger.”

By Monday, things progressed as planned. The Board of Directors gave its approval to the billion-dollar idea after voicing the same concerns brought up by Dr. Wall. They mandated that nothing could move forward without the hospital’s executive team, and made it clear to Nick and Jerry that nothing could be done to embarrass the hospital or exploit the children.

Nick and Jerry were on their game and put on a dog and pony show that even Bongero would have enjoyed. Nick was beginning to act as if he had been chosen to take on this role by divine intervention. He remained sharp and calm when speaking on this topic. His calmness seemed to be rubbing off on Jerry, who admittedly did not feel the same chosen sensation as Nick. Nick was a changed person. Oddly, he owed it all to a disease that killed his brother and mother and introduced him to a woman unlike any he had met before.

After shaking hands with St. Theresa’s dozen or so Board members, Nick and Jerry floated out of the boardroom, making their way to the public relations office next door. Marie Mellon, the hospital’s executive director, had asked them to wait there. This was their last stop before heading to Las Vegas to see if, in fact, Sal was right and a billion dollars could be their gift for the upcoming holiday season.

“Hi, guys.” Marie startled Nick by suddenly appearing from around a cubicle wall to the left of the receptionist. She reached out and shook hands with him and Jerry, then motion for them to sit down.

“I must say, that’s a great idea you guys have,” she said.

"I'll take that as a compliment," said Nick. "Especially after all the wonderful work you have accomplished here." The wall behind her desk proudly displayed copies of past campaigns: posters, ad slicks, enlarged photos.

"I wish I could take credit for all of this," said Marie, "but you know as much as I do, it's our volunteers that make all this happen. Not to mention our dear friends in corporate America. It's a blessing, all right. Everyone wants to help St. Theresa's. Hey, Nick, not to change the subject or anything, but I hear you're dating Shelly White! Is that true?"

"Well, we went out to dinner, but ..."

"You better treat her right, that's all I can say, or Dr. Wall will have you publicly flogged by a small army."

"Great, I'll remember that," he said, shifting in his chair. He then leaned forward and looked right at Marie. "Funny you should mention an army, because you're right on target. We all know it will take an army to beat cancer, and the time for war is now."

Marie put down her now empty coffee cup and cleared her throat. "Let's recap the Board presentation. You come up with a billion dollars, which in itself is a miracle."

Nick nodded.

"Then we have a press conference here at the hospital."

"Right."

"And then we sit back and wait for a cure."

"Seems kind of simple, doesn't it?"

"Sounds somewhat unfeasible, if you ask me."

"That's what Dr. Wall said."

"What did you expect, Nick? He knows miracles don't happen overnight. Well, except for Shelly. He started from the ground up and has seen it all. He just calls it the way he sees it. And I kind of think he might be right on this one."

"Marie," Nick said, "I understand your trepidation. But I can't think of a better place to launch this idea. You have no cost, no exposure. The least that could happen is that more people will know about the wonderful work being done at St. Theresa's. Who knows, this may lead to something we don't have right now. If it saves one life, it's worth it." It was an argument Nick had given several times before. He didn't want to sound like a salesman

giving the same pitch over and over again, but each point needed repeating. He'd give the same spiel a thousand times if necessary.

She sat silent.

"If we get one more person to get a breast exam or a colonoscopy," added Jerry, "we think it's worth the effort."

"Yes, but those two cancers don't get much attention here, obviously."

"I know that." Jerry's face reddened, "What I'm *trying* to say is the whole process and the publicity that comes from it may raise awareness about cancer in general and get people to take testing more seriously. You'd be amazed at what good some publicity can do."

"Oh, I am amazed."

"You are?" Jerry asked.

"Yes, I am amazed that Shelly White is going out with Nick!"

Nick rolled his eyes.

"Sorry, Nick, I couldn't resist. You're just so different from one another, that's all. But opposites do attract, as they say." Marie smiled and rose from her chair, an obvious sign that she had to end the meeting. "Look, if I say no to your idea, you're probably going to do this anyway, right? With some other hospital?"

"It's too important for us not to, Marie," said Nick. He and Jerry stood.

"Well, if Dr. Wall trusts you, I guess we should, too." She reached out and offered them a hug. "Make us look good," she whispered. "And, Nick. I was serious about Doc Wall and his affection for Shelly. He'll hunt you down."

Nick smiled and nodded. "I have no doubt of that."

CHAPTER 12

Nick came home to an unusually quiet house and a note on the refrigerator:

Went to dinner and movie with Tanya. After you stop complaining she is too young for me, you can heat something up from the fridge. Hope your pitch went great. Your ever so surprising and agile father.

“Good Lord, does the man ever stop?” Nick said, reaching into what his dad usually called the icebox and found a tray of lasagna. He tossed it in the oven, set the timer, and went into the other room and switched on the TV. He took a sip of his beer and placed it on the table next to the recliner. The Discovery Channel was on, just where his dad had left it. The program was titled “Medical Science and Nanotechnology.”

“In the near future, small robots fueled by the body’s own electrical impulses and current will patrol the body,” said the voiceover. “The hearts of these sentries will be operated by small nanomotors.” The show featured a company called Bio-Tech from Salt Lake City. Nick turned it up and leaned forward.

“We now know that many of the diseases of the human body, such as cancer cells, can be targeted for destruction,” the show’s voiceover continued. “Could this be the next chapter in the war on cancer? We are here with Dr. Henry Shoo, a researcher at Bio-Tech.”

Shoo was a pleasant-looking older man of Japanese descent. Nick thought he looked like Sulu from *Star Trek* with a few more decades on him. “I hope some will see the technology further

developed, and as far as the war on cancer ... yes, I believe it can be a game changer," said Dr. Shoo. "If we can target free radicals in the body to attack these cells—these cancer cells as they form tumors—then not only can we stop cancer, but think about other applications like treating the plaque that's inside the brains of Alzheimer's patients. The thought is, there are endless possibilities inside the body. Sentries patrolling, looking for abnormalities—things that make our body weak that can be repaired. It's an extraordinary, exciting time to be in medicine."

The voiceover returned.

"The thought of nanotechnology being used in this type of treatment for diseases is entering a new dimension. According to Dr. Shoo, there is no question the technology can work. Only funding stands in the way."

The program slipped into a commercial break.

"Nanorobots?" Nick questioned. "Now that's thinking outside the box." He reached for his phone and called Shelly to let her know how the pitch to the Board went and about the blessing he received—along with a hard time—from Marie.

"I hope I didn't catch you in the middle of something," Nick said as Shelly answered the phone. "I couldn't find you after the presentation."

"It's been a crazy day. I just finished some fine dining in the hospital cafeteria."

"You know, my dad thinks that food causes cancer."

"Doubt that. So what happened today? How did it go?"

"Green light all around."

"That's great!"

"Members of the Board of Directors had their concerns, but when I told them Doc Wall was on board, they said fine. Then we had a private conversation with Marie, and she agreed the proposal was interesting. Wall's name is powerful, and since he gave the okay and there is no downside, she said to move forward. Now I have to make a pitch to hundreds of strangers at a convention and just ask them for a billion dollars."

"Is that all?" She giggled. "I can tell how passionate you are about this project, and I know they'll see it too. You will do great."

"Ever heard of nanotechnology?"

"What?"

"I was watching this show on the Discovery Channel about these amazing micro-robots—nanobots. This scientist was saying he thinks they can be put into the human body to hunt down cancer cells. Can you imagine?"

"A little bit, but I don't know much about it."

"They can also search for tumors or plaque in the brain of the Alzheimer patient. I was so intrigued by this program because it's more than just take this pill or take that shot. It's how we can do things in a different way. I live in the advertising world, and we have to sell the same crap to the same people over and over again, but we have to make the stuff look different. That's what it's all about. Doing something different *because we have to do* something different to get results. Every day, I sell people on an idea or a product. Something that makes them pause or think about possibilities that haven't occurred to them or laugh or even brings them close to tears. Why? Because they want it, or they need it. They don't know it at the time, but they do. When you look at what we're doing, it's providing something everybody wants and everybody needs. Who can look at us and say it's a bad idea? Who is going to condemn an idea like that? We have to push the envelope, and what better way than to hang a bunch of cash in front of the world and say 'bring it on'?" He paused for a swig of beer.

"We have one thing going for us. The human spirit of never giving up. And even if we can only find one new treatment, I'd be happy. If we could save one patient, I'd be happy. But none of that is going to happen unless we get out there and raise the money and throw it out into the world. Simple as that."

"And once you get this money, where is the big announcement going to be?"

"I'd like to have a press conference at St. Theresa's. In the auditorium. It will keep the hospital and the foundation in the public eye."

"That's kind of big, don't you think?"

"Yes, but I have an idea how to fill it up."

"How's that?"

"Let's cover that after we get the funds."

"Okay. So when is this convention?"

"Three weeks from now in Vegas."

"Never been, but I've always wanted to go."

"Tell you what," said Nick. "We pull this off, I'll take you there myself."

"A date with you to Las Vegas?"

"Of course, you'd have to leave your patients for a few days."

"Well, Mr. Harris, if you pull this off, I wouldn't have a lot of kids to leave behind, now would I?"

"That's the spirit. Hey, why are you still working?"

"Not really working. We're showing a film to the kids in our new theater, and I volunteered to take them there and bring them back to their rooms. A new Friday night tradition for Doris, Doc Wall, and me. We're pushers for the wheelchairs."

"If you ever need some help, let me know."

"Well, next week is right around the corner."

"Then put me down as a pusher."

"Thanks, Nick. And you can show Doc Wall you're a team player."

"I am a team player," said Nick. "Sometimes I don't know what team I'm on, but I am a team player."

"Good night, Nick," Shelly said with a laugh.

Nick got up in time to see his dad's car pull into the driveway across the street. As Sal and Tanya walked toward the house, Sal looked back and spotted Nick peering through the window. He gave him a big wave and a smile, turned, and followed Tanya through the front door.

Nick waved back in shame, mumbling to himself, "She's young enough to kill you, Pop." He checked the lock on the door and headed back to the study to start work on his speech. He popped "Nights in White Satin" into the CD player, grabbed a legal pad, and sank into his dad's leather chair.

Jerry was waiting for Nick in the front office Monday morning.

"You know about the meeting, right?"

"What meeting?" asked Nick.

"Oh, you don't know. Bongero wants updates on all our accounts. So what's happening with UPS?"

"Honestly, Jerry, I only have a small layout. Nothing to present or anything. Why?"

"Because Bongero is going to ask, and he's going to want a timeline. So be prepared. That's all."

Empty-handed, Nick followed Jerry, who was loaded down with files, into the boardroom. He felt like he was late for class and forgot to do his homework. "Maybe Bongero would go for the old 'my dog ate it' bit."

"Doubtful."

The room was already littered with associates who silently waited for the meeting to begin. Nick could tell the two of them were holding up the show.

"Well, Mr. Harris and Mr. Lamont, so nice you could join us," Bongero said sarcastically, "And only ten minutes late."

"Sorry, sir, I was discussing UPS with Jerry."

"Great, then what have you got?"

"Nothing worth presenting right now, but we should have something within a few days," Nick said. Maybe the boss-man would go for today's lie.

"We don't make money by waiting a few days, Mr. Harris. Now, I don't suppose this delay has anything to do with St. Theresa's, does it?"

"No, sir. Also trying to keep the John Deere people happy and keep that on track," Nick answered in a spiteful tone.

"I thought that was your account, sir," Jerry piped in. Nick loved how well their one-two-punch team operated.

"Harris is helping me on that one," Bongero responded. The fact that John Deere, a most precious account, was on the ropes because the powers-that-be at the one-hundred-fifty-year-old tractor company hated Bongero was working well for Nick. He thought he would lay it on a little and watch Bongero squirm.

"If you want, sir, I can drop the John Deere project and jump right over to a full press with UPS."

"No, no, just get to the UPS account as soon as you can."

"Your call, sir." Nick looked down to hide his grin.

Bongero changed the subject from John Deere to shut Nick down. The review of accounts part of the meeting was suddenly done for the day, but Nick had a feeling some bomb or another was about to drop. On the way to the meeting room, Jerry had mentioned a mandatory snooze fest was in the works. A handout was circulated around the room—there was the bomb. Big

motivational speaker. Mandatory attendance. The twenty-first, the same day he was scheduled to speak in Vegas.

"The twenty-first?" Jerry mouthed to Nick. "Crap."

Nick remained quiet, and Bongero abruptly ended the meeting. "Now get back to work! I don't pay you to sit around a conference room and drink coffee!" He turned and stormed out.

"What a douchebag," Jerry said. A chorus of laughs echoed from around the table.

"That's Bongero for you," said Nick. They walked back to Nick's office and shut the door behind them. Bella knocked lightly and joined them.

"How are you going to break it to the head asshole that you can't make his precious conference?"

"Call in sick?" Nick said.

"Call in sick?" asked Jerry. "On the day you're asking for a billion, that's with a 'b,' dollars?"

"So?"

"I already have a press release prepared for it. How are you going to pull that off? Someone's going to do a story on this. Somebody had better do a story on this."

"I have to think of something."

"Why not say someone died?" asked Bella.

"That would work, except the speech is in Las Vegas."

"People die in Las Vegas."

"You tell him, darling!"

"Darling?"

"So?"

"And Bella, you call him, what?"

"Num-Nums." Smiling, she blushed and turned her head toward Jerry.

"Num-Nums?" Nick repeated. "Really? Num-Nums?"

"It's because he's so gosh-darn cute," she said.

"Stop. I don't want to know," Nick said, raising his hands up. "Look, all kidding aside, not a word of this to anyone."

"Yep," said Jerry.

Bella gave the Girl Scout honor sign.

"You were a Girl Scout?" asked Jerry.

"I sold more cookies than anyone in my town."

"Is that so?" Jerry smiled.

"Hey, you two." Nick, snapped his fingers. "We got work to do." Jerry turned and headed for his office with Bella in tow. "I loved those mint ones."

Shelly saw that she had a message on her phone.

"Hi, Shelly. It's Nick." She smiled. "Wondered if you would like to have dinner this Friday? If you're busy, no problem. But the convention is in a couple weeks, and I thought I could get some feedback on what I've written for my speech thus far. Let me know. Thanks for doing what you do. Bye for now."

She returned his call. He picked up on the first ring.

"Nick, I would love to have dinner with you, but Friday night is movie night, remember?"

"Oh, that's right, and I'm a pusher."

"What about Saturday night?" she asked.

"That would be two nights in a row with me. You sure that's not overexposure?"

"I think I can handle it. So, you have the speech written?"

"A few tweaks here and there, but I think I have a good pitch going so far. Kind of weird talking about cancer and hearing the word 'pitch,' but I can fill you in on Saturday."

"Sounds good. See you Friday at seven."

Friday evening, Nick knocked on the open door of the suite that led to Shelly's and Dr. Wall's offices. Shelly wasn't in, but he noticed and oddly dressed Dr. Wall hunched over with his back to his desk.

"Doc?"

"Mr. Harris ... Shelly's just finishing her rounds," he said and turned. "We'll start gathering the kids soon."

Nick stared at Wall. Dr. Wall, dressed like a circus clown stared back—a hairless clown.

"Just putting on my face," he said.

"Clowning around with medicine, Doc?"

"Funny guy, Mr. Harris." Dr. Wall continued to look in the mirror.

"You got to admit, you don't look like this very often," Nick said. He paused. "Do you?"

"For your information, I have been a clown since high school. I always wanted to make kids laugh."

Nick smiled and took a seat on the office loveseat. "So why'd you become a doctor?"

"Had to find a way out of poverty. I joined the Navy and became a doctor. Later, after my hitch, I switched my focus from sailors to pediatrics. Figured I would rather keep children alive and healthy than kill adults."

"Must have been tough for you, trying to become a doctor back then," noted Nick.

"Not many people trusted the black guy, that's for sure. But I was lucky. I was able to find a commander who believed in me. I worked hard in medical school. And now here I am. Besides, it's hard to make a dead person laugh, Mr. Harris."

"So, every clown has a name," Nick said. "What's yours?"

"Take a guess."

"Hmm. Patches?"

Doc Wall stared.

"Bobo?"

"Bobo? No. It's Popcorn."

"Popcorn? I would have never guessed. Why Popcorn?"

"Because I like popcorn, and it's good for you," Dr. Wall said. "That's why."

"Works for me."

Nick sat back and watched the man work his artistic fingers, applying makeup like a pro. One last red line and his new smile was complete. He turned away from the mirror and began to pack up his supplies.

"So, Mr. Harris, the big speech is in a couple of weeks, right?" he asked.

"Yes, sir, it is."

"I had a talk with some of the Board members, and I must admit you impressed them with your enthusiasm. You have your heart in the right place. The more I think about it, what you're suggesting, if done with class, could be very special. The Foundation wins no

matter what. Hell, Mr. Harris. You may be right. If we can get one new treatment that saves just one life, it's worth it." He reached into his drawer and pulled out a clown wig. "You know, I had my doubts about you. But everyone I talk to says the same thing."

"What do they say?"

"That you make things happen," Wall said. He returned to the mirror to adjust his multi-colored hairpiece. "I just want you and your dad and Jerry to know how much we appreciate what you're doing."

"So if I do fall flat on my face, you won't mind if I still take Shelly to dinner once in a while?"

"Actually, Shelly seems to be happier now than she has been in a long time."

"That's nice to know," Nick said. "Thank you."

"Of course, I would also like to remind you that if you hurt Shelly, Popcorn the Clown may get upset. And you should never upset a clown."

"I'll keep that in mind." Nick found it hard to take the warning seriously, especially after he ended the statement with his clown horn – "honka, honka!"

"So what do you think?" he asked Nick. There he stood, Dr. Gregory Wall in full clown regalia. Nick nodded his approval and walked toward the door.

"Hey, Popcorn, keep it down," said Shelly as she came into the room wearing a colorful t-shirt with a giant smiley face on it. "Hi, Nick. So what do you think of Popcorn?"

"He looks ... " Nick hesitated. "Fun."

"Fun?" Dr. Wall responded.

Shelly grabbed his arm and did a slight adjustment to his bowtie. "You know this clown is like a dad to me," she said.

"I've heard."

"So what do you think of my shirt?" asked Shelly.

"You look like you work for the advertising department at Wal-Mart."

"Okay, how many kids we got tonight?" Dr. Wall interjected.

"We have a hundred and fifteen," answered Shelly. "Seventy-seven walking, thirty-eight in wheelchairs, and the rest in beds."

"How many pushers?"

"Thirty-two, including Nick."

Popcorn the Clown led them out of the office and into the main hall, where a sea of volunteers awaited instruction. Everyone was dressed in bright, loud shirts. Nick spotted Jerry and Bella in the crowd and made his way through the pack.

"I didn't know you guys were coming," he said. He shook Jerry's hand and offered a cheek peck to Bella.

"And miss *Cars*, the movie?" said Jerry. "Never!"

"Follow the clown, everyone!" bellowed Dr. Wall.

The crowd moved down the hall to the new children's theater, pushing wheelchairs and beds and herding those on foot as laughter, chatter, and smiles filled the hospital wing. Shelly looked around, smiling, knowing this was what movie night was all about. This theater and the movie, all designed to let everyone—especially the ill children—forget about disease and treatment and concentrate on popcorn and cartoons and fun, if only for a night.

The next night, Nick pulled into the parking area of Shelly's townhouse just as the sun began to set. The evening was a gorgeous sixty degrees with not a cloud in the sky. Her townhouse was located in a gated community not far from the hospital. Theresa's grand pinnacle loomed a short distance away. Nick spotted her Volkswagen, which needed a good hose down. Someone had written "For God Sake's, Wash Me" in the dirt and dust covering the back of the Bug.

As he approached the door, a cat peered at him from an inside window ledge. *A cat!* he thought. After he had knocked, Shelly answered within seconds, wearing a big bright smile.

"Hi, Nick," she said, hugging him as he stepped forward. "I heard you pull up."

"Well, hello there." He stepped inside the foyer. The cat remained in the window. "I didn't think you were a cat person."

"I'm not," she said. "That's Petey. One of my patients made me promise to take care of him."

"Aw, really?"

"Not what it looks like. They're in Florida for spring break. Taking care of him here is easier than driving across town to their house."

"Just a visiting cat, then?"

"Yes." She looking at Petey and then back to Nick. "Like I said, I'm a dog person. Come on in."

Nick's eyes traveled to the pictures on the living room wall. Shelly, with a woman who must have been her mom, and another with Dr. Wall and his wife. Then more combinations of her mom, Dr. Wall, and Dottie. A single framed shot of a man sat alone. On the main wall, dozens of pictures of children filled the space.

"These are my amazing kids," she said as he stood before her shrine to the children. "Here's Lizzie." Shelly pointed to Fazio's daughter.

"So pretty. They all beat cancer?" Nick asked as he looked around the room.

"Most, but every one has a story and every one is my little hero. I actually ran out of room last year and stopped putting pictures up. This wall, like Doc Wall, reminds me of why I am here. Some kids come from great families, but regardless, to most kids, we become their second home. Sort of an extended family. And some kids have no one."

"So, how's Mary doing?"

"Not well, but she's stable. We're going to have to work hard to get her into remission. I'm hoping I can do it. This morning the state took custody of her."

"Wow. How did her mom react?"

"She didn't. She was in a drunk tank in Macon. Her daughter is fighting for her life, and she was out getting plastered."

"I'm sorry ..."

"I've seen it before. But she's taken low life to a new level." She sighed. "Don't worry, though, the hospital will take care of her and won't let her fall through the cracks."

"Maybe she'll become a great doctor."

"I'd like to see her get to the point where she can think about going to school. Right now, I just want her to be in remission. If her mom had given her the meds we sent home with her a year ago, she'd be playing with her friends today."

As Shelly continued the five-cent tour, Nick saw more pictures of her and Dr. Wall in the great room.

"Wow, is that you in high school?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "Wild hair, huh? And Doc Wall—doesn't he look so young? You know, he was at all my graduations."

"Never made him out to be a clown." Nick smiled.

"Who can juggle, no less!"

"That man is full of surprises." Nick followed Shelly to the kitchen.

"That he is, and I think he's warming up to you."

"I noticed. But I know one thing, if I do anything to upset you, Popcorn the Clown is going to hunt me down. Maybe even squirt me with his poison flower."

"You worry too much, Nick. Okay, tour's over. Let's go eat. I'm starving."

"My chariot awaits, Madame." Nick motioned toward the front door with his right arm.

They walked by her car and Nick decided not to say a word.

"Some rain would be nice," Shelly said.

Nick couldn't resist. "You better hope for a monsoon, then."

After dinner, Shelly and Nick decided to take a walk through Wilshire Park as they did the first night. The October evening was lovely. Shelly hooked her arm in his.

"Aren't you going to ask me?" she asked.

"Ask you what?" Nick said. He glanced at Shelly's arm around his.

"Why I never really dated," she said. "I never really told you about me."

"Let's go back for a minute. What do you think you know about me?"

"Let's see, you've overcome lots of challenges in sports and life in general. As a young man, you were successful in high school, fell in love, did well in college ..."

Nick stopped her. "Fell in love?"

"Sorry. I heard about Kristen."

"Let me guess. My dad."

"He told me the night I came for dinner. You were upstairs on the phone. I didn't mean to ..."

"That's okay. She was my life. It's natural for Dad to talk about her. Not a day goes by we don't think about her. Having your life torn apart and upended, especially by a drunk in a Mercedes, is tough."

"If it's any consolation," she said as she fidgeted with the collar of her tan Giorgio overcoat, "I had the same thing happen to me when my mom died. She was my best friend. I never felt so alone. Then Dr. Wall gave me this bear hug at her funeral and told me he could be my new rock. Once again, he was there for me, saying and doing the right thing at the right time."

"Okay," said Nick, "let's get back to you. Why do you never date?"

"It started in high school. There was this guy who really liked me, or said he really liked me. Then, on the night of the prom, he decided to tell me that we were going to have sex. I said no. Well, I guess he didn't like that very much, so he decided to beat me up."

"On your prom night?"

"On prom night. Of course, he waited until after the dance."

"How bad was it?"

"A black eye, a busted nose, a severe kick in the groin."

"Groin?"

"Yeah, I beat the crap out of him."

"You beat him up?" Nick laughed.

"No, just kicked him where it hurts. I kicked him again after he was bent over in pain. That's how I broke his nose. He was the perfect gentleman in school that next Monday."

"Wow."

"Yeah, wow," she echoed.

They walked in silence for the next few minutes. As it was almost eleven thirty, they decided to head back home. Nick drove to her place and walked her to her door. Like a gentleman, he waited for a sign, an invitation for the evening to continue or a signal for it to end. Besides, all guys hate getting kicked between the legs.

"I would like to hear your speech, Nick. So come on in and let's hear it. Or is it a pitch?"

"It is a pitch, I guess. It's in my car. Just give me a minute to grab it."

"I'll make some coffee and you can pitch away."

The aroma of delicious fresh coffee filled the air as he opened his briefcase to remove his notes. "You sure you want to hear this?" he said.

"Of course!" She sat cross-legged in the corner of the hunter green sectional and awaited the presentation.

Before beginning, Nick described how the room would be set up—large screens in the corners on each side of the stage in the ballroom—a dinner that would serve over eight hundred people from all over the world. Translators would be present, he told her, although many of the guests would speak English. A lectern would sit in the center of the stage. All lights would be dimmed, except the one over the lectern.

"That's where I'll be standing while the screens display pictures of St. Theresa's, logos of the Kristen Foundation, a picture of Wall, you—"

"Me?"

"Yeah, you."

"Hope it's a good one."

"Only the best. And it starts out something like this: Thank you, Robert." He stopped and looked at Shelly. "That's Robert Smith, the guy who took over the Association for Dad. Unfortunately, his wife has pancreatic cancer, and she isn't doing well. We're hoping she'll make it through next week."

"Sad," Shelly said. She sat up and leaned forward.

"Anyway, I thank him for the opportunity to address the convention, and then go into my story of growing up around them."

Nick spoke with passion as Shelly sat listening. She saved her observations, which were few, for the end. She reminded him that even if it didn't go over this time, it might work someday. She assured him he'd written a brilliant speech. He took all her comments in stride.

When she finished her comments he glanced at his watch. It was after midnight.

"I better go," he said, "Thanks for listening." He gathered his notes and tossed them into his trusty black briefcase.

She followed him to the door. He turned. Their eyes met. He hesitated for a moment, then leaned in to brush a kiss across her

lips. Her eyes closed and her lips parted, ever so slightly. She released the kiss and rested her head on his shoulder.

"You're going to do great, Nick," she whispered.

Two weeks later, Nick found himself in front of a mass of insurance conventioners at the MGM Grand. This would be one of the biggest nights of his life. He couldn't fail. He couldn't let his dad down. He couldn't let Shelly down. He was petrified that if he did fail, she would exit his life just as fast as she entered it. Even though she'd said otherwise, you get used to losing people after a while. He took a deep breath and began his pitch.

"For many of you here this evening, I am that little kid who grew up around this convention. I spent much of my young life running through your tradeshows, business meetings, and countless parties, dinners, and get-togethers. This conference and this organization have been a part of my family as much as my dad and mom.

"I spent those years being shadowed by an amazing woman. Her name was Jane Harris, the light of my dad's existence. My mother was, in short, a class act. And last year we lost her to breast cancer. In fact, my father, Salvatore Harris, or Sal, as he's known to you, left this organization three years ago to be with my mom to help her with her fight. That is not all. Cancer has wounded our family not once, but twice. I was still a child when cancer stole my brother." Nick paused to let the words sink in. "I don't tell you that so you will feel sorry for my family. I share our loss with you because many of you, no doubt, have faced or are facing the same crisis.

"Sadly, Robert's wife, Jill, at this moment is fighting pancreatic cancer, and our prayers go out to their family." He paused. "In both situations, as in all cancer treatments, we have heard a familiar line: 'There is nothing more we can do.' It's a simple statement that creates a heart-stopping feeling of helplessness. I don't have to tell you the devastation of being helpless. Anyone in this room who has quietly said to themselves, 'there must be something else when it comes to cancer treatment' is not alone. I recently met a young woman named Dr. Shelly White. That's her on the screen. She

works at St. Theresa's Children's Hospital in my hometown of Atlanta, Georgia. Shelly first came to St. Theresa's in 1972, when she was eight years old, within the first few months of its opening. She had a cancerous mass in her chest that was slowly killing her.

"There was one doctor on duty who met her in the lobby when she arrived and began treating her. To his surprise, four months later, that cancer would disappear. Shelly White became the first miracle at St. Theresa's, but although she survived, her roommate, Kristen, did not. The physician who treated her was Dr. Gregory Wall, whose picture is now showing on the screen. Today, thirty-five years later, he continues to practice, and Dr. White now works alongside him. He is her mentor, a father figure, and a wonderful individual. Together, they save lives at St. Theresa's, along with an extraordinary staff of men and women who are focused on the ultimate goal: curing cancer. In Kristen's memory, Drs. White and Wall created the Kristen Foundation, which brings money to the hospital. Money goes for playground equipment, microscopes, the list goes on and on, yet the goal remains the same at the Kristen Foundation and St. Theresa's—do what needs to be done to save lives, and that, ladies and gentlemen, is the reason I am here tonight.

"Recently, someone I admire and love very much said something that is worth repeating: 'The world is driven by money.' This came up after we were wondering why, after all these years, we still cannot stop cancer. Sure, we can treat it, we can make it go into remission, but for too many, cancer's a death sentence. The words 'pancreatic cancer' will stop anybody in their tracks. So will lung cancer. All of these diseases, all these promised breakthroughs, and yet we hear the same thing over and over again: 'Just a few more years.' We launch people into space, yet we are helpless to stop a disease that keeps taking our loved ones. After years of telethons, cancer walks, clinical trials, and galas, what do we have to show for it? Well, the organizations will tell you they are making progress with new treatments and slowly turning the table on cancer. While there is some truth to that, I am here to tell you that if we are turning the table on cancer, it must be one helluva table. After seeing my mom pass away before my eyes, I believe this progress is much too slow. The hole they leave in our hearts when they say goodbye is much too big. Many of those of you in

this room know what it is like to be touched by the death of a loved one from cancer, a disease that reaches out and destroys young and old, families and friends, and legacies and heritage in its devastation.

“So, this amazing man I was talking to asked, what if there was an incentive to find a cure to cancer? A reward, if you will. Dangle money before the world and see if it gets their attention. The incentive would have to be an extraordinary amount of money, something that would make people stop and say, Wow! Yes, more than millions, it would have to be at least a billion.

“Now, when I heard this idea, I was with my good friend, Jerry Lamont, and we asked ourselves where we could come up with that kind of money? Then it hit us. Every year, the people in this room spend a collective one trillion dollars to treat cancer patients. You know how much it costs to keep people alive and put them into remission. And despite what trial lawyers may say, it is you who pay the majority of those costs. And you can imagine the costs and the feelings of family members after going through everything a patient and their family has to go through, only to hear that expression we all hate: ‘There is nothing more we can do.’

“Well, tonight, ladies and gentlemen, there is something more we can do. Because we have an idea that in itself will not cost you a dime, but will make everyone in this room into heroes. And here it is.” Nick paused to take a sip of water and returned the glass to the lectern. He inhaled deeply and continued.

“Working with the Kristen Foundation, associated and overseen by Dr. Gregory Wall and Dr. Shelly White at St. Theresa’s, we are looking for a pot of gold. We are looking for one hundred companies in this room to pledge ten million dollars apiece to the Kristen Foundation Project. And the great thing is, we don’t want your money right away. But if a hundred companies pledge ten million, we could create a one-billion-dollar incentive. That might motivate some pharmaceutical company, chemist, organization, or student to come up with a magic bullet.

“Now think for a moment about what would happen if this wild idea works. What happens if we find the cure for cancer? And what would happen if the cure for cancer were discovered and funded by the dreaded, horrible insurance industry?”

The crowd chortled.

“What would it do to your bottom line, what would it do for your stockholders, and what would it do for the growth of your organizations? This is a major public relations gift and the bottom line of any major business is tied to public relations.

“For decades, the world has been told that you don’t care—that insurance companies are only interested in profits. It’s time to prove to the world this is wrong. The man who came up with this idea is standing right over there on my left.” He waited for the crowd to recognize Sal.

“That’s right, this crazy idea is my dad’s. Your former leader. We both ask you to think about what I have said here tonight during your remaining time at the conference. Tell Sal what you think. I also ask you to remember Robert and Jill in your thoughts and prayers. And think about all those amazing kids at St. Theresa’s and at so many other children’s hospitals who are fighting for their lives. Join us as we try something different in a war that has gone on much too long. Tonight we provide hope to those who feel life is being taken from them. Together in this room, we can stand as one and say to all of those who are fighting cancer to keep fighting. The cavalry is coming—I can hear them.” He paused again as the room went silent.

“Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen, for your time and consideration.”

Nick backed away from the microphone as the audience began to clap, then cheer, then rise from their chairs. Over eight hundred people rose to their feet applauding Nick’s efforts. He was beaming as Sal and Robert came to the stage. Sal extended his arms to his son.

“Now that’s a pitch, Nick!” he said.

“That’s some idea you guys have,” Robert shouted above the crowd as he shook Nick’s hand, tears were rolling down his cheeks.

“It’s all his,” Nick said, pointing and smiling at his dad.

Robert returned to resume the business meeting. He looked back at Nick and pointed to him as the crowd again applauded. Nick bowed slightly, waved, and stepped off the stage. His work was finished. He had given his all. As he and Sal walked from the ballroom, Robert continued to restore order.

When the door closed behind them, Nick turned and gave his dad another big smile.

"Well, that seemed to go well, huh?"

"You did great." Sal beamed. "Want to go out to dinner later when this is all over?"

"No thanks," he said. "I think I'll order some room service and relax. I have an eight a.m. flight. Let me know what they say."

"I will," he said, hugging him. "Proud of you. So's your mother."

"Thanks," Nick started toward the elevator bank.

"Hey, son," Sal said, "in this army, where do I fit in?"

Nick looked over his shoulder. "Every army needs a general."

"I like that. General Harris. Nice ring!" he said as he walked back to the ballroom. He opened the door to more applause, smiling and waving to some close friends as he wandered toward his seat. Benny Waitfore grabbed his arm, stopping him in his tracks. "Sal, can't you hear them? They want you on stage."

Upstairs, Nick marveled at the endless twinkle of lights he could see from his window on the twenty-sixth floor. Room service had just arrived with his deluxe meal: a cheeseburger, fries, and iced tea. The attendant glanced out the window during his delivery and remarked on what a beautiful city Las Vegas was at night. Nick stood for a few more moments, marveling at the difference between Atlanta and the so-called Sin City, wondering if the trip had been worth the effort. He turned and rolled the cart in front of the TV and sat down. He reached for the remote just as the phone rang.

"Hi, son, it's me."

"What's up, Dad?"

"I need you to get down here."

"C'mon, I just got my food, and I am not in the party mood tonight."

"I need you down here, Nick."

"Can I at least eat first?"

"No, can't wait. Get your ass down here. Now!" He spoke with such urgency that Nick knew Sal meant business. "I'll wait for you by the elevators."

Nick got dressed, took a bite out of his cheeseburger, washed it down with some tea, and headed to the elevator, happy now that

he had ordered the burger without onions. He deduced on the ride down that they needed more info or data or something to make an educated decision. As the door opened, there was Sal.

"C'mon, let's go."

"What's going on?"

"Lots," Sal said. He dragged Nick by the right arm, but slowed down as they approached the set of double doors. "Look, you understand the responsibility all this brings, right?"

"Yeah, so?"

"Well, just enjoy the moment." Sal opened the doors and pushed his son forward. "I found him!"

The president of the Million Dollar Roundtable was now on stage, slamming his gavel on the lectern multiple times in an attempt to quiet the crowd. Only until after he bellowed, "Quiet!" did the chatter reduce to a murmur.

"Mr. Nick Harris, could you join me, please?"

Nick strode up the side steps to the stage to join this hefty, partially gray man and extended his hand.

"Nick, I am Bob Nearshaw, president of MDR. On behalf of all of us here, we didn't want you to go back home without knowing how touched we were by your presentation." The crowd again broke out into resounding applause. Nick recognized them with a nod.

"After you had left, we asked your father to answer a few questions that some of our members had, and we agree there is no downside. I, as well as everyone in this room, would like nothing more than to have cancer eradicated. I also wouldn't mind the chance to tell a trial lawyer or two where to stick it." He smiled as the room filled with chuckles. "So, we took a quick vote to see how many members here would like to be part of your army and support the Kristen Foundation Project. Now, keep in mind, this would take a legal agreement and no funds would be exchanged until a cancer cure could be found. Correct?"

"Absolutely, sir," said Nick. He looked back at his father.

"Well, we took a vote, and as I recall you were looking for a hundred companies to pledge ten million dollars each. Is that correct?"

"Yes, sir, but any amount would help."

"I'm glad you said that, Nick, because we don't have a hundred companies willing to be involved."

"I understand. As I said, any amount will help," Nick repeated. He caught his father's eye, which appeared to have a tear in it. The wind began to slip out of Nick's sails.

"That's good, because, uh, we have three hundred companies that are here tonight who would like to participate and pledge ten million apiece!"

The crowd erupted. Nick was stunned. He had just raised three billion dollars. Chills went up and down his body. He wanted to shout. He wanted to cry. He wanted to hug his dad. He wanted to hug his mom, his brother, his friend, Jerry. He wanted so much to share this with Shelly.

"Oh, my God," muttered Nick.

"Now, I don't know where this will take us, but I would love to join you one day at a press conference to proudly state that everyone in this room was part of finding a cure for cancer."

Someone in the crowd shouted, "Way to go, Nick!"

More applause followed. Suddenly, Nick was some sort of celebrity, some sort of hero. But he hadn't done anything yet. He'd just made a speech. The pitch of his life, apparently, but just a speech.

Sal joined Nick on stage. They waved to the crowd. They'd just raised an unbelievable amount of money in less than two hours. Every face Nick could see wore a smile. The crowd buzzed with excitement. The Kristen Foundation Project was starting to move. But the work had just begun ...

Shelly's phone rang, waking both her and the visiting cat from a deep sleep. She grabbed the phone and checked the clock on her nightstand. It was three in the morning.

"This is Dr. White."

"Shel, it's me. Nick."

"Nick, do you know what time it is?"

"Yes, yes, I know, but I had to call you about my speech!"

"Oh, yeah," Shelly said, slowly finding her bearings. Petey curled on her lap as she sat up and leaned back against her red, padded headboard. "The conference. So how did it go?"

"Well, I didn't get the hundred companies I set out to get—"

"Nick," she consoled him, "you can't expect people to fork over that kind of money. But you tried and that's something to be proud of. I know I am proud of you."

No response.

"Are you still there?" she suppressed a yawn.

"I wasn't finished. I got *three hundred* of them."

"Three hundred of what?" she asked, still groggy and in no mood to play games.

"Three hundred companies pledging ten million dollars apiece."

Shelly sat up, almost knocking Petey from his perch. "Say that again?"

"I said I just raised three billion dollars to find a cure for cancer! That's what I said."

"You better not be playing with me. This isn't a joke."

"Rest assured, this is no joke. Would you let Wall know? I'll be on a plane in the morning."

"Of course I will!" she shrieked. "How were you able to do this so quickly?"

"It was easy, really. My dad said a few things after I had left the room that I'm sure helped. Of course, they won't give us a dime until we find a cure, but that's the agreement. Now you, Wall, and your friend, Barry, are going to have to start figuring out how to monitor the contacts and the people in the industry. The Million Dollar Roundtable will do the legal work, which will take a couple of weeks, but, in general, it's a go."

"Nick, I can't believe this. When can I give you a big hug?"

"I'll call you tomorrow when I get in. Now go back to sleep."

"Sleep? Yeah, right. I'm up now!" she said, then paused as the magnitude of this moment started to sink in. "Nick?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you for everything."

"You can thank me when we find what we're looking for."

Smiling, she suppressed another yawn. She popped out of bed and made a beeline for the shower.

CHAPTER 13

Dr. Gregory Wall pulled into the doctors' parking lot as he did every morning at seven. He spotted Shelly's still unwashed Bug as he struggled to get out of his car. He took the elevator to the fifth floor and stopped at the nurses' station for his morning report.

"Good morning, Doctor," Doris greeted him as she held out with a stack of files and messages.

"Hold those for a minute, Doris. Have you seen Dr. White running around this morning?"

"She's in your office waiting for you."

"Waiting for me?" he asked. He was usually the first to get to work and many times would stay the night at the bedside of a little patient.

"She's been in there for the better part of an hour."

With a "Harumph," he grabbed his briefcase and walked to his office. Shelly stood staring out of the window. "I hear you're waiting for me?" he said. "Now that's a switch."

"I've been here for a while."

"A while?" he asked. "It's seven a.m. What's going on?"

"Well, I got a call from Nick Harris this morning."

"This morning? I repeat, it's seven a.m."

"Actually, he called me about three."

"The man calls you at three in the morning?"

"He's in Vegas at the insurance conference. Remember?"

"Oh, yeah," he said. "So, let me guess. He made his big pitch, they told him he was crazy, and he called you for some consolation after hitting the bar."

"Not even close." She paused, waiting for him to look up from the papers that were askew on his desk.

"Well, what did happen then?"

"He got three hundred companies."

It took a moment for Wall to speak. "Say again?"

"Nick Harris just raised three billion dollars in the name of the Kristen Foundation Project."

"Holy mother of God! That boy is full of surprises!" He lifted his large frame from his chair. "Three billion dollars! That must have been one helluva speech, huh?"

"Apparently he really cares about the kids. Admit you might be wrong about him."

"For that amount of money, I'd be happy to be wrong about anything." He smiled. "By the way, who else knows about this?"

"Nick and his dad, the insurance group, you and me, and probably Jerry."

"What have we got into here, Shelly?" He walked toward her and offered one of his comforting hugs. She accepted.

"One wild ride, Doc," she whispered in his ear. "One wild ride." She stepped back. "Nick said he will inform the hospital board later. Let's keep this quiet for now. We have a lot of planning to do."

"We just raised three billion dollars, and we can't tell anyone," he said. "That about right?"

"That's about it," she said, grabbing her purse from the loveseat. "Oh, by the way, I thought you'd also like to be the first to know that I think I'm falling in love with Nick Harris."

He watched as she left the office. "I was just about to say the same thing!" He sat back down and reclined. "Yes, sir, I'm really starting to like this young man."

Jerry checked his watch. Right on time. He followed the signs for arrivals and slowly cruised the pickup area, looking for Nick. With any luck, he wouldn't have to swing around and make

another pass. Just as he was getting to the end of the line, he spotted an unshaven, tired looking man with a carry-on.

"Hey, big guy!" he greeted him. "So, you did well, young Skywalker. I can't friggin' believe it!"

"I nailed it, man, but it must have been what Dad said after I left the room that clinched the deal. Do you realize that we now have to put on the press conference of our lives?"

"I do, but I need to let you know that Bongero kind of went ballistic when he found out his main creative guy wasn't at the so-called mandatory meeting yesterday. The meeting that was supposed to fire up the employees into a super working unit or some shit like that."

"I figured," Nick said. "So how was it?"

"I really don't know," Jerry said as he merged onto Interstate 85. "I slept through most of it."

They arrived at Nick's house about five-thirty in the afternoon. Nick needed a shower and a nap. He needed to collect his thoughts. He had just stepped into the biggest campaign of his life and he felt a bit overwhelmed with logistics. How would they handle multiple claims of cures? What if they got laughed out of town at the press conference? What if a foreign entity had the magic potion – would they receive the reward in U.S. dollars? What about translators? What if some of the insurance companies reneged? What if this was just a lesson in futility? So many questions, so few answers.

He entered the house, quiet with Sal still in Las Vegas and lacking the smell of dinner being prepared in the kitchen. He threw his bag onto the chair in the living room, headed upstairs, and had just stripped down when he heard his cell phone ring.

"Hi, Shelly."

"You home?"

"Sure am. I'm about to jump in the shower."

"You're alone?"

"I hope so," he said. "Where are you?"

"At the hospital, sitting with Mary and going over some files."

"How is she?"

"Weak, but stable, and that's a good thing."

"Does she know about her mom yet?"

"No, not yet. I asked Social Services to hold off until she felt a little better. For now, I'm watching over her."

"She's in good hands. Sorry for waking you this morning."

"Are you kidding? That was the best call I could ever get at three in the morning! What do we do now?"

"Let me get cleaned up, and I'll call you back."

"Want me to grab a pizza and come by?"

"I'd love to, Shel, but I'm exhausted. Can I have a rain check?"

"Sure. But I am buying the next meal."

"Deal. I'll call you tomorrow. We can go over the legal issues we have to look at for the funds."

"Got it. Get some rest. By the way, Doc Wall thinks you're amazing."

"Wow, in just a month's time, I've proven myself to the remarkable Dr. Gregory Wall!"

"I don't think you have to prove yourself to anybody, Nick."

"Even you?"

"What do you think?"

The Monday morning air was chilly. Once Nick stepped outside, he drew a deep, refreshing breath. His life had taken a sudden turn down a path he never knew existed.

His state of euphoria was short-lived. As soon as he arrived at AdWorks, that familiar pit in his stomach—the Bongero pit he knew so well—opened up. He decided he would try to sneak into work and deal with the wrath later. Not very adult, but neither was Bongero.

Nick walked with his head down and made a beeline to his office. He noticed a number of people crowded in the break room watching TV. Suddenly Jerry appeared.

"Have you seen the news? Have you?"

"Quiet, Jerry, I'm trying to get into my office under the radar. Is he in yet?"

Jerry dragged Nick by the arm toward the break room. "Did you know the audiovisual company from Vegas released your pitch to the press?"

"No! What the hell? They were only running the PowerPoint. That can't be."

"They must have had a camera rolling and somebody leaked it. Every morning show in the country is running it."

"Oh, shit!" Nick turned and jogged to his office with Jerry in tow. Each person they passed commented on the news: "Nice job." "What a pitch!" "Three billion dollars, wow!" "Man, can you raise some money or what?" Nick was frenzied. He needed a minute to think.

Just as they arrived at his office door, Bongero's voice filled the halls.

"Harris!"

He turned to see the man, red faced and bulging eyed, marching toward him.

"Yes, sir?" Nick asked.

"I thought you were sick yesterday, Harris!"

"I sort of had to do a thing for my dad."

"What did I tell you about the free foundation shit?"

"Well, yeah, but, uh, I thought it would be great PR for us. Besides, Jerry filled me in on the important points from yesterday."

"He did, did he?" asked Bongero. "I'd be real curious about what he told you, because he slept through most of it." His eyes burned a hole through Jerry.

"I was awake during the important stuff, sir."

"Please, Jerry. Just shut up. Harris, would you mind telling me why every major news organization is babbling about you raising three billion dollars for some dipshit's charity over here?"

"It's a foundation, sir," Jerry chided.

Bongero raised his hand in front of Jerry's face for quiet, staring at Nick, waiting for an answer. Nick knew the two of them were fatuously punching their tickets out of AdWorks, but he really didn't care anymore.

"Well, I planned to have a press conference in a couple of days and ..."

"A few days?" interrupted Bongero. "I got news for you, Mr. Harris. CNN, NBC, and FOX are on their way over here. And guess who they want to talk to?"

"Me?"

"That's right, sick boy, so you'd better get a statement ready or we're all going to look like idiots. And then you and this sidekick of yours will be out on the streets!"

"I'll get right on it, sir," Nick nodded then darted into his office.

"And you go make yourself useful," Bongero said to Jerry. "Try staying awake."

"Hey, Nick, I saw you on TV," Bella said.

Nick rushed past her desk. As soon as he sat down Bella's voice came over the intercom. "Shelly is on line five."

"Oh, crap," said Nick. He hit the hands-free button on his desk phone and leaned back in his chair. "Hi, Shel!"

"Hi, Nick. Um ... are you aware there are satellite news trucks pulling up to the hospital?"

"Trucks?" Nick asked. "How many?"

"At least three from what I've heard," she said.

Bella tapped on the door and walked in on her toes. "Marie from the hospital board is on line six," she whispered.

Jerry walked in a moment later closing the door behind him.

Nick closed his eyes. *What a morning.* "Shelly, I have to go. We'll get through this. Just tell Wall that someone at the MGM leaked my speech without my knowledge."

Nick punched line six. Time to put out some fires, and he might as well start at the top. All of his crisis management training was about to pay off. Within ten minutes, Nick had the hospital's Executive Board calm and was prepared to meet the media. The press conference of a lifetime that he planned to work on over the next few days or so had been pushed up – to today.

Bella's voice again sounded over the intercom, announcing Sal Harris on line twelve.

"This day just keeps getting better and better," said Jerry as Nick hit the flashing button for line twelve.

"Hey, Dad."

"Hey, son. You been watching the news?"

"Yeah, kind of. I just found out. The AV crew at the hotel must have leaked the story to the press."

"Leaked it? Hell, I told them to!"

"You what?"

"I told them they could. It's free PR, right?"

"We were going to have a press conference. We wanted to announce it to the world from St. Theresa's. We were going to invite people ..."

"The Association people think it was a great idea. Everyone's talking about it. You can't go anywhere in the hotel without someone saying something. And all the TVs are on. By the way, you know TV does add ten pounds. I'm just saying."

"Dad, we're not ready and news crews are already at St. Theresa's and reporters are on their way to ..." He stopped. "I gotta go."

"You'll make it work."

"It takes time to write a campaign, Dad."

"Campaign?"

"We wanted to create press packets and prepare statements for the players. A lot goes into these things. Especially something this huge."

"Oh, come on. We are trying to find a cure to cancer, and we just raised three billion dollars. Give us the cure, we give you the money. How easy can it get? Besides, the faster we get it out there, the faster we find a cure. You do what you do. There's no one better. Before I go, the Association's legal guys said they'll have the paperwork to you next week."

"Great." Nick sighed.

"See you on TV!"

"Goodbye, Dad."

"Goodbye, Sal," yelled Jerry.

"Oh, hey, Jer. So, what kind of tattoo did you get?"

"We don't have time for this right now," Nick said.

"I'll tell you later, Sal," said Jerry.

Nick clicked the line off. "Okay, we have four hours to pull this all together. Let's get to work."

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Jerry asked. He pointed at the commotion in the hallway. Nick opened the door and saw a stream of reporters with cameras in tow milling around like ants. "Damn."

"Here, I wrote up a quick statement earlier," Jerry said. He handed a legal pad to Nick. "Figured we needed something when I saw the news this morning."

"You're a lifesaver, man."

By mid-afternoon, Nick was satisfied that the auditorium at St. Theresa's had been transformed into an area befitting a press conference of this magnitude. He had called a friend in the AV business who created a backdrop flanked by ten-foot screens, along with drapery, lighting, and sound.

"You out did yourself again, Sammy."

"Thanks," Sammy stood on a tall ladder adjusting a stage light. "Could you tell me what this is all about? Did you really raise three billion dollars?"

"Well, sort of," said Nick. He was growing tired of answering that question. "You'll find out the whole deal at two-thirty." A large crash made him jump. "Now what?"

"Just local news setting up stage left," Sammy said. "CNN, FOX, and the three main networks are on the press riser. Not sure how to fit in much more here."

Nick shook his head. "Just roll with it, Sammy. You'll figure it out."

"Will do, boss. And you've got company."

Nick turned to see Wall and Shelly strolling into the auditorium, dressed in their lab whites.

"Dr. Wall, where's your stethoscope?" asked Nick.

"It's in my pocket. Why?"

"You'll need to put it around your neck, okay?"

"Oh, like a prop?"

"Right."

"If we need makeup, I have some in my desk." Wall smiled.

"No, Doc, we need just you. Let's save Popcorn the Clown for Friday night at the movies."

"Do I look all right?" Shelly flashed that classic smile as she stood straight and turned a bit to the left.

"You look like a million bucks, Shel. Okay, you two. Just stand with us and follow along." There was no time for a run-through. Nick took a deep breath and looked around. The room was filling up with special guests, high-ranking officials, and even more press. There were now more cameras than could fit on the twenty-four-foot press riser. He caught Sammy's eye and motioned him over.

"What's the matter? You look troubled." Nick asked.

"Don't mean to alarm you, but there is a boatload of the press still coming in, and you're out of parking spots for satellite trucks."

"You're kidding."

"Hell, there are twelve out there already, and most are going global."

"Squeeze 'em in the best you can, Sammy."

"You're gonna owe me, Nick."

"I'll buy you a beer."

"You'll buy me a case of beer." Sammy moved into the rising ocean of press.

Nick looked to the stage to see that Marie Mellon standing with Drs. Wall and White behind the lectern. He joined them on stage and produced a smile to share with them.

"Okay, everyone," he said, "just follow my lead and stay close. Keep smiling and always look forward." Nick waited a few minutes for stragglers to enter the room and for the auditorium doors to be shut. The mayor, Board members, and other dignitaries had long been seated.

"Good afternoon, and welcome to St. Theresa's Children's Hospital," Nick began. "This hospital, founded in 1972, is known as ground zero for children's cancer research. It is staffed by the finest medical researchers and cancer treatment specialists in the world. It brings hope to patients and families. All are welcome. All are treated. I am joined today by the faces of St. Theresa's. Their tireless work goes without saying. They continue to be the driving force to find a cure and raise funds for this facility. For every child here and around the globe, these people are an inspiration. And to represent the many doctors, nurses, and researchers here at St. Theresa's, I am honored to have on my left, Dr. Gregory Wall and Dr. Shelly White.

"Dr. Wall started at St. Theresa's in 1972. One of his first patients was none other than Dr. Shelly White, who beat her cancer under his care. She was the first miracle here at St. Theresa's. But during her time back in 1972, her roommate was not so fortunate. Shelly made a promise to that roommate, a promise to become a doctor and one day find a cure for cancer. She, along with Doctor Wall, created the Kristen Foundation for that reason. Today, we announce a unique challenge to the world of cancer research

through a grant made possible by more than three hundred insurance organizations spanning the globe. We offer a unique incentive. Today, we are looking for a lasting cure for cancer. Whoever finds either of those will receive the staggering reward of three billion dollars and the gratitude of thousands.”

As Nick continued, the flashes of hundreds of still cameras went off, video cameras zoomed, and reporters listened intently, holding their recorders. The room was silent, save the clicking of cameras and Nick’s strong voice.

“This, ladies and gentlemen, is no joke. We invite anyone who would like to participate to contact us at the KristenFoundation.org. The Foundation, run by Drs. White and Wall, will be happy to give you further information. All participants will be told the detailed rules and regulations. I would also like to acknowledge the assistance of Dr. Barry Hayes of the University of Florida, who along with Dr. White will review and monitor the progress of this exciting program. The goal we set today is to find the magic formula that will stop a killer. Today, we will form a new army of people who have witnessed too much death. As I look around this room, I see the faces of not rich nor poor, not black nor white, but the faces of people who have told a loved one goodbye. We intend to put an end to this in a way that has never been tried before.”

He paused.

“We look around the world and ask a question: Is there anything else we can do? I say there is. And three billion dollars proves we are not kidding. With the backing of the insurance industry and the Million Dollar Roundtable, we offer this incentive to stop a killer. This is not a government project; it is an effort by ordinary individuals, large corporations and institutions, and researchers working together to save lives of children and adults alike. We ask all of you with us today and watching on television to help us. Do you have an idea, a new treatment, or a drug? Ever thought what would happen if you tried? Today we offer this extraordinary opportunity for you to participate in a reward so big, it will revolutionize the world of healthcare. A reward so big, it rivals the revenue of a small country. The question remains: Can it be done? For three billion dollars, I think we can give it one helluva try. With that, we will take any questions you may have.”

Nick pointed to a suit-clad woman in the front of the audience as murmurs began to circulate throughout the auditorium.

"You really think you can find the magic bullet to cure cancer?" she asked with a British accent.

"Yes, we do," he responded.

"But cancer is so complex and in so many forms as it attacks the body, your request is indeed like finding a needle in a haystack."

Dr. Wall stepped up to the microphone. "May I, Mr. Harris?"

"By all means, Dr. Wall."

"I understand your pessimism, but pessimism changes nothing. Change comes from commitment to making a difference no matter how impossible the task seems. We would rather fail while attempting to do something great than fail by doing nothing at all. I have been here at St. Theresa's for many, many years. Dr. White has been virtually a part of this institution since she was an eight-year-old patient. I have to say, I was quick to tell Mr. Harris his idea was impossible. Then I watched as he led one, then two, and then a swarm of people to think, 'What if?' We can focus on the difficulty, or we can focus on the lives we might save. So, yes, it will be like finding a needle in a haystack, but if we do, think about the people we will save. Out there are chemists, researchers, and scientists who have felt the loss of a loved one to cancer and know the disease continues to kill, and one of them may be the very person who finds a clue to unlocking this mystery. I know there will be those who say this will be an impossible request. In fact, it would be a miracle. Well, I for one have seen miracles, and one of them is standing right here."

Dr. Wall moved away from the lectern and put his arm around Shelly. She smiled as the room suddenly erupted in a sea of questions. Nick raised his arms, attempting to keep order. "One at a time, please," he yelled.

CHAPTER 14

Eighteen hundred miles away, Dr. Henry Shoo sat in the break room of the BioTech Corporation's Salt Lake City laboratory watching the press conference on FOX.

"Wow, three billion," a technician said to him. "Those guys aren't kidding, are they?"

"No, I guess not," Shoo said.

Dr. Shoo watched in silence, staring at the television propped up in the corner of the room. His heart was still heavy with the loss of his mother, and he would need time to return to normal. He listened as the medical correspondent talked about what it would take to find a cure to cancer. The Holy Grail of Medicine, the talking head called it.

"They're asking for a miracle," the tech said. "Sadly, there's no such thing as miracles."

"I wonder," Shoo said softly. "I wonder."

On the campus of the University of Florida in Gainesville, Dr. Barry Hayes sat in his lab with his students following the press conference. Shelly had called to let him know what was happening – that the announcement was now on a fast track. As the television health correspondents began their liturgy, students' hands began to rise.

"Yes, sir?" He called on Michael Hennessey in the last row.

"Dr. Hayes, is it possible? Can we really do what they're asking?"

"That's a good question," he answered. "It depends. If you're asking if we, or someone on our team, can come up with the magic bullet to kill cancer, probably not. But there is nothing to say that the delivery of a drug couldn't be formulated to attack the cancer itself.

"Yes, Jill?" He motioned to Jill Weber, one of his prize students.

"Is it possible for us to work on something like this as a class or maybe a side project?"

"Sounds like you could use three billion dollars, huh, Jill?" he kidded. The class broke out into laughter.

"So could I!" a voice bellowed from the back of the lab.

"No, Dr. Hayes," she said with a furrowed brow. "I just lost my grandfather to cancer, and I can't think of a better way to honor him than to have a hand in trying stopping it."

Everyone went silent, looking at Dr. Hayes.

"You know, guys, sometimes I'm asked why I teach. Well, it's because of you."

He gazed his students. Each one seemed eager to help, to be a part of something larger than themselves. He admired that, but big dreams required sobering truth.

"Can we do a side project. Maybe. Probably. But I'm not being a good professor if I don't level with. The discovery of new treatments and cures seldom come by accident or part time work. The odds of us discovering a cancer cure is slim."

He paced for a moment or two. "Still," he said, "we can at least give it some thought. At the very least, we might learn a few things.

"Sometime," he continued, "I look at my students and wonder what great things you might achieve in the years ahead. Could the cure for cancer be in a young person's mind right now? Maybe. It may be something that has never been tried, a combination of science and math, or pure luck. But it's the passion for helping a fellow human being that will make a cure happen. What better way to honor the ones we love than to stop a disease that threatens so many lives? Remember, there are twelve million people living with cancer at any point in time in the United States. Some of them will

win their battle; a great many won't. Every one of them is loved by somebody.

"So, yes, it would be an honor for you all to work on this project. In fact, Dr. Shelly White, as you may know, is a dear friend of ours at UF, an alum and a cancer survivor. We were students together. She sat in this very room. Our goal was the same as it is today – to save lives. She does it every day. She asked me personally to help with this project, and I jumped at the chance." He looked at Jill and smiled. "So if you want to help, remember, it's a team effort. We might not find what we're looking for, but one thing I know for sure, no one ever hit a home run from the dugout."

Shelly watched as the hustle-bustle in the auditorium wound down. The last of the media filed out of the building amidst heavy chatter. Nick had caused quite a stir. Shelly turned to Nick and gave him a big hug.

"Well, how'd you like your first press conference?"

"That was a rush!" she said.

"I'm glad you had fun," he said. "I was terrified."

"You?" Wall piped in. "Didn't show."

"How'd you do with the reporters over there?"

"The press is rude," said Wall.

"Rude?" asked Nick.

"They wanted to know how old I was."

"You're thirty-nine, right?" ribbed Jerry, who joined the group on stage.

"Yes, I am thirty-nine, that's correct."

"It's Popcorn who's over seventy," Shelly blurted out. Dr. Wall gave her the evil eye. "Nick, I have to get back to my rounds. Dinner tonight?" she asked while reaching out and grabbing his arm. The touch was electric. She had it bad for this guy.

"Where we going?" asked Jerry.

"Wherever you and Bella would like to go is fine," Shelly said.

"Bella has a pole dancing class tonight."

"Pole dancing?" Wall asked.

"Yes, it's apparently good for the abs."

"Really?" Nick said. "The abs? You know, Jerry, you can't even do a pull up without straining something."

"Yes, but I try. So, am I flying solo tonight?"

"Correct, my friend."

Jerry leaned in toward Nick. Shelly heard him say, "You better check in with Bongero in the morning. See you all later."

"By the way, thank you, Doctor, for your kind words," Nick said, shaking Dr. Wall's hand.

"You know, Nick, I thought this was a crazy idea, but I have to admit you did a brilliant job. I hope something comes of it all."

"Three billion dollars says it will be," Nick said.

Shelly leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. "Call me around five."

"Even in your hospital garb, you look radiant," he whispered back. She blushed.

"I think she likes you." Dr. Wall grinned.

"Hope so," Nick said. "If not, a clown may kill me in my sleep."

Dr. Wall nodded. "Never trust a pissed-off clown."

CHAPTER 15

Shelly heard a knock she had been waiting for.

"Wow! Smells great," Nick said when she opened the door.

"Eggplant Parmesan with chicken. Or are you talking about me?"

"Well, that too." He smiled. She leaned in to accept his kiss on the cheek. "But, how did you have the time to cook dinner?"

"Well, I asked Fazio's to send some over. I hope you don't mind."

"Stay here instead of going out and avoiding the press? It's a great idea." Music played softly in the background. Nick cocked his head to one side. "Is that, um ..."

"It's Luther Vandross," Shelly said. "I love his music."

"He just died a couple years ago, didn't he?"

"Unfortunately, yes. A great singer. Diabetes, followed by complications of a stroke. He was only fifty-four. Might still be with us if he had listened to his doctor."

"A lot of people don't listen to their doctors," said Nick. He accepted a plate from Shelly and headed for the table. "I'm not even in medicine and I see it all the time." He motioned to Shelly to serve herself first, and she brushed against him as she moved forward. She sat, her face flushed. She loved the way the low light of the chandelier and candles slowly flickered from the center of the table. She raised her gaze when she felt Nick staring at her and smiled. It

was official, she had fallen for this guy. She never realized how much she craved romance.

"At least I work with kids. And they have a good excuse."

"What's that?"

"That they're kids. Now, adults, that's the problem. It took me five years to convince Greg to get a colonoscopy."

"Wall? Really?"

"According to him, he doesn't like garden hoses shoved ..."

"I get it. How did you get him to go?"

"I hid his clown shoes for two weeks. He had a gig."

"You are downright ruthless, aren't you?"

"I have my moments."

Nick took a bite of his eggplant Parmesan. "This is nice, isn't it?"

"Well, I figured after the day you had, this might be a nice change."

"You're right about that." He stopped and turned his head. "Why does that cat keep staring at me?"

"He stares at everybody. In another week, he goes home to stare at his own people."

"Good for you both." He smiled. "You really look wonderful after the day we just had. How do you do it?"

"Are you kidding?" She beamed. "Today was fun! I know you deal with this stuff all the time, but standing there on that stage today, it just hit me."

"What hit you?" he asked.

"You. I was standing next to a guy I'd recently wanted nothing to do with. And this guy turns out to be one of the most extraordinary people I have ever met. You mean what you say. You are helping the kids. Can I tell you something?"

She paused and sipped her wine, watching Nick grab a garlic roll. He appeared uneasy.

"The few times I did get serious with a guy, they'd comment how being on call sounded like a lot of work. That I would never have any free time. They would always ask how much I made or if I wanted kids. Like I was filling out a job application. Then I meet you. You never asked 'why?' or 'who?' You just listened. And then you and your dad come along with this idea and the next thing I know, you raise three billion dollars, and I'm staring at a sea of cameras and reporters. And you don't even flinch. I would be

scared to death! And knowing that you hadn't planned on doing what you did today and just had to throw it together—mighty impressive, Nick. Mighty impressive. I find myself being drawn toward you, and that just doesn't happen to me."

"Look, Shel, I, I..." Nick was at a loss for words. She decided to rescue him.

"When you lost your brother, I lost Kristen. When they wheeled me out of that hospital, I looked back to the room I had just left and I knew Kristen was in there. I saw the lights flashing, the chaos—after all these years and all I've seen in my work, that one image still haunts me. I was young but knew what had happened. I carried the anger of a trapped animal for years, all the while knowing if I could break free from this memory of Kristen's death, maybe I could still make a difference for other Kristens. So I made a pledge that I would avenge her death, and I thought being a doctor would do that."

She sipped her wine, then dabbed her lips, staring back into Nick's eyes.

"But it didn't. I can't get retribution for her death. Who do I go after? God? I just wanted to make a difference. I just didn't want Kristen's life and her struggles to be forgotten. I know it may sound weird to you or others that even though I only knew her a short time, there was a connection between us. It's hard for me to explain. But it's there. Like you. I've only known you for a month and it seems so much longer. There was a reason for Kristen and me to be together in 1972. In the grand scheme of things, I believe we all have a purpose. There's a reason you're here." She paused again. "And there is a reason I am not sitting right next to you," she added quietly, finally looking away.

Nick rose from his chair and sat next to Shelly. "When was the last time you allowed anyone to get close to you, other than Doc Wall?"

"A long time ago."

"Look, Shel, you've been doing your part to be everything for those kids and there is nothing wrong with that. But I am here to fight with you. Maybe it's time you let that guard down and realize I've seen the struggles you've dealt with. And like you, I don't back down from a fight. I can tell you one thing—you're the real thing. Your beauty is not only on the outside, but on the inside. You were

the bright sunshine on a very clear and cold day. You warm people's souls. I'm feel lucky to be sitting with you right now."

Vandross's "Everyone Needs Someone To Love" began to play as if on cue. Nick leaned in toward Shelly and tenderly kissed her parting lips. She reciprocated, gently at first, followed by channeled passion. Her body and soul craved the touch, the love of a man. She had almost forgotten how good it felt. The chicken would have to wait.

The next morning, FOX TV met Nick at St. Theresa's. The interview was going live on *Good Day Atlanta*. In the meantime, SkyNews was setting up an interview with Shelly and Dr. Wall.

By nine thirty, the interviews had concluded, and Nick knew it was time to go to work and face the music. A one-on-one with his boss was imminent. He walked in, and there at the end of the hall waited the dreaded Bongero.

"My office, now!" he barked, loud enough for everyone to hear. Intimidation was his strong suit.

Nick took a deep breath and walked into the den of doom, only to find Jerry already seated.

"Take a seat, Nick," ordered Bongero. He sat behind his desk, where he gritted his teeth and flexed his knuckles.

"There's only one reason I'm not going to fire you two over this shit," he snarled. "You know why?"

"Because we're really good at what we do?" Jerry quipped. Nick's eyes grew wide.

"No! That's not the reason, smartass. Over the past four days you haven't done shit for this company, but if I fire your asses, the press will tear me apart for letting go the guys who are dangling three billion dollars in front of the world. I told you not to get us involved in this crap, and now we're chest high in it. Hell, CNN wants to come here and do a piece on how we support St. Theresa's."

"That's great!" said Jerry.

"No, that's not great! We don't support anyone who doesn't make us money. Sound familiar? Yet the media thinks we do. So we're gonna play this little game and hope this all goes away. I

don't want to waste time on a campaign that's not even ours to begin with. It's yours, Harris, and that pisses me off!" He fell silent and conducted his predictable ritual of shuffling papers. "So here's the deal. An unbelievable pitch for UPS by the end of the week with storyboards. Got that, you two?"

"Yes, sir," Nick answered.

"Got it!" Jerry responded, almost saluting. "If it means anything, we have gotten some good PR for our firm, sir."

"We make PR for our customers, not ourselves. And I will not have my employees telling me how to run my company!"

Nick and Jerry nodded their heads in unison.

"I might add, as pissed off as I am at the two of you, I hear you did pull off a pretty damn good show yesterday."

"Thank you, sir," said Jerry.

"Well, thank my wife. She's the one who said it."

"At this point, we'll take a compliment anywhere we can get one," Nick rose from his chair. "Gotta get back to work."

"I mean it, you two. By the end of the week!"

"Got it!" repeated Jerry, closing the door behind him.

"I really hate that SOB," said Nick. "I really think ..." His thought was interrupted by Bella, announcing that an important call from a woman named Julia was waiting on hold.

"Julia? Who's that?"

"World News Tonight."

"ABC? Oh, God, that's just what I need."

"Want me to take a message?"

"No, I'll take it. Just keep Bongero away from me."

Nick let out a big sigh following the ABC interview at St. Teresa's. He unknotted his tie and tried not to appear as weary as he felt.

"You know, you're really good at this stuff." Shelly smiled and helped him with his tie. "Anybody ever told you that?"

"I'm the one who's supposed to be behind the camera where you were, not in front of it." She had watched the interview from the shadows of the conference room.

"You're a better spokesperson than you think. It's a gift."

Nick wadded his tie up and tucked into one of his suit coat pockets. He glanced around. "Where's Jerry?"

"Bella called while you were chatting with the news crew. Her car died. He ran off to rescue her."

"Great. He drove."

"I told him I'd take you home."

Nick studied her for a moment. "What did he say?"

"Nothing. He did smile a lot."

"I bet he did." He took her hand and started for the parking lot. "It's been a stressful day. A little extra time with the you is just what I need."

Nick's phone rang as they walked to the car. He retrieved the cell from his pocket and looked at the display. "Will you look at that!"

"What?"

He showed her the phone. "That's the White House number."

"You're kidding. You might want to answer that."

He did. "This is Nick."

"This is Operator two-seven-five, White House signal. Could you please hold for the President of the United States?"

"I'd be happy to."

A short pause was broken by the voice of his old friend.

"Hello, Nick? You there?"

"Yes, Mr. President, I am. Always good to hear from you."

"Hell, I think I've seen you on every network today. Looks like a campaign year. I hope you're not going to run for my office anytime soon."

"No, sir, just trying to catch my breath after a wild few days. I guess you could call it a campaign to find the cure to cancer."

Nick glanced at Shelly. Her eyes were wide. She kept her voice low. "Is that President Riley?"

Nick nodded.

"Oh, my God!" She covered her mouth with both hands.

"Right, my Surgeon General tells me you're looking for a needle in a haystack, but if I can do anything to help, I want you to contact me. And I mean it, Nick. You seem to have enough cash there to get people's attention."

"Yes, sir," Nick answered. "I won't hesitate to call you." Shelly's eyes grew wider. "So, where are you now?"

"Somewhere over the Atlantic. Going to some damn summit meeting."

"Sounds like fun."

"Not really. A campaign can be fun. This is another photo ops with world leaders who need to cut back on their cologne. Anyway, I just wanted to call and say I'm with you. One day, maybe you'll come back and join our campaign."

"I'll think about it. I appreciate the kind words, sir."

"I got to run. Briefing. Keep up the good work. Keep me advised."

"Will do, Bill." Nick returned the phone to his pocket.

Shelly looked stunned. "You seem so calm. What did he say?"

"He said I should call if I need anything."

"That's pretty exciting."

"It is. And now we have an ace up our sleeve."

They got into Shelly's car. "It looks like your Bug still needs a bath."

"Maybe it will rain," she said.

He sighed. "I just don't think that would help."

Friday morning, Nick was in the boardroom ready to pitch Bongero on Jerry's idea. It was unlike anything he had pitched for UPS and different was just what the campaign needed.

Jerry was setting up the storyboards on a pair of easels as Bongero walked into the room and settled into his chair. "This better be good."

Nick smiled and stuffed what he really wanted to say to his employer. Instead, he went directly into the oration that he hoped would keep Bongero happy and UPS excited. Silence greeted the end of their presentation. Jerry and Nick stared at Bongero waiting for a flicker of life.

"You know," Bongero finally said, "that's a neat twist. Lots of human drama. Let's do it."

"It will take some time to coordinate the filming and staging," said Nick.

"Fine, then I won't fire your asses 'til after."

"Thanks, sir," Jerry said. Nick gave him a look. Bongero turned and walked out as Nick and Jerry collected their paperwork and storyboards.

"I like this idea, Jerry. And to think, you're supposed to be just the storyboard guy."

"And to think you're supposed to be just the idea guy," Jerry retorted, grabbing his boards from Nick.

"Quite a week," Nick said. "I'm exhausted."

"Oh, sure, you raise a few billion dollars and challenge the world to find a cure for cancer, and you're tired? What a wimp."

A week later, the legal papers arrived at St. Theresa's. Questions were pouring in, not just from the press, but from the medical community, families, and people on the street. Many questioned whether the challenge was genuine. But some had very real questions about coordination, and who the true leaders of this project were. The majority of the feedback was quite positive. Now the wait.

In the backroom at Fazio's, laughter and clinking glasses filled the air in celebration of both the initial success of the challenge and Shelly's birthday. Bella and Jerry, Wall and his wife, Dottie, Doris, Nick, and Sal toasted the birthday girl in unison. Shelly blushed. She didn't like to divulge her age, but in reality everyone at the table knew they just needed to count backward to 1972 when Shelly was eight years old. Tonight was a happy occasion. Every birthday was a milestone marking off a life that was almost cut short by cancer. She never let herself forget that.

Nick stood. "If I may offer a toast to this lovely lady on this, her birthday," he said with a smile. "I'd just like to say that thanks to my best friend, Jerry, and the quiet behind-the-scenes work of Doris —"

"What's he talking about?" Doris exclaimed with a wide grin.

"I stand here today believing in my heart that this lady is indeed the miracle that Doc Wall says she is. Your kindness, healing touch,

and the love you have for your kids make me proud to know and love you. Cheers.”

Shelly teared up. He’d never mentioned he loved her before.

“That was nice, son. But what’s happening on the cure front?”

“It’s a slow, uphill battle, Sal,” said Shelly.

“You’d think three billion dollars would get you off the mountain faster,” he said.

“This is what we told you guys in the beginning. It’s complicated,” Wall said. “But the hard part is—”

“What’s the hard part?” Sal pressed.

“All of it,” Wall said. “Finding the tumor, finding out what type it is, how to get to it, how to kill the cancer cells without killing the patient. I’m not saying it can’t be done, but it takes time. Don’t get me wrong, the money has made it a top priority at many institutions and companies.”

“Sixty-two medical universities and twenty-eight pharmaceutical and bio companies are working on it,” said Shelly. “And the numbers continue to grow daily.”

“Any luck at all?” asked Sal.

“Well,” she said, “there’s one doctor at a company called Bio-Tech in Salt Lake who has some ingenious ideas. He’s working on nanotechnology.”

“Dr. Henry Shoo,” said Nick. “That’s the guy in the documentary who talks about using little robots to attack cancer cells.”

“That’s him. The scientist you told me about..” Shelly smiled and a kissed him on the cheek.

Sal pushed his cheek in her direction. She looked at Nick, then Sal. “What?” said Sal. “I’ve taught him everything he knows.”

CHAPTER 16

The 2007 holiday season came and went without the present they were all hoping for. Reporters, struggling to keep the story alive, searched far and wide for institutions, universities, and pharmaceutical companies that were working on serums that might just be the worth three billion dollars. After weeks had turned into a few months without a prize claimant, life in Atlanta returned to a relatively normal pace as winter slowly gave way to spring.

On a crisp, sunny March morning, Shelly answered her phone to find Dr. Barry Hayes from the University of Florida on the line.

"Hi, Barry," she said happily. "Nice to talk to you instead of email."

"Hi, Shelly. You, too. Hey, I have a request. I had this guest speaker for next month's Gator Mixer cancel on me, and I thought you might want to come back to the old Gator Nation and speak to the young medical minds of tomorrow."

"I thought we were the young minds of tomorrow?" she teased.

"Yeah, well, these are the latest ones. So, what do you say? They'd be thrilled to meet you if you could squeeze it in."

Shelly thought for a moment. "Would you mind if I brought Nick along?"

"Not at all! I'd love to meet Nick in person."

"Great! Tell me the date, let me check my schedule, and I'll let you know by the end of the day," she said. "By the way, have you

been looking at Dr. Shoo's questions and comments on the foundation website?"

"I have," he said, "but that's really out of my league. This guy is working like a dog on this, but the funny thing is, he really doesn't want the money."

"No?"

"Turns out his mom just died from pancreatic cancer, so it's personal."

"Sounds like Nick."

"Okay, Shel, gotta run. Let me know your answer as soon as possible. Talk to you soon."

"Love ya! Mean it!" they said in unison, a phrase they used as students. It was one of the few times she ever got to use that expression with a man. Shelly hung up the phone, grabbed her files, and was off on her rounds, a bit giddy at the thought of going back to UF, seeing Barry, and reliving some of the memories. And sharing those with Nick. That would be special.

Dr. Henry Shoo was staring at his computer as a colleague looked over his shoulder.

"So that's what the SRCK looks like?"

"Yep, and after ten years, it can finally be tested."

"I just need to start on the FDA approval process with legal," Roger Till said, staring at the handiwork of SRCK, the Surgical Robotic Cancer Killer. "And you know how difficult that is. Probably will take about five years. Hopefully by then we'll get it into human testing."

"Sadly," his colleague said, "that's the next hurdle to jump through." He glanced over at the copy of the letter sent out by Drs. White and Wall concerning the three billion dollar promise that Dr. Shoo had taped to an uncluttered area of his desk. "You think you got the big cash prize with this?"

"What we have here is a delivery system, not a cure," Shoo said. "But if they can find something, something that works, I am pretty sure I can target the cancer cell and attack it."

The colleague pointed at the computer screen. "I still have trouble believing that robot is so small, and I've been working here for years."

"Smaller than a human hair. There are days when I have trouble believing it myself."

Dr. Shoo reached for the phone and hit zero. "Legal, please."

Shelly and Nick arrived in Gainesville on a beautifully clear and sunny Friday. On Saturday, the annual Blue-Orange spring football game would fill the stadium with avid fans hoping this year's squad could bring home another National Championship like the team back in 1996. As they drove by Florida Field on the University campus, television trucks were already setting up.

"Look! There! The Zone," Shelly said. The Zone was a nickname for the Gator Football stadium.

Nick slowed and pulled into a rare open parking spot.

"Why is it called The Zone?" Nick asked as they got out of the car.

"Like 'be in the zone.' To be focused on winning. It's a sports thing."

"Well, then, I'm glad I was able to stop in time," Nick said. She watched him roll his eyes.

They walked toward Barry's office in Newel Hall, a 1909 brick building that also housed Barry's medical lab and classroom. Shelly stopped them at the entrance, turned to Nick, rose on her toes, and wrapped her arms around his neck, then kissed him full on the lips.

"Like the Zone now?"

"I do. A lot."

They entered the building through a twenty-foot-high glass-inlaid door. The sounds of students echoed through the halls. Shelly knocked softly on a half-open wooden classroom door.

A second later it swung open. "Dr. Shelly White!" Dr. Barry Hayes exclaimed. He wrapped his arms around her in giant bear hug. "I miss you, girl!" He stepped back. "Look at you! You look stunning."

Nick waited his turn to be introduced formally.

Barry turned his attention to him. "So this must be the man who stole your heart." He extended a hand to Nick, then reeled him in for his own bear hug. "You, sir, are a god in the College of Communication."

"I'm what?" He pulled out of Barry's grip.

"That last minute press conference you held at St. Theresa's is legendary. It usually takes time to put on something like that, but you made it look natural. You have a few fans here, Mr. Harris."

Shelly seldom saw Nick blush, but it seemed as if Barry had struck a chord. She was the reason they were here, the famed graduate, the miracle child. But she loved the fact Barry was dotting on him.

"Please, call me Nick," he said to Barry. "And I'm just tagging along for the ride."

"Okay, Nick." Barry nodded.

Shelly pointed to an empty chair in the first row and Nick made use of it.

"Dr. White, are you ready to talk to tomorrow's young medical minds?"

She smiled, nodded, and stood with hands clasped behind her back.

"Okay, class, take your seats," he said to the contingent of one hundred twenty-five students in the theater-style lecture hall. "I have the pleasure of introducing to you a dear friend, a fellow Gator, and a walking medical miracle, Dr. Shelly White."

She grabbed the microphone and easily filled the hour talking about her life at UF, beating cancer, and what it was like on the front lines as a physician. She spent the last fifteen minutes talking about the Kristen Foundation Project.

"As I close, I would like to introduce this man on my left, Nick Harris. He and his father are the reason the challenge exists. At first I thought they were dreamers." She looked at Nick and, giving him a playful smile, said, "And then I found out they were just passionate. Nuts about finding the cure for cancer, like all of you here in this room. Like all of you, my passion is to heal. But what Nick did was send us in a different direction. The cure for cancer will be more than just a vaccine. It will be many minds working together with one goal. It will be one group having one answer and another having a similar, yet different, approach. It will be

educated physicians like Dr. Hayes here at UF working with people like you and other students around the world who ask, 'What if?' It will be technology merging together. It will not be just one person in the lab yelling 'Eureka!' It will be a combined effort.

"In my practice, I have found that the love of a son who has lost his mother, or a husband who has lost his wife, is a powerful force to be reckoned with. And it can do so much for others, for humanity. In our struggle to find a cure, we look to all of you because the answer to the problem of cancer is in tomorrow. And that's exactly where all of you are now. You are our hope. And my job and that of Dr. Hayes is to help make that discovery happen. So I want to thank you for listening and tell you I truly admire every one of you. If there is anything I can do to make you more successful, please don't hesitate to ask."

Barry walked to the front of the room as students began to applaud, then stand. She looked at Nick, who gave her a thumbs-up.

"Thank you, Dr. White," Dr. Hayes said, clapping along with his charges. "Now if you'll take your seats, I believe the good doctor will take any questions you have. And I believe Mr. Harris will also answer questions as well."

Half of the students' hands jutted into the air.

"Betty?" Dr. Hayes called on a petite brunette in the front row.

"Dr. White, I read an article about you in *News and World Report*, and I read about you beating cancer as a child. Can you tell me what it's really like to be a patient who has survived cancer? Emotions, everything?"

Shelly paused for a moment. She had been asked this question so many times in the past thirty-plus years, she needed to be sure she didn't sound matter-of-fact with her answer.

"To tell you the truth," she began, "I am just a very lucky person, and I had a doctor who was so extraordinarily dedicated to taking care of me at St. Theresa's. If you follow our Foundation, you'll see what a vital part Dr. Wall is to its successes. He is like a father to me. I consider myself very fortunate that I was able to beat cancer because, quite honestly, no one knows why it went away. I firmly believe it was the work of Dr. Wall—a passionate man who saved my life."

"But do you remember being scared?" she asked. "Did you know really what was going on? I only ask because very few people with your type of cancer could answer these questions. They would, uh, be dead."

Shelly had never really considered what Betty was saying. Her emotions, her feelings were important. Betty was right. Few people could relate such information. She remembered being scared at first, but she had some good memories of her four months as a patient at St. Theresa's. A lot of nice people took care of her while she was away from home. She was often the center of attention. The memory of Kristen death had hindered memories of the happy times from coming forward, but lately some had been pushing through.

"I'll have to document some of those feelings, Betty. You're right. But off the top of my head, scared at first, yes, but the staff and doctors really made my stay pleasant. And it's really hard to say whether I considered my own mortality at the time. I was old enough to know what was going on, but the finality of what could have happened, I'm not so sure."

"Doctor," said a tall, lanky young man whom Dr. Hayes had acknowledged in the back of the room, "my father is an MD in South Florida, and he says your Foundation is giving people false hope. How would you respond to that?"

Nick stood up when he heard the question. "I got this." Shelly gladly handed him the microphone.

"If I might, I would like to answer this young man's question." He paused. "Before I met this amazing woman here, I watched my mother die of breast cancer in the arms of my father. And as a young boy, I watched my older brother, Chucky, pass away at the age of ten from another cancer. Leukemia. In both cases, at the end of their lives, doctors said the same thing: There's nothing more we can do. The word 'hope' is never around. For those of you who have never seen someone die from cancer, well, it's an ugly part of our lives. As fate would have it, I was fortunate to meet this woman they call the miracle child. From the moment I did, my life changed. She, along with Dr. Wall, beat cancer at its game every day. She provides hope, strength, and love to more human beings than I have time to talk about. The goal of the Kristen Foundation Project is to do something extraordinary, to save more lives. Can you

imagine being part of something like that? The cure for cancer? Now, I'm sure your dad is an excellent physician and he is entitled to his opinion, but this woman right here in front of you today, along with your own Dr. Hayes, myself, and people throughout the world hope to make it happen.

"False hope? That's not our intention. We're trying to find a way to offer *real* hope. This project won't be effective if people don't try. We want to encourage those who are trying. We've seen enough innovative ideas to think there's room for hope. Wouldn't you like to be a part of that?"

The biggest question is—and the biggest question to ask your father is—will you be part of it? I ask that because most of the people in this room will be."

The room went quiet. The student slowly sat down. Nick had done his job. A little political style in his rhetoric, Shelly thought, but she knew he had learned from the master, the Commander in Chief.

As Nick, Shelly, and Barry exited the building, a young woman approached Dr. Hayes.

"I'm bummed I missed Dr. White."

"Well, here she is. Dr. White, this is Ann Rogers."

"Pleased to meet you, Ann."

"And this is Nick Harris."

"Nice to meet you," he said as he extended his hand.

"I've been following the project with Dr. Hayes, and it is a real honor to meet you both. I would have been here, but I had to get my shots." Her voice trailed off as she finished her sentence.

"Shots?" Shelly inquired.

"Ann here has advanced rheumatoid arthritis," Barry explained. "She needs her shots no matter what the schedule is. But we work with her." He smiled.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Shelly said. "We were just on our way to get some dinner. Why don't you join us, and we can fill you in on what you missed?"

"Really? I would love to!"

"Of course," Nick piped in. "My treat."

They walked the brick path to the sidewalk along University Boulevard.

"You choose the place," Nick said, "I'll drive."

They took the short drive east on University to The Swamp, a sports bar and restaurant located across from and sharing the nickname of the Gator's football stadium.

"So, how long have you had RA?" Shelly asked Ann as they found a table by the window.

"Since the eighth grade. I live with it. Didn't really bother me much for a while. I was a cheerleader in high school, but when I got to be a senior, the pain was too much. That's when I started getting the shots. But can we talk about the Kristen project?"

"Of course!" said Shelly as she scooted forward. "What would you like to know?"

"I have been working with Dr. Hayes on the review side, and I know a lot of groups are involved in finding a cure, but it seems kind of slow in its progress. Sort of like no one is really talking to each other the way they were at the beginning."

"I would agree," said Shelly.

"So do you think the idea may be losing steam? It started with such a bang, but now it's just talked about by people like us," she said. "Have you found anything that's promising so far?"

Shelly looked at Nick and then to Barry, who told her with his eyes it was okay to let Ann know what was going on as best she could.

"Well, there are a few things we see that are promising," Shelly began. "A doctor in Salt Lake City has micro-robots—based on nanotechnology—that can float in the bloodstream. That's exciting."

"How does that help in curing cancer?"

"It's a direct delivery system. So when we find a way to kill cancer, it can be carried right to the site of the tumor. And once it's approved by the FDA, it could be extraordinary."

"That takes about five years, though, doesn't it?" Ann asked Barry.

"Five years?" Nick asked, putting down his iced tea. "Are you kidding me?"

"No, she's right," said Shelly. "It takes the FDA about five years to approve a drug for human testing. To lessen the time frame, you

need to be a big pharmaceutical mogul. That's who sits on the FDA for the most part, and they tend to take care of their own."

"You mean to tell me if we find a vaccine that stops cancer dead in its tracks, it's going to take five years to test it on humans?"

"Could be. They have to be sure the treatment works and doesn't harm patients. I'm a little surprised you didn't know that."

"I don't know everything, Shel, just almost everything."

She chuckled. "Let's not worry about that right now." Shelly patted Nick's arm. She didn't want her main cheerleader to get disenchanted.

"If I could mention something," said Barry, who had been quietly listening and sipping on his glass of Chardonnay.

"By all means," Shelly said.

"I got a unique email the other day that asked some strange questions about you, Dr. White."

"Oh?"

"It was from a public library in Baltimore," Barry continued. "This person wanted to know how you were doing and acted like they knew you when you were a patient at St. Theresa's. Or just knew you. It was simply signed S.S."

"Huh?" said Shelly.

"And they seemed to know Dr. Wall. Called him Dr. G."

"Dr. G.?" asked Shelly. "As in Gregory? Gregory Wall?"

"That's my assumption. I'm assuming he saw your press conference and saw Dr. Wall. That's just an assumption. Anyway, I thought about sending a response asking who the sender was, but the email had a tag saying that email could not be sent to that address. Really weird, even a little spooky."

"Maybe he's just a fan," said Nick.

"Or a stalker!" said Ann.

"I think I'll go with Annie here," Shelly said.

"S.S.," repeated Nick. "Sounds like a Nazi."

"Very funny," Shelly said as the waitress placed plates of hot food on the table.

"Here, try this," said Barry.

"What is it?" Nick asked.

"Gator tail," he responded. "Tastes like chicken."

Shelly strolled into the hospital Monday morning ready to get back to her kids. The Gainesville trip was a wonderful weekend away from the rigors of life in Atlanta. She had forgotten how alive a college campus could feel, and had been blown away by the electricity in the air inside the football stadium during the game. It invigorated her. She looked up and spied Dr. Wall down the hall.

"Doctor," she called out.

"Dr. White, fresh from The Swamp, are you? You look, rested."

"Yes, I am." She felt her face flush. "So, how are things going around here?"

"Mary is holding her own and stable. Just barely, though. Six kids tried to make a run for it during movie night and Doris is trying to sell Girl Scout cookies for her granddaughter to anybody who is breathing."

"So, the zoo is functioning at full capacity."

He nodded. "How was the trip?" he asked as they walked side by side toward the doctors' lounge.

"It was great to see Barry and speak to the class. Nick even got to field a few questions. We went to dinner with a student who's helping Barry on the challenge. Very bright. And we watched the football game the next day—took in the sites. We had a fun and relaxing weekend. I should get away more often." There was a pause as she formed the question she had been dying to ask. "Barry did mention a strange email he received. It was about me and someone I think is you."

"Oh?" asked Wall.

"They knew about me being here in 1972 and asked about a Dr. G."

Dr. Wall stopped in his tracks. Shelly knew all about that concerned look emanating from his brow. It usually meant trouble.

"What are you talking about?"

"Did people used to call you Dr. G. here?" she pressed.

"Where is this message?"

"Barry has it. I guess I can have him send it over. Why?"

"Shelly, when I was in the Navy, there were programs I worked on that I can't talk about."

"But that was years ago."

"Look, I really don't have time to get into this right now. Can you get Barry to forward that message?"

"Sure, but you can't reply to it. Barry traced it to a public library in Baltimore. It was just signed S.S."

"S.S.?" He looked like he had just seen a ghost.

"Yes, S.S.," she responded. "That's all Barry said. Is there something I should know? You're starting to worry me here."

"Nothing to concern yourself with. It's military stuff. Just get me the note from Barry. And now if you'll excuse me, I have little people waiting for me."

As he walked back in the direction of the nurses' station, Shelly could read his body language. He looked troubled.

Doris called out, "Thin Mints for sale!" Dr. Wall barely even acknowledged her presence.

That afternoon, Shelly entered the office suite and found Doc Wall staring at his computer screen.

"Did you get the message that Barry sent?"

"Yes, I did," he answered without looking up. "And I do have a concern, so sit down."

Shelly sat on one of the two leather chairs in front of his desk, eager to know what was going on.

Dr. Wall got up from his chair and walked to the window, staring out at the city.

"Okay, what's going on?" she asked.

"I really can't get into it, but I have never lied to you. You know that, right?"

"You lied to me about Chucky," she responded. He refused to look at her.

"Okay, sorry," she continued. "But now you are really scaring me. What's going on?"

He turned. "This cannot leave this room. Got it?"

"I promise." She made a sign of the cross.

He turned back to his gaze out the window.

"When you were in high school or college, what did you learn about the Nazis?" he asked.

Shelly looked at him, puzzled. "The Nazis? Uh, they were the bad guys in World War II?"

"By the end of the war, you bet. But before the war started, Germany was known for having some of the brightest minds in medicine. Their research was so advanced they really believed that they could build a master race. The Nazis were the ones who first really looked at cancer. All types of cancer. They're the ones who figured out that smoking was killing people. In fact, when Hitler found out about it, he ordered smoking banned by the German people. Then the military. Could you imagine telling a whole army they couldn't smoke back in those days?"

Shelly shrugged her shoulders. "So, what's this have to do with you, Doc?"

He made his way back to his desk and sat. Shelly looked at him as he let out a big sigh.

"When I was in the Navy," he began, "I met a German doctor-chemist who happened to be working on a top secret bio-project for the Allies. Turns out he was fascinated with clowns. And when he found out I dabbled in the clown world, we became fast friends. I showed him how to do makeup, balloon animals, tricks, clown stuff. One night we were at a pub off base, and after a few beers, he started telling me his family was involved with the Nazis. He detested them. He cared about science. So he went to work, gathering up all the information and the medical documentation the Nazis had put together that he could get his hands on. One of the things they were really good at was documentation. They were killing people, but they were experimenting on them first. The tests were ghastly. They were trying to build the perfect race, so they were trying to stop cancer as part of that process. They had all these books and codes. They were killing so many people in the process. One of the conscripted doctors was his uncle. The man was forced to work with the Nazis. I don't know he did for them but it didn't last. Apparently he was uncooperative and they sent him to one of the camps and died there."

He stopped for a moment and raised his water glass to his lips. Shelly sat silently, eyes wide and waiting with bated breath.

"So he tells me they had found a book full of these mathematical equations and codes all pertaining to cancer research, and he, along with a dozen or so medical experts, was trying to decode it. When

I asked him if there were any breakthroughs, he just smiled and said not all Germans were Nazis, some were sentinels of God. And that was about it."

"He never told you what he found?"

"No, but we remained friends, and when I told him I had gotten this job, he was so excited and promised he would visit me." He hesitated for a moment like he had something to hide.

"Well, did he?" she asked.

"He came here, and we walked the halls. I told him about my patients and that there was one in particular I was concerned about. I was afraid I couldn't save her. I had tried everything and I was losing the battle. He smiled at me and patted the bag he was carrying."

He must be talking about Kristen, the patient he always referred to as the one he could not save.

"So I went on my rounds," he continued, "and he asked if he could visit with some of the patients. Then that night, we had dinner, and that was it. He disappeared."

"You never saw him again?"

"No. I tried to find him, but in those days there was no internet. I wrote letters, made phone calls. Nothing."

"You weren't able to save that patient, were you?"

"Oh, no. I saved her. I don't know how. But I did." He paused. "It was you."

Shelly sat frozen in front of Dr. Wall, trying to piece together his story and its implications. He wasn't talking about Kristen at all. Now it began to sink in. Was he trying to say that this guy may have had something to do with her remission?

"Now, I can't prove anything, Shel, but the week before, I took you to x-ray, and you still had a mass in your chest that was huge. The day after his visit, it was gone. I couldn't explain it, but I had a feeling he had something to do with it. But without proof, I decided to keep my mouth shut."

She sat speechless – he kept talking.

"I guess teaching him to be a clown allowed him to hide from his family he despised so much. He liked making children laugh. When he found out what his uncle had done, he wanted to prove that his family was better than that. The last thing he said to me

was, 'Good luck, my friend, and may your young patient's troubles disappear.'"

"My God!" she finally blurted out. "So you think this may be the same guy?" She pointed to the computer screen.

"Might be," he said. "He's the only one who ever called me Dr. G. If it is, maybe he's trying to reach out to us."

"Who else knows about this?"

"No one but us, I guess. Besides the government. The project has never been declassified. It was coded S.S."

"What does this S.S. mean?" she asked.

"I don't know."

"So you're telling me there is a seventy-something-year-old man walking around somewhere with the formula to stop cancer."

"I can't prove that."

"I can't believe you've never said anything this whole time. We are sticking our necks out and working our asses off trying to make this search for a cure a success. All the work Nick has done, all this time wasted ..." She began to tear up, betrayed by the man to whom she had dedicated her life for saving it.

"I thought about telling you, but if I can't prove it, it's just a theory."

"We have to find this guy," she said.

"That's another thing." He furrowed his brow. "We can't."

"Why not?"

"According to the Feds, he died eight years ago in Amsterdam."

"Then how did he send a message to Barry?"

"You think the government always tells you the truth? So, if he is alive and watching what we're doing, he will find a way to get in touch with us. This message may be just a start."

"I don't believe this!" Shelly said, rubbing her temples and rising from her chair. "There is someone out there who may have the cure for cancer and to top it off, he may look like a seventy-year-old clown. Is that about right?"

Wall nodded.

"Does this guy have a name?" she pressed.

"Hans. Hans Bextal."

"Do you think he sent the message because he wants the money?"

“Does it matter?” he asked.

Shelly sat back down, still holding her head. She wanted to cry. She wanted to scream, but that would only cause a scene. She needed to compose herself.

“Shelly, the most important thing in my life, today and always, has been you. Of all the things I have accomplished in my life, keeping you alive was my greatest accomplishment. You asked what was going on, and I told you. Whether Hans had something to do with it or not, my first miracle does not change. It’s still you.”

Shelly wanted to ask if he was just keeping this a secret so he wouldn’t lose face; if it came out, the miracle doctor would not be the miracle doctor after all. She thought better of disrespecting the man who had virtually raised her, miracle doctor or not. Instead, she stewed in silence.

“Another thing you need to remember,” he said. “There are a lot of people out there who make a lot of money treating cancer who would love to take Hans out of the game—or anyone with a potential cure—so we have to keep this among us. You, me, Nick, and Barry. Okay?”

She peered at him. “Anything else?”

“Oh, yeah,” he said with a smile. “Don’t tell Dottie I said you are the most important thing in my life. It might upset her.”

Shelly rolled her eyes and walked out into the hall. She stopped at the window to watch the children on the playground. Even knowing the treatments they were undergoing, she envied the simplicity of their lives.

Nick walked out of the sound stage as his cell phone rang. “Dr. White’s fan club. Big fan, here. How can I help you?”

“Hi, Nick, got a minute?”

“Sure, we just got done shooting the last scene for our latest UPS commercial.”

“Is it funny?”

“No. In fact, if I did my job right, it should make you cry.”

“Really? What’s it about?”

“Let’s just say it’s something I have always wanted to do, and I finally got a chance to put it on film. And it’s a surprise. So, how are you?”

“I had a very strange conversation with Doc Wall this afternoon, and I really don’t know what to do. I was wondering if you could meet me at the hospital when you get a chance.”

“Sure, whereabouts?”

“How about the playground in an hour? The children will all be in by then.”

Shelly sat on one of the playground swings, her back to the parking lot. Thoughts—some angry, some painful—bounced around in her mind.

“So, what’s up with our resident clown?”

Shelly turned to see Nick. She looked away quickly, hoping to conceal her tears.

“Shel, what’s wrong?” He wiped away a lone tear from her right cheek.

Shelly mustered the strength to tell Nick about her talk with Dr. Wall. She realized what hurt most was that she had considered herself a once-in-a-lifetime miracle and that her job—her mission, her *raison d’être*—was to prove it could happen again. She felt betrayed, yet fortunate, just not in the same way she did a couple hours ago.

“Now,” she said, “I find out there’s a guy named Hans who may be the key to all of it, and I have no idea whether he is dead or alive. Dr. Wall believes he went into hiding years ago in fear for his life.”

Nick sat on the edge of the slide next to the swing. She could tell he was upset that Dr. Wall hadn’t said something sooner, but instead, he consoled her. She’d had the script of her life rewritten in an instant.

“Look, I can check with some contacts in DC and at least see how legit this is. Maybe your world hasn’t been changed.”

“Where do you start?”

“Well, I have this guy who lives in this big, ol’ white house that still owes me favors, remember? Besides, I have a couple of old

friends in the military who may be able to help us out. If Hans is alive, I bet we can find him."

"You really think so?"

Nick cupped her face. "Shelly, if this guy had anything to do with you walking out of these four walls cancer-free in '72, he is your key."

"Key?"

"This is what I have been saying all along. It's taken our project to shake this guy out. He must be following what we're doing. If he contacted Barry from a library in Baltimore, that means he is stateside. So you need to write an open letter to this guy on the website. Tell him how it's going. You need to draw him out, but he must be cautious. Wall is right. If this guy does have the formula, there are a lot of companies that would love to keep him quiet."

"That's so sad, isn't it? You would think every human being on this planet would do anything to stop cancer, but if we find a cure, I guess they're out of business."

"There's no money in a cure." Nick looked at his watch. "Shel, I have to go meet Dad and Tanya for dinner."

"They still see each other? That's great."

"To you it's great; to me it's a scary thing."

"What on earth could be so scary about your dad and Tanya?"

"This morning he asked if I had any condoms."

"Thanks for the laugh." She smiled. "I needed that." She rose from her swing as Nick stood to leave and kissed him gently.

"Anytime."

As they embraced, she looked up at the wing of the hospital. "Looks like we have little eyes upon us," she said. Nick looked up and waved.

"You know, if we find this guy, those little eyes may not be there anymore."

"Yeah," she said, nestled into his body, "but I hope you will be."

"That, I can guarantee," he said. She kissed him again as the sun set further into the western sky.

Following dinner, Nick returned home with his dad after stopping at Tanya's for a nightcap. Sal said goodnight, heading

upstairs, and Nick went to the den to relax. The conversation with Shelly had his mind racing for a way to check out the story of Hans. Who was he, and could he really have the information that led to Shelly's miracle?

He walked to his bookcase, retrieved a small, worn book and leafed through the pages. He picked up the phone and dialed the number.

"Colonel Taylor?" Nick asked, sitting back in his chair.

"This is Taylor. Who the hell is this?"

"Colonel, it's Nick Harris." There was silence. "How are you, sir?"

"My God, it's the only guy on the damn White House advance team that I ever liked. How the hell are you, my boy?"

"Very well, sir. I hear you're about to retire. Is that true?"

"Well, in the military you're a hero until you are sixty-five, then you're in the way, so next month I'm out. Moving to Florida. Might run a small charter fishing boat. Who knows? As long as I don't have to deal with the White House staff." He paused. "Hey, I saw you on TV, son. Great thing you're doing."

"That's why I'm calling. Seems like there may be someone out there with some vital intel that we need to get a hold of. But I have no idea where he might be or where to start looking."

"Cut the BS, son. Is it a project that would be of public knowledge?"

"Not at all. In fact, it has to do with decoding some old German Nazi data. Medical journals. I don't suppose, as military liaison to the president, you could ask if you could help us gather some intel, could you? I think you know me well enough that he would approve it."

"Nick, let's save some time. What or who are we looking for?"

Nick gave the colonel all the information he had. "My concern, Colonel, is if this guy really has something, his life may be in danger. There are a few companies out there who would want to shut him up."

"Son, if what you tell me is correct, I'd be surprised if he's still alive."

"I know, sir."

"Tell you what, I'll see the president tomorrow morning after briefing and get his blessing. Give me a day or so, and I'll let you

know what I find out. By the way, I had heard about your mom. I'll bet she would be proud of what you're doing."

"Thanks, Colonel. By the way, I miss our poker games on the press plane."

He laughed. "We stopped doing that. Goddamn press never pays up!"

Nick smiled. He loved this guy's cadence. "Thanks again, sir, for your help."

"If he's out there, Harris, we'll find him."

CHAPTER 17

Rounds were over for the day and Mary was resting comfortably, but still in guarded condition. Shelly stretched her arms upward as she sat at her desk. She looked at the clock. Seven p.m. She returned to the keyboard and the letter Nick had suggested.

“Hello,” she began, “to all of our participants in the Kristen Foundation Project. As of this date, there are more than one hundred universities and close to five hundred private corporations and organizations working to find the holy grail of medicine. As you know, it was Mr. Salvatore Harris in Atlanta, Georgia, who started this whole process by asking ‘What if?’ Today, three billion dollars still await the team, group, or individual who does one thing: finds a way to stop cancer.

“I am very blessed to have Dr. Henry Shoo on our advisory team. For those who are not familiar with his work, he has now completed his patent and is working with the FDA for the testing of his cancer-killing delivery system. When we find a cure, his nanorobots will be able to deliver treatment straight to the cancer cells or tumor. This extraordinary feat will make recovery from treatment days, not weeks. For those of you who have watched the journey from the sidelines, I’d like to say, we know you’re there. Many of you just want to know what you can do to help. Your thoughts and prayers are always welcome. To those who have been in my shoes, as a doctor, know that for every patient you have

treated, there is comfort. And for those you have cured, there is a deep appreciation.

"I work at the most extraordinary place in the world and my goal is the same as the founders' was in 1972: to shut cancer down. I am one of the fortunate ones. But together, if my miracle is shared by others, we can do the impossible. Here's to believing that wherever that answer lies, it will find us. The words of a giving and caring German researcher sum up our hopes: 'may my young patients' troubles disappear.'"

She stopped and leaned back, reading over what she had written. She smiled, shrugged her shoulders, and hit send. Then she remained sitting, staring at the screen, resting her chin on her propped hands. "Where are you, Mr. Bextal?" she whispered.

Not wanting to go home right away, she decided to grab some files and do a little more research on Mary's symptoms. She was determined to keep her alive and have her walk out of St. Theresa's on her own two feet.

Two hours later, the ringtone on her cell phone startled her. It was Barry.

"I just saw your little note. What was that all about?"

"Just a sec." Shelly slipped from Mary's room and into the corridor putting some distance between her and the door. "Nothing really. Just reminiscing with Doc Wall today, and I wanted everyone to know I still hope for another miracle for my kids."

"Well, Shel, a lot of people are trying and Dr. Shoo's work is pretty damn cool. But you're okay, right?"

"I'm fine, Barry." She changed the subject. "So, how's Ann doing?"

"You know, if I ever have to deal with RA, I hope I have half the pep that child does," Barry said. "And Nick?"

"Nick's great. Having dinner with his dad and his dad's forty-five-year-old girlfriend tonight."

"He's how old?"

"In his seventies."

"Wow," Barry said. "Now if she has a brother, tell her to call me."

"I'll look into it." She laughed. "Wait, where is your man tonight? Flying around the globe?"

"Believe it or not, he just finished up a UPS commercial."

"Really? So did Nick ..."

"Yeah, he had this flight they were featuring and hasn't told me much about it. Tells me it's a surprise."

"Well, tell Dennis I said hi."

"Will do." He paused. "And you sure you're okay?"

"I'm good, Barry. It's just a patient, a little girl, who isn't doing so well right now." She sighed. "Her mom sold the meds we gave her last year, so it's been horrible. Mom's in jail, Mary is a ward of the court."

"My God," he said. "Who's watching her?"

"We all are."

"Who's we?"

"Me, the hospital staff, Nick, Nick's dad, Sal ... it takes a village sometimes, Barry. Sal has taken such a liking to her. He calls her his grandchild."

"In good hands. Well, gotta run. Love you."

"Love you, too."

Shelly returned to Mary's room and looked down at her sleeping patient. Mary looked so innocent, so angelic. Shelly extended her hand and held Mary's fingers. A night nurse walking by the room stopped for a moment to ask if she needed anything.

"I need her better, but other than that ... thanks anyway." Shelly nodded.

"Get some rest, Doctor. I can keep her company tonight."

"I will. I'm just going to stay a little while longer. She may wake up soon. I want to be here."

Shelly knew that unless something drastic changed, Mary would be leaving her. Watching Kristen go must have been just as hard for Dr. Wall, she thought. And now, she was experiencing that feeling. So many other children had come and gone over the years, but this was the first time chills spread through her body so intensely. *Sometimes it gets so personal. That feeling of hopelessness, that feeling of pain, that feeling of doom.*

The next morning, Nick called Shelly to tell her he had seen her post. She told him that Barry had called and asked what it was all about, but she had kept quiet.

"I just hope it draws this guy out," she said. "Anything on the background of Hans yet?"

"No, but give me a few days," he said. "What's on the agenda today?"

"Today is the grand opening of sorts in one of our labs for new simulator models."

"Simulator models?"

"They allow you to plug in different types of cancers and different kinds of drugs and other treatments and tell you whether they will work together or not. Pretty impressive, really. And very expensive. We've been trying to buy one of these for years to save time. Dr. Shoo has one. Now we're finally getting ours. Today is the big day."

"Sounds cool."

"Before I go, I need to ask you something. Barry says his Dennis was in a UPS commercial yesterday. Coincidence, Mr. Harris?"

"Perhaps, perhaps not. But as I said, it's a surprise. If I tell you, the effect will be lost. You'll have to wait."

"You're no fun."

"I beg to differ," he said. "Right now I gotta go meet Jerry, but I'll be by at six thirty to sit with Mary. See you then?"

"No."

"No? Just because I won't tell you about my commercial?"

"I have to meet with a case worker about Mary. Supposed to be just a routine check on her condition. We'll see. Gotta go—talk to you later."

Dr. Wall walked into her office, pointing at his watch.

"We're late, Dr. White. Let's go. We need to review the models before they show them to the public."

"Oh, boy—new toys!" she joked, trying to get a smile on his stern face.

As they walked to the lab, Shelly realized Dr. Wall must have read her post. He was pretty adamant about protecting his friend, but from her side of the coin, she was driven to save her children, especially Mary. He told her it sounded like she was trying to draw someone out.

"I'm trying to do what the one man I owe everything in my life to wants me to do."

"Is that so?"

"Doc, if he's out there, we've got to find him," she said as they approached the double glass doors. "And I'll bet he's not dressed like a clown."

"We don't even know if this is the same man," he said.

"There is a hospital full of sick kids who need him to be," she said. "Now, come on, act as if you want to be here. Smile!"

"You know how I hate computers."

"Quiet, and pretend you're enjoying yourself."

Nick was sitting at his desk reviewing UPS graphic files when Bella called.

"Nick, there's a Colonel Taylor on line six for you."

Nick stood up and closed his door, thanking Bella as he turned the knob completely until it clicked, then returned to his chair. He pressed the flashing white light on the phone.

"Hello, Colonel. So what'd you find out?"

"Son, you really have no idea who this guy is, do you?"

"Well, sir, I was hoping you could tell me."

"Hell, I had to go to NSA to get this. And I can't even give you this over the phone."

"So how am I supposed to get it?"

"Lucky for you, I am on my way to Central Command in Tampa tomorrow, with a stopover in Georgia. I'll be at Robins Air Force Base at 1100 hours. Can you make it? It's a couple hours south of you."

"I'll be there."

"You still got your ID, or do I have to call you in?"

"I still have my White House press pass," Nick answered.

"Oh, hell," the colonel said. "I'll call you in. You're liable to get shot with a press pass on that base. And don't be late, son. I have to get to Tampa to close on my house by 1400 hours."

The next morning, Nick stood on the tarmac of Robins Air Force Base. He wore an Eddie Bauer jacket to fend off the biting wind that had descended on the city the night before. A white, unmarked

Gulfstream V, one of the most sophisticated planes in the world, taxied toward him. As the engines shut down, the cabin door opened and out stepped Colonel Taylor in a full dress US Air Force uniform. At almost sixty-five years old, he was still a strapping display of military might.

Nick walked to him, offering his hand. "Damn, you sure know how to make an entrance."

"The president said I could take one of his jets out to close on my house." He smiled.

"Not bad," Nick responded.

Inside the hanger office, Nick listened intently to the colonel as he described Hans, a German scientist who was the only one known alive who could decode the old Nazi medical formulas. The colonel reached into his valise to retrieve a piece of paper.

"Like I said, this shit is so classified I had to go through NSA to get the full story. They informed me that you were right. Turns out this guy has some sort of formula that makes cancer disappear, or something like that. NSA also agrees that this guy's life is expendable to a few very large U.S. companies, here and abroad."

"I would think he's aware of that," said Nick.

"Oh, he knows," the colonel said, pointing to the paper. "Here is a list of the other eleven guys who were on his team. All dead. None natural. No heart attacks, stroke, cancer – all accidents."

"Sounds like he's a marked man."

"Look, son, I understand what you're trying to do, but if you somehow talk to this guy, protect yourself. If he gives you any information like you think he has, they'll take you out and anyone else they think you've told about it as well. A few years back his brother was killed in Amsterdam. An accident too, of course. His car was run over by a cement truck. Never found the driver. Gives you an idea of the kind of people we are dealing with. So you need to protect yourself. Got that?"

"Yes, sir," he responded.

"Oh, and the president never heard you ask about this, and I was never here."

Nick nodded. "One last thing, Colonel. Why would Hans still be in the United States? And how is he still alive?"

"NSA pulled his passport about twenty years ago. He can't leave. Surveillance still has him in the Baltimore area. We know he's

about seventy-five years old, smokes, drinks, and has had a tough life. Probably not much time left." He paused and looked back at the piece of paper.

"One more thing. This guy for some reason is into clowns. There are comments in the file that he's some sort of makeup artist. If there is any truth to that, he could be able to disguise himself to look like anybody. Hell, even a clown. What people do for a hobby, huh?" He laughed. "At my age, my hobby is not dying 'til I'm ninety."

"If we find what we're looking for, Colonel," said Nick, "that just might happen."

"My wife would love that." He smirked as he turned to walk back to the tarmac. "Oh, POTUS says if you need anything, give him a call. Now, if you'll excuse me, the president's plane is waiting to take me to Tampa to buy my house." He gave Nick a salute. "God, I love this country."

Nick watched as the colonel's Gulfstream taxied, then soared into the bright blue Georgia sky. He missed the excitement of hanging around the brass.

A knock on Shelly's office door vibrated the wood as she sat hunched over examining Mary's latest test results. The sun had gone down hours before.

"Anyone home?" Nick said as he entered. He looked over at an empty desk. "Wall's gone?"

"If it's after six, Wall has left the building." She smiled.

Nick fluttered some papers before her eyes, diverting her attention from the computer data on her desk.

"I have the report."

"What report?" she asked, rising slightly to give him a kiss.

"The Hans report I promised you."

She sat up and looked into Nick's eyes, searching for a clue to what news he might have on the recluse.

"His name is Hans Bextal. We already knew that. And Wall was right. Not only is this guy German, a lot of his family were Nazis. The decoding project was top secret. Still is. A friend from DC gave me some info and most of it is still classified, but they could tell us

it was a medical project based on the info the Allied Forces confiscated from the concentration camps. Mr. Bextal was the leader of this group, and as far as they can tell, he's the last one alive."

"He's alive!" she softly shrieked, then sat back down. "But Dr. Wall said he died in Amsterdam eight years ago."

"And," Nick said, "it turns out that was his brother. Wall was also right about protecting Hans. Seems everyone on his team has died from some sort of accident. His brother died in a car versus cement truck mishap. He was the guy in the car. Whoever killed his brother might have thought it was him."

"How many on the team?" Shelly asked.

"Twelve. Not a heart attack, stroke, or cancer victim among them. If this guy is alive, his life is in danger. And I am sure he knows it. Has there been any response to the post?"

"Nothing," Shelly said, dropping her head.

"Well, I'm going to see Mary," he said, closing the manila folder. "How is she doing?"

"Today's a good day. Your dad brought homemade food and she ate some."

"That's great!"

"Doris ate the breadsticks and Wall had the meatballs."

"That's Dad for you, feeding the masses." Nick laughed.

"Oh," he said, waving the folder before he left, "if anyone asks, you don't know anything."

"Anything about what?" She grinned.

"That's my girl!"

Thursday evening, Shelly received a call from Jerry at the hospital. After a little bit of small talk about Bella, his voice tailed off. Shelly prodded. He started to tell her about the UPS project, but she got about as much information from him as she did from Nick. Must be some commercial, she thought. Then he started letting it all out. He talked about how the both of them had waited and finally found someone, and how happy he was that he had been able to introduce Nick to her.

"These last seven months are because of you, Jerry," she said. "I don't think I've ever thanked you personally. I think Nick may be my soul mate. So, what do you need, Jerry?"

"I'm thinking about asking Bella to marry me."

"That is so cool, Jer! You guys make a cute couple." She knew marriage was only a matter of time after they got their matching his-and-hers tattoos.

"I know, but I just wanted to make sure it's the right thing."

"Jerry, you are such a great guy. I can say without hesitation, you two will be great together."

"You really think so? You really think she'd say yes if I asked her?"

"She would be a fool not to."

"Thanks, Shel. I just really needed a woman's point of view."

Shelly hung up smiling. No sooner had she put down the phone than it rang again.

"Forget something, Jer?" There was a pause. She could hear breathing. "Jer?"

"Dr. White?" a man asked with an accent. "Dr. Shelly White?"

Shelly froze. She held the phone both lifelessly and with immense pressure at the same time. Her heart began to race. Her leg began to shake.

"Can I help you?" she mustered.

"I believe it is I who can help you, Dr. White."

She swallowed hard. She had not rehearsed this moment. She ached for this call but was not prepared for what to say. *What do I do? If his life is in danger, should I keep him on the phone? What if we get cut off?*

"Do you have something to write on?" he asked.

"Y-yes," she said, the word stumbling from her mouth, her hands frantically searching for the pen and paper that were right in front of her. "Um, yes, go ahead."

"I am going to give you a formula for you to take to that new lab that I read about in the paper. The one with the models, yes?"

"Yes," she answered, not sure if she was supposed to.

He started speaking, listing off numbers and calculations. Shelly wrote anxiously, trying to relax her heart rate and periodically wiping the sweat from her hands and the pen. The series of codes and mathematical equations took three pages of a yellow legal pad.

She was petrified she would miss something and now and again asked for confirmation on a number or letter she was afraid of misconstruing because of his accent. When he got to the last line, there was a pause. She heard the slosh of liquid and could tell he was taking a drink. Now was her chance to ask the question that burned inside of her.

"Were you here at St. Theresa's in 1972?" She sat in reverent expectation, almost as if she sat before God. She sighed when his voice answered affirmatively.

"I gave your Dr. G. a very special gift, something he told me he would do anything for."

"It was me, wasn't it?"

"Yes," he said. "Now you have what you seek."

"Tell me, are you safe? Is there any way we can help you?"

"Do not worry about me, my dear. It is you who must be careful. What you have in front of you will change the world. Guard it with your life. I just ask one thing."

"Name it."

"You tell Dr. G. I have given you a gift, a gift from the Silver Sparrow."

"S.S.," she said aloud. "Can I meet you someday?"

"From the moment I entered this country, people are determined to kill me because I carry this formula to make the world a better place. So I hide from those who make money off this terrible disease. Perhaps you can share this gift with the rest of the world. You ask me to meet you, and I say no, that would not be wise. I will watch from a distance. It is time for you to make your patients' troubles disappear, yes?"

"Yes," she answered, almost in tears as the phone went dead. She swallowed hard and looked down at her legal pad. She immediately called Dr. Shoo and left him an urgent message, then headed to the lab. Most of the lights were off or dimmed, except a brightly lit corner where a young tech was playing a handheld computer game.

"Hi, Doc," he said.

"Hi. Johnny, are there any simulator models running right now?"

"Sure, back in that corner." He pointed to the far left of the lab. "Need any help?"

"Not really. I just thought I'd try my hand at this high-tech stuff while I had a few minutes."

"Just holler if you need anything."

Shelly parked herself in front of the computerized simulator and looked around for a moment. The device was similar to those used by pharmaceutical research firms to test possible physical reactions of a patient exposed to a new drug. Nervously, she began loading the formula she had given by Hans, trying not to think of what she may be holding in her hands. The key. The cure. The answer. The Holy Grail.

Downstairs, a casually dressed Dr. Wall walked into his office to grab his clown shoes. As he was leaving, he ran into the night nurse.

"Here late tonight, Doctor?"

"Came back for my golf shoes," he joked as he held them out in front of him.

"I don't even want to know what your handicap is." She smiled.

"Thanks for not asking. All quiet tonight?"

"It is," she said. "Pretty quiet, except for Dr. White. Saw her heading upstairs in a hurry."

"Dr. White is still here?"

"Yes. She was heading to the new model lab. Quite impressive. Have you seen it?"

"Yes," he said, looking past her, "really something." He wished the night nurse a pleasant evening and made a beeline to the lab.

Startled, Johnny popped up from his video game, attempting to hide it behind his back.

"Hi, Doc! Nice shoes."

"Thanks," he mumbled. "Have you seen Dr. White?"

"She came in a short time ago and headed to the back. That's her. Unit number eight."

"Thanks, son. You can go back to your game." Wall briskly walked away.

Dr. Wall arrived just as Shelly had finished loading the formula into the computer that allowed the user to choose a cancer to see how the formula or calculation would respond. Shelly chose the cancer that killed more of her patients than any other: leukemia. The computer prompted her to agree to run the exercise. She hit the key without trepidation and the system began to whirl.

"What are you doing?" Wall asked, startling Shelly as she sat in mid-thought about the implications of this moment in time.

"Shhh!" She put her hand up to stop him from talking. She pointed to the modeling chamber, where a message flashed that a decision had been reached and the answer was about to appear. It had only taken forty-five seconds, and the monitor said it all:

NEUTRALIZED.

"Mother of God, Shelly," he said. "What am I looking at?"

"Well, it was leukemia." Tears rose in her eyes. She looked at Dr. Wall with more admiration than ever in her life. She felt almost spiritual; not religious, but as though she was floating on air, defying gravity. "He called."

"Hans?"

"Well, whoever it was spoke with a German accent and called you Dr. G."

"My God, he's alive."

"Oh, he's alive all right," she said. "Very much alive. And, yes, he did give us both a miracle back in '72."

Dr. Wall nodded; the mystery was finally solved. Shelly turned her attention back to the modeling simulator. Her out-of-body experience had subsided, and her chosen role of doctor went into high gear. "Where the hell is breast cancer on this thing?" she said, fumbling with the control panel. Wall looked at her and shrugged his shoulders.

"Here it is. Everything is loaded," she said as Dr. Wall looked on. "Okay, find the bad cell, and kill it!" she exclaimed and hit the button to launch the exercise.

They watched in amazement as the breast cancer cells were neutralized.

"Yes!" they both exclaimed, high-fiving and acting like a couple of kids.

"Everything okay back there?" yelled Johnny.

"Uh," answered Dr. Wall. "Just telling a few jokes."

“Kind of a strange place to tell jokes, don’t ya think?”

Dr. Wall quietly advised Shelly to erase everything from the simulator as he stalled Johnny, who was now walking back to check on them. She quickly cleaned up the data she had entered, grabbed her folders, and met up with Dr. Wall as they rushed past the tech and into the hallway.

Shelly and Dr. Wall had moved to the latter’s office and had Dr. Henry Shoo on the line. She painstakingly relayed the formula Hans had recited to her earlier. She hung up while he did in Salt Lake City what she had done a short time ago in her hospital. Seconds passed like hours. The phone finally rang.

“Hello?”

“It’s Shoo.”

“Have you run it?”

“Running it now.”

“What are you using as the cancer cell type?” she asked.

“Well since my mother died of pancreatic cancer, that’s what I’m keying on,” he said. “Here goes. Hang on the line.

“I don’t believe it,” she heard Dr. Shoo exclaim. He picked up the phone.

“It was neutralized, wasn’t it?” she asked.

“Y-yes,” he said softly.

“Run breast.”

“Yes, let’s run breast.” He reset the simulator. “My God, it’s a war.”

“What do you mean?”

“The formula,” he said. “It binds to the cancer cells and attacks. It’s like a war zone, but it is neutralizing them. It’s ... it’s astounding.”

Shelly giggled like a schoolgirl and looked over at a smiling Dr. Wall, who had been listening on her speaker phone.

“Dr. Shoo, Dr. Wall here. What makes that war even more amazing is that you own the tanks. If we can get this formula into one of your nano units, we could kill the cancer cells entirely. Is that possible? Can you load your units to do that?”

"Well, if we take our body and apply the laws of ohms, we would just have to find the right frequency of the tumor," he said.

"What does he mean by frequency?" Shelly whispered to Dr. Wall.

"Dr. Shoo, could you enlighten us on what you mean by frequency?" asked Dr. Wall.

"Greg, please call me Henry," he said. "Simple really. Every object on our planet has an electrical frequency that can be measured. Electrical frequency is measured by counting the number of occurrences of a repeating current flow per second. This unit is called Hertz. As a tumor attacks, it gets bigger and puts out more energy. Although it is negative energy, we can still find it. That's what is so great about nanotechnology. We can zero in on it. So, yes, I think if we can find the tumor's frequency, we could attack the virus. We would just send in a nano unit and the war would start."

"Dr. Sh—I mean Henry, have you ever seen anything like this before?" asked Dr. Wall.

"Greg," he said, "I have been doing this for thirty-three years, and I have never seen anything like this in my wildest dreams."

"Dr. Shoo," said Shelly. "Just a reminder. We need you to keep this under wraps and tell no one until further notice. We were told that if this is what we think it is, there are people who might want it to disappear."

"You and I are the only ones who know about this," Dr. Wall said. "We need to work together to stay safe. To protect each other.."

Shelly looked at Dr. Wall after they hung up.

"You know, Doc, we may have just found the cure to cancer," she said, noticing the clown shoes he had been holding were now prominently displayed on his desk. "And you have been carrying around clown shoes the whole time."

"I bet the kid in the lab thinks I'm off my rocker," he said, raising the shoes proudly in his left hand.

"He's close." She smiled.

CHAPTER 18

Early the next morning, Nick and Jerry walked down the long hall at AdWorks, greeting Bella as they continued to Nick's office and closed the door. Today was the day to debut the UPS commercial to the client.

"I hope you don't mind," said Jerry, "but I called Shelly last night and talked to her about relationships and stuff."

"Why Shelly?"

"I needed a woman's opinion."

"Are you thinking of marriage, my friend?" Nick booted up his computer.

"I just want to do the right thing, that's all."

"Jerry, you and Bella are going to be amazing together."

"You think so, too?"

"I know so," Nick said just before he was interrupted by Bella's voice on the intercom announcing the arrival of the UPS team. Nick rose, put on his jacket, and rested his hand on Jerry's shoulder. "I just better be your best man."

The boardroom was full of pertinent staff, UPS top brass, and, of course, Bongero. Bill Stein led his team into the room and sat in the seats as directed by Bella. Nick took his position in the front of the room. The window shades were drawn.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I want to thank you for allowing us to produce what I think is some of our finest work. That's because we got to work with some of the finest people in the industry. This commercial is not based on humor like those we have successfully

staged in the past. This is based on a true story of your people – Something that happened less than six months ago.” He paused, motioning to Bill and his team. “Flying your planes, and doing what you do best. We call it ‘Delivering Life.’”

Bella cut the lights as the screen lit up with the image of a Gulfstream V private aircraft adorned with UPS markings. As it flew, dark skies and lightning appeared in the distance.

The voiceover began:

“On October 17, 2007, UPS Captain Dennis Hoenston and co-pilot Susan Ingram were flying a high-priority package from Nashville, Tennessee, that needed to be delivered to Atlanta’s Hartsfield Airport. Time was in short supply and any delay could be devastating. As they drew near Atlanta airspace, air traffic controllers announced the closure of the runways due to an approaching storm, explaining it was too dangerous to land. Captain Hoenston pleaded his case. He needed to be on the ground to deliver his cargo immediately. As he’d flown for UPS for twenty-six years, his experience told him he must try. Finally, the tower gave him reluctant approval. While commercial aviation circled the airport, and aircraft controllers held their breath, the two UPS employees made a textbook landing and delivered their package.”

Captain Hoenston appeared, handing a small ice chest with the words *human heart* emblazoned on the side to a waiting EMT.

The announcer continued: “Why would two seasoned pilots risk a thirty-five million dollar aircraft and their own lives to deliver just one package?”

The scene switched to the two UPS pilots greeting a little girl in a hospital playroom. She was about eight years old and holding on to an IV cart. She extended first her hand holding the cart, and then the other, searching for a hug. Co-pilot Ingram bent down to accept the embrace. Hoenston stood smiling. Behind the little girl were her parents, two nurses and a doctor.

The announcer returned: “Because the thank you they would receive would be priceless.” The screen froze and the UPS logo appeared. “UPS. Shipping with a human touch.”

Bella hit the lights on cue. Nick immediately looked at Bill’s team. He saw one of them mouth “wow.”

Bill finally spoke up. “That is really something.”

“So, what do you think?” Nick asked the UPS team, looking for more than a guarded reaction. He spotted Bongero nervously shuffling his papers.

“Are you kidding?” Bill smile as he wiped a tear from his eye. “Nick, that was amazing. What a great job. And you used Dennis and Susan. Perfect.”

There was a sigh of relief from the entire AdWorks team. Months of work had all been worth it. Even Bongero was smiling. The UPS team stood and one by one shook Nick’s hand, then Jerry’s. Bongero, never missing a beat, got in line for his own undeserved kudos.

“We’ve never been portrayed like that before,” Bill said to Nick. “It’s extraordinary.”

Bella brushed up against Nick. “I hate to interrupt, but Dr. White is on the phone,” she whispered in his ear. “Says it’s really important.”

“Excuse me for one minute,” Nick said to his guests. He walked over to the phone on the wall of the conference room and pressed line six, where Bella had parked Shelly.

“Hi, there. Not really a good time, Shelly.”

“I know you’re busy, but I really need to talk to you about something.”

“Can it wait?” he asked as he waved to their clients. “I’m with the UPS team.”

“Nick, listen.” She paused. “We got something.”

“Got what?”

“The code. And we can’t get it to fail.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It kills cancer, Nick. All types of cancer. It’s the code that saved my life. I just got off the phone with Dr. Shoo. He wants us to get to Salt Lake.”

Nick said nothing.

“Nick?”

“I’m here.”

“I know this is probably freaking you out about now, but we need to keep calm, and not let on. Too much is at stake.”

“I understand. Let me call you back. When do you want to leave?”

“Immediately.”

"Okay."

"Should I book us tickets?"

"No, I'll take care of that," said Nick. "Just be ready to go within the next couple of hours. Love you. Gotta run."

Nick hung up and turned around. Bill was standing just a few feet away. "So you like what you saw?"

"Fantastic, Nick. Right down to the storyboards. Great work."

"Thanks. The storyboards are the extraordinary work of my friend, Jerry, who always makes me look good." He nodded to Jerry and saw Bongero, swimming in his own guile, grinning from ear to ear.

"Bill, you know Jerry and I are involved in the Kristen Foundation Project, right?"

"Three billion dollars for a cure for cancer? I think we heard about that." He laughed.

"I just got off the phone with Dr. White, and we need to get to Utah. You wouldn't happen to have a flight going to Salt Lake City today?"

"When do you want to leave?" Bill reached into his pocket and retrieved his cell phone.

"Well, I need to ask my boss if I can take a few days off first," he said, looking at Bongero, who was now standing next to Bill.

"You bet, Nick. Take all the time you need," he said. "Like I always say, there is nothing more important than St. Theresa's and the kids." Jerry stared at Bongero as if he were an alien.

"See what a great boss I have?" Nick smiled. "Can I depart in about two hours?"

"Absolutely. I'll get you the same plane you just filmed. How's that?"

"That would be great. And while I'm away, Jerry will take care of the package for television and the rest of the ad buys. Again, Bill, we appreciate you trusting us on this piece."

"Hey, Nick," Bill whispered as he was leaving, "you find a cure, I'll have it around the world in twenty-four hours."

"You're UPS," Nick said. "You'd do it in twenty."

Bill looked at his team as they filed out of the conference room. "Yeah, we could do that."

Nick walked to the UPS Executive Air Support Center. He saw Shelly pull up in her classic VW and pop the hood to retrieve her luggage. Nick to helped with her suitcases and overnight bag.

"Most people have the trunk in the back," he said, lifting them out.

"Yeah, well, I like to be different." She grabbed a quick kiss.

"Okay, so what's the deal?" They walked through the terminal. "What exactly is going on?"

"He called last night around nine," she said.

"Who's he?"

"Hans. Caught me so off guard. I thought it was Jerry calling me back. Sorry I'm just telling you now, but it all happened so fast." She stopped and shook her head in amazement. "Then he tells me to copy down this long code. Turns out to be a formula that neutralizes every cancer we've simulated."

"My God. You already tested it?"

"We have that new model simulator," she said. "I went in, loaded the information, and it attacked the cancer cells. It hunts them down and destroys them. Dr. Shoo tried it, too. He compared it to a war."

As they walked to their gate, they were greeted by Captain Dennis Hoenston, Barry's longtime partner and soon-to-be TV star.

"Dennis?" Shelly said as she reached out for a hug.

"Hi, Shelly!"

"I can't get enough of you today!" joked Nick, extending his hand.

"Hey, Nick. I hear I look good on TV. Is that true?"

"What are you two talking about?" asked Shelly as they walked out on the tarmac.

"Well," said Nick, "while you were finding the cure for cancer, I was making Dennis a star in a new UPS commercial."

"So that was your big secret?"

Nick smiled and put his arm around Shelly, hugging her close. "The ad is done. Dennis is on TV. They loved it, and we can get paid."

"C'mon you two, this way." Dennis motioned. "Your plane is waiting."

Shelly stopped as they were about to board the Gulfstream.

"Um, I really don't like small planes," she said.

"It's okay, darling, this is not a small plane. It's a race car with wings," said Nick.

"Nicely put, my friend," Dennis said.

"This is the finest aircraft ever built." Nick put his hand on her shoulder. "I promise. Have I lied to you yet?"

"No. I don't think so." She shuffled her feet up the sandpaper-coated metal stairs.

Above the clouds, the plane handled as Nick described. The flight was as fast and smooth as driving a sports car. Nick sipped a scotch and soda and put his feet up on the ottoman in front of his seat.

"Was there a caller ID on your phone when Hans called?"

"Yes, I wrote it down. The area code was 703—he called from Virginia."

"Maybe we can track him down."

"I doubt it," said Shelly. She sat back, feeling more relaxed now that the first hour of the trip was behind them. "Probably a public phone."

"Well, if we find him, you'll have to hold me back because I'll slug him."

Shelly looked at him with curious, shocked eyes.

"Don't get me wrong," he continued. "I'm thrilled we got the information. In 1972, this guy walked into St. Theresa's and saved your life. Why did so many others have to die since then? Why didn't he spare Kristen? What did he know and why didn't he tell others? For that matter, if this was a military operation, why did they keep it secret?" He stopped to take a healthy sip of his drink. "I'm just pissed. The more I think about it, the more I realize I was right. Somewhere in this world there was somebody with the cure to cancer hidden in a safe. My guess is this guy is dying, and he's trying to set things right before meeting his maker."

"Nick," she said. "I agree, but you need to settle down and look at the bright side. We may have the cure for cancer in our hands. That's huge. Bigger than any invective you can spout out. And not to mention, the search for the cure brought us together. That's also huge. At least I think so."

"I know, you're right, but I can't keep from thinking of how many lives were lost. So many." Images of his mother and his

brother floated in his mind. He sighed. "Anyway, how was Mary when you left?"

"Not good. Wall will handle my case load and watch over Mary and notify me of any change."

"Do you think we can use this code on her?"

"I hope so, but first it has to become a medication we can administer, and I have no clue how to do that. The formula is very, very complicated. Tinkering with it could screw up the properties. Hopefully, Dr. Shoo can enlighten us."

Her eyes grew big as she saw Dennis walking toward them.

"Who's flying the plane?" she yelled, gripping the arms of her seat.

"We have a co-pilot, Shelly." He smiled. "You can relax. By the way, Barry is meeting us in Salt Lake."

Nick looked at Shelly. "Barry will know how to formulate the vaccine, won't he? He's the expert, right?"

"Let's hope so," answered Shelly.

"I don't want to pry, but I have never seen Barry like this before," said Dennis. "We've been together for twenty years. Is there anything—I mean, what's going on?"

"He is helping us with a special project that could change the world. But mum's the word."

"Wow," said Dennis. "That's pretty cool. If there's anything you need, you just let us know. We'll be on the ground in about an hour and a half."

He returned to the cockpit.

Nick pulled out a pair of headphones from his briefcase.

"What are you listening to?" she asked.

"Moody Blues," he said. "Days of Future Passed." He closed his eyes and let the sounds of Justin Hayward's voice fill his head.

Upon landing, a limo rushed Shelly and Nick to Bio-Tech, where they were greeted by a small team flanked by Barry. Shelly reflected that this could be just the beginning of the special treatment they would receive if this formula could work on humans.

"Hey, girlfriend, welcome to Salt Lake," Barry said as he hugged his long-time friend.

"Good to see you again, Barry," Nick said, also receiving a big hug.

"Dr. Shelly White," Barry introduced her, "Dr. Henry Shoo."

"Please call me Henry, Doctor," he said, extending his hand.

"Shelly," she said simply as they shook hands.

"And you must be Nick Harris."

"It is quite a pleasure, Dr. Shoo," offered Nick.

"Please, everyone, call me Henry. And this is my staff handling scientific coding, my bio-team, the group responsible for what we are about to test."

They entered the building and headed toward the lab. The tension in the air grew thicker; the excitement more electric.

Inside the lab, Dr. Shoo gave his guests a small tour, and as they approached the simulator, he reiterated how he could not get the model to fail with the code sequence. He said the entire biotech team was attempting to make batches of serum to try on rodents, but were running into a problem.

"There is a side effect," he announced.

Shelly's heart sank. "Like what?" she asked, looking at Barry.

"The compound attacks the tumor with such energy that it literally makes the Petri dish vibrate."

"You can feel the reaction?" asked Nick.

"This formula creates a reaction. A violent one, at that. This thing destroys cancer cells. The bigger the tumor, the bigger the vibration. I've never seen anything like it before."

Shelly understood the implications, but silently prayed it could be controlled. Dr. Shoo led them to an area of the lab with cages of laboratory rats. Nick spied a large lab rat in a cage and backed up.

"C'mon, don't tell me you're afraid of a rat, are you?" kidded Shelly.

"No, I'm not afraid. It's just—"

"I think you might like Oscar," said Dr. Shoo.

"Oscar? Oscar the rat?"

"Oscar the rat. You see, when Doctors White and Wall called, he looked like this." He, showing them a photo of the rat with tumors on each side of his body and a small hump on his back. "And there are six more of his friends in the back who seem to be doing just as well."

Shelly examined the photo and watched Oscar gnawing on a sunflower seed he held with his eight front fingers. She thought back to the lab rats she worked with in college. Surely she'd never

thought one of these creatures would show her that cancer might just be curable in her lifetime. Hans had given her the key.

"Any other side effects?" she asked.

"Just the initial one I mentioned, as far as we can tell. But after the first phase of the so-called war is over, the rats appear healthy. Go on, touch him. He won't bite." Nick backed away as Shelly opened the metal cage and reached in to pet Oscar, who paid her little mind.

"Wow, he really is vibrating. But no tumors."

"That's correct. From what we can discern, the test medication is effective, but so violent on the body that the patient feels a vibration in their body. It doesn't appear to persist. It declines overtime. I've got others in the lab doing the same thing." Shelly wondered for a moment if she had vibrated. She couldn't recall it happening, but that was such a long time ago.

"So there is still a war going on inside this little guy?" Shelly continued petting.

"It looks like the war is on, Dr. Shoo?" asked Nick.

"Well, I will tell you that in all my thirty years, I have never seen a tumor disappear in less than twenty-four hours."

"Then let's obliterate cancer from the face of the earth."

Shelly slowly closed the cage and looked over at Nick, smiling in wonderment. It was all so much to take in. She walked over to him and gave him a hug without saying a word.

"I know you need to settle into your rooms," said Dr. Shoo as he walked them back through the main lab and toward the exit. "If you'd like, why don't we get together for dinner and talk about the next round of testing? There's a little café next door to the hotel. I'll come by in a couple of hours."

As Shelly, Barry, and Nick reached the front door, the limo arrived almost on cue.

CHAPTER 19

The teams spent the entire weekend and Monday testing, retesting, and testing again. Nick loved watching them work. The progress was stunning. Rodents with tumors double the size of the animals themselves had been turned back to normal. The creatures shook before their goggle-enclosed eyes as the vaccine attacked the tumors. Shelly had been driven to tears as she watched in amazement the power of the vaccine. She was saddened, though, when she realized human testing could take years, and people like Mary didn't have that kind of time. On Tuesday, Shelly posed the question about human testing to the entire team as they broke for lunch.

"At the rate we're going," said Dr. Shoo, "I would say we ask legal to start the filing process."

"Filing process?" Nick asked.

"Nick, we have covered this before." Shelly, touched his wrist. "It takes years before we can test on humans."

"C'mon, there must be some way to fast-track it."

"You could talk to our legal department and see if they can do anything," said Dr. Shoo. "We have no say with the FDA, unless something goes wrong, of course. Then it's all our fault."

"It seems we have found this magic formula," Nick said, "yet we can't help people now?"

"No, we can't," Dr. Shoo replied.

"So, if I am dying, and let's say this is my life and I have one day left, and you have this possible cure, you can't give it to me?"

"Oh," said Dr. Shoo, "we could, but then we would be arrested and lose our licenses. Even if we saved your life."

"That's just crap," he yelled, pounding his fist on the table.

Dr. Shoo nodded. "But that's the law. If you have a way of changing it, there are a few hundred scientists around here who would carry you off on their shoulders."

"Where's the legal department?" Nick asked.

"Fourth floor," said Dr. Shoo. "Ask for George Horgan. He's the one who helps us get through legal."

"Excuse me, I've got a job to do." Nick stood, then made a beeline for the hallway.

Upstairs, Nick received the same story about delays, with added legal phrases and jargon sprinkled here and there. George Hogan, the senior legal analyst for Bio-Tech, told him they could appeal to the government board that made such decisions but they only met twice a year and they already had a full docket. In his opinion, that option was a dead end.

"So, if, say, we have the cure for cancer, that doesn't get us to the front of the line?"

"Mr. Harris, I understand what you have down in the lab may be incredible, and we would love to start testing now. I have a dear family friend who is dying from pancreatic cancer right now and will probably not be alive in the next few days. He would jump at this chance. But the law is the law. We spend our lives trying to deal with red tape the government throws in front of us. Even after we have tested products and medications and ruled out side effects, there is still a huge lull." He paused and sipped his coffee. "I'll tell you this," he continued, "if we could get rid of half of the BS we have to go through, there would be a lot more treatments out there for all sorts of illnesses."

"What about an executive order?" asked Nick.

"What executive order?"

"Like from the President of the United States. That kind of executive order. Then we could move forward?"

The lawyer looked over at his paralegal, who just shrugged her shoulders. "Don't know, Mr. Harris, if that is even possible. We'd have to check on the precedence of—"

Nick interrupted him. "Tell you what, you check on that, and I'll see if I can get one."

"How the hell are you going to do that?"

"Watch me," he said as he turned and left the office. He found empty office space down the hall and took out his phone. He dialed the number that took him to the private switchboard in the nation's capital."

White House Signal Operator Number Twenty-three. How may I help you?"

"Signal Twenty-three, Mr. Nick Harris. I'd like to speak to the president, please."

"Hold the line, Mr. Harris." Nick found himself humming along to the patriotic music as he waited on hold. Five long minutes went by, then he heard a click.

"Hello?" Nick asked.

"Nick Harris, you coming back to work my campaign?"

Nick smiled. It was the president, the man who told him if he ever needed anything, he should call Signal Twenty-three.

"I believe you've asked me that the last few times we spoke. My answer is still, no, sir, I'm not, but I think I may have a way to guarantee a win."

"How's that?"

"Well, Mr. President, I'm here in Salt Lake City, and it turns out—and as crazy as it sounds—we might just have found the cure for cancer," Nick said as he realized how odd, how bizarre those words sounded.

"Are you serious?" the president asked, an earnest tone eclipsing his usual jovial demeanor.

"Very," Nick said, taking a deep breath as he got ready to make his plea.

"Do you need security?"

"No, this place is pretty tight, but there are all these laws that make us wait years to test it on humans. I'm sure you know about the rules and regulations that govern such things. A lot of people who could be healed are going to die while we wait for the paperwork to be approved."

"Jesus, Nick, do you know what you're saying? You really think you have it?"

"In a word, yes. Positive. And I cannot think of a better way to start your campaign than to be the man to make that happen."

"Well, I can try to open some doors for you, but—"

Nick interrupted him. "Mr. President, I don't need you to open doors, I need you to break them down."

Two hours passed and Nick waited nervously by a fax machine connected to the number he had given the White House operator. The paper began to move; the whirling sound of a fax being received was music to his ears. The cover sheet emerged with the telltale seal of the President of the United States of America. Four pages surfaced in all, which Nick scooped up, then he said a little prayer and kissed the seal. He brought them immediately over to George Hogan and plunked them down on his desk.

"What's this?"

"A message from the President of the United States."

Hogan put on his glasses and looked at the executive order. "How did you get this?" he asked.

"I helped run his last campaign," said Nick briskly, hoping to expedite matters at once. "We help each other out."

"You got this in two hours? I've been doing this shit for twenty years, and I have never seen anything like this."

"Well, you have to know the right people, Mr. Hogan. So, can we test?"

"Well, I need to verify this," Hogan said, holding up the fax.

"Trust me, you will."

"And I have to get with Dr. Shoo."

"Okay, fine with me," Nick said. "Now, tell me about your dying friend."

Just as he finished telling Nick about his friend running out of time in a Salt Lake City hospital, his assistant walked into the office. "Mr. Hogan, I hate to interrupt, but, believe it or not, the Surgeon General and the Secretary of Health are on the phone for you. They say it's urgent."

Hogan looked up at Nick, offering a wry smile.

"Maybe we can help your friend after all," said Nick.

Within an hour, Nick, Hogan, half of the legal team, and the top executives walked into the lab en masse. Work stopped as all heads watched the entourage head directly toward Dr. Shoo.

“Oh, my God, watch this,” said Shelly, putting her hand on Shoo’s shoulder.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I am Bob Nordin, the CEO of BioTech, and I have just been briefed by my legal team.”

“A pleasure to meet you, sir,” said Shelly.

“I don’t know how Mr. Harris did this, but we have just received and verified a Presidential Order, and you are authorized to proceed with human testing on consenting patients when you feel you are able and ready.”

Dr. Shoo sat down. “A Presidential Order,” he said, taking off his glasses and rubbing his eyes.

“An Executive Order! It’s the damnedest thing I’ve ever seen, Henry,” said Nordin. “And then the Secretary of Health and the Surgeon General told me whatever we need, we got. Can you believe that?” He smiled from ear to ear, looking over at Nick. “Now, I don’t know how this is going to turn out, but I want everyone in this room to drop whatever project they are working on and do whatever Dr. Shoo says.”

Nick turned and took George’s arm. “Shelly, this is George Hogan, and he has someone who needs our help. George, this is Dr. Shelly White, the best there is.”

Shelly looked into his eyes and could tell Hogan was a worried man.

Dr. Shoo, Nick, Shelly, Dr. Barry Hayes, and a small group of BioTech personnel marched into LDS Hospital in Salt Lake City the following morning. They were met by Jack Keith, a thirty-nine-year-old oncologist who was treating a gravely sick, seventy-five-year-old Manny Howard.

“Hi, Jack,” said George Hogan as he shook the doctor’s hand and introduced the team. Shelly looked around, pleased with the hospital. Clean and updated, with wide halls, well-lit. St Teresa’s sure could use some polish, she thought.

"Dr. Shoo, this is indeed an honor," said Dr. Keith. "George filled me in on what's going on, but I must tell you, Manny really doesn't have much time. His wife is in the room and has given us permission to move forward. All of the paperwork has been signed, gentlemen," he said as he looked at the suits.

"Let's do this," announced Shoo. They followed Dr. Keith and a nurse down the long hall. Along the way, hospital officials joined the march.

"I sent you the particulars on Mr. Howard," Dr. Keith said to Shoo, "so you should have everything. The current BP and heart rate are shallow. Do you really think this will work?"

"If you had asked me a week ago if I would be holding what I think I am holding in my hands, I would have laughed out loud," Shoo said as they arrived at the elevator. "But this stuff is a damn miracle, so my answer is yes."

When they arrived at the patient's room, they limited the team to Drs. White, Shoo, and Keith. Shoo examined the readings on the monitors hooked up to Mr. Howard. Shelly introduced herself to Manny's wife.

"I have seen you on TV with the cancer challenge," she said, holding Shelly's hand and arm. "Do you think you can help my Manny?"

"We're going to try," she said.

"Manny has so much to live for," she said. "Our first great-grandchild will be born next month. Our daughter is flying in from New York this afternoon. Please, if you can, save him."

She began to cry, and Nick offered to take her into the hall to console her. Shelly watched them leave then turned her attention to Shoo who was beginning to inject the drug into Howard's IV.

"God, I hope this works," she heard Dr. Keith say.

"Faith, Doctor," Shoo said. "Faith."

She knew she was watching the culmination of an incredible project, an unthinkable journey. Decades had passed since she was diagnosed with cancer, then miraculously cured. But in less than seven days, a German researcher named Hans Bextal had revealed a secret formulation to break the cancer stronghold on humans, testing had been completed, and a human being who otherwise would not have made it to another sunrise was about to be cured. She was exhausted, yet full of energy.

"The package has been delivered," Shoo said.

"Barry Hayes?" Nick asked.

"We wait," answered Shoo. "We had to dilute the dosage so the intensity of the vibrations we saw in the lab wouldn't be repeated here and affect the patient. Too dangerous at this point."

"Coffee, anyone?" asked Dr. Keith.

"I could use some," said Barry. "What about you, Shel?"

"Sure, I guess," she said.

"You all go ahead," Shoo said. "I will call you when something happens."

The team slouched in their hospital-issue chairs, which Shelly thought were suited better for junior high students than grown adults. They hunched over the table in the cafeteria, cupping their coffee. Mrs. Howard didn't want to leave her husband's side and returned to his hospital room.

Shelly looked at Nick, touched his forearm, and gave him a big smile.

"Strange to think, we didn't have much to go on until about six days ago."

"Really?" asked Keith. "What did you guys find out to get so far so fast?"

"We can't say much right now," said Nick, "but someday one of us will write a book about it."

"Well, this is no doubt the most exciting day of my career," he answered. "And to top it off, we're trying it on Dr. Howard."

"Dr. Howard?" asked Shelly.

"Sure, Manny Howard. He's a legend in Salt Lake."

Barry leaned over to join the conversation. "This guy's a doctor? What kind of doctor is he?"

"Pediatrics, OB-GYN," said Dr. Keith. "He delivered me. He's been delivering kids all over this city for forty-five years."

"Right when you think things couldn't have gotten any weirder," Shelly said to Nick, just as the PA crackled with an incoming announcement.

"Dr. Keith, Dr. Keith. Report to floor seven, STAT."

"Manny!" he blurted out and jumped up. "C'mon!"

They rushed from the hospital café like children playing tag, trying to keep a sense of decorum as they moved swiftly down the

hall and reached the elevator, where they were met by a large crowd waiting for the lift. They stopped in their tracks.

"Stairs!" Keith said as he led the team around the corner and threw open the heavy metal fire door. Taking two steps at a time, Nick and Shelly passed Barry, then a nurse and doctor embracing on the third-floor landing.

"Get a room," said Nick. The young couple gasped as they made way for four people bounding up the stairs. Out of breath, they arrived at the seventh floor and stopped to collect themselves for a moment before they pushed open the stairwell exit. They reached Manny's room to find a group of onlookers.

"Make a hole, people," Keith announced as Barry, Shelly, and Nick followed him through the small crowd. The first thing Shelly saw was Mrs. Howard holding her mouth. She looked at Shoo, who stood in front of the monitors.

"What's going on?" she asked.

Shoo turned, tears forming in his eyes. "It's working. Look at the vitals."

Respiration, heart, and blood pressure were all rising and stabilizing.

"Feel his arm," Dr. Shoo said, grabbing Shelly's hand.

"It's vibrating."

"Right, just like in the lab. That tells us it's working."

"What's happening?" asked Manny's wife, looking at Nick.

"I think what the good doctor is trying to say is that Manny just might be around for that great-grandchild," Nick said.

"I prayed for a miracle!" she exclaimed. She looked at the group surrounding the hospital bed. "I asked God to send us a miracle. He sent five."

The room went quiet as they all looked at Manny and then to his wife. Nick gave her a hug. Shelly teared up.

"It's all about faith, Mrs. Howard," Shelly said. "Isn't that right, Dr. Shoo?"

Shoo looked over the glasses perched on his nose. "I would think the miracle is your husband, Dr. Manny Howard."

CHAPTER 20

As Shelly leaned on the nurses' station the next morning, she could hear laughter coming from Manny's room across the hall. Manny was awake and being briefed. Shelly needed to be alone for a moment and found solace in the hall. She also needed to call Dr. Wall and let him know Manny's progress. As amazing as it sounded, Manny was in remission. She kept thinking how Dr. Howard was now the second of the miracles, a distinction she had held alone for almost thirty-five years. From now on, people like her and Manny would not be classified as miracles, simply the first patients cured by an amazing, and still mysterious new treatment.

"Right, the MRI shows it's disappearing," she said to her mentor. "His BP began resetting to normal, his respiration increased, and there was the vibration I was telling you about, just like we saw in the lab. I feel like I should pinch myself."

Nick appeared around the corner with two cups of coffee, handing one to Shelly. "Who's that?" he whispered.

"Dr. Wall."

"How's Mary?"

"Good question. How's Mary?"

"Not good, I'm afraid," answered Wall.

"I thought you said yesterday that she was stable?"

"I didn't want to alarm you so you could concentrate on your work, but she is not well. She's not going to make it, Shel. Her white count is so high ..." He paused. "Every test we run looks horrible."

I have her sedated. Don't be upset, but there is nothing we can do for her."

Nick saw the hurt on Shelly's face. "What?" he asked.

"We're losing Mary," she said, fighting back tears.

"Like hell," Nick said and grabbed Shelly's cell phone. "Doc, what if we gave her some of this juice we just gave Dr. Howard?"

"Nick, I know you mean well, but she is barely hanging on. She's probably got less than twenty-four hours to live."

"The question is, will this serum give her a chance or not?"

"That would be a question for Dr. Shoo."

"Hold on." He ran into Manny's room. Shelly followed. She'd learned not to question this man who was blessed with getting results. He had become her miracle. "Henry, quick, talk to Dr. Wall." He put the phone to his ear.

"Greg?"

"We've come too far to just let her die, Shel," said Nick.

She put her fingers to his lips as she listened to Shoo talk to Wall.

"If you can get me the vitals, I could produce the proper strength for her, yes," Dr. Shoo said. "How old?" He paused. "I see. Well, if Mr. Harris can get us back in time, I guess it's possible." He looked at Nick, who gave him a thumbs-up. "Yes, it's very exciting, Greg. Dr. Howard says he's going to nominate us all for the Nobel Prize for Medicine."

Shoo listened for a few moments.

"Yes, he is a lucky man. He is the luckiest person on earth right now," Shoo said. "So, let's see if we can make Mary the second-luckiest."

Within two hours, Nick, Shelly, Barry, and Dr. Shoo arrived at the FBO, the private side of the municipal airport, where Nick hoped to pull some more strings to get someone to fly them to Atlanta.

"Well, I'll be damned, it's the dynamic duo!" Nick yelled. Up ahead, Captain Dennis Hoenston and co-pilot Susan Ingram waited.

"We thought you might need a ride home, so we flew in yesterday," said Dennis.

"How'd you know?" Shelly asked.

“Jerry Lamont told my boss that if your serum worked here, you would be making a beeline back to St. Theresa’s,” Dennis said. “And from what I see, he was right.”

“Good old Jerry,” Nick said.

“Dennis, Susan, I’d like to introduce you to the brains of our operation, Dr. Henry Shoo,” said Shelly. “I think you already know Barry.”

The plane trip back to Atlanta was spent mostly in silence. Shelly looked around and saw each of them deep in contemplative thought about what was transpiring in their lives – lives that might never be the same when they stepped off the plane in Atlanta.

“What are you thinking, Nick?”

“About the day my brother died, how my mother cried, and how my father tried to hide his pain. I’ve been thinking about my mother’s death and how she pleaded for the pain to be stopped and for the disease that was killing her to go away.”

Shelly patted his hand. She closed her eyes and leaned back, thinking about all the children she had lost as a doctor, and her time as a young patient, and Chucky. She pictured his face. Every time she saw Sal, she saw Chucky. She thought about what happened in the past seven days, how fast things had progressed, and how they had already saved a life. She looked at Dr. Shoo clutching the bag that contained the syringe that would hopefully save Mary. His dreams of being a renowned scientist were becoming a reality, and she imagined how proud his mom would be. If this had just been last year, his mother could have been saved. He’d told Shelly how proud she was when he became a doctor – the first in the family – and the touch of her hand as she lay dying.

She smiled when she thought of good old Barry, and how perfect that Dennis was flying the team to Atlanta. Even though she was petrified of flying in a small aircraft, at this moment, she was totally at ease. Dennis would keep her safe as they raced through the sky to save the life of an eight-year-old girl. She looked up into the clouds through the window and said a small prayer. She hoped with all her might that what they had discovered would hold true and give so many people their lives back.

“Well, look at that, a Presidential White Top in Atlanta,” said Nick as they landed.

“A what?” Shelly asked.

“Well, believe it or not, the president has sent a helicopter to fly us to the hospital.”

“Can’t we just drive?” Shelly asked, nervously looking out of the window.

“At five o’clock during rush hour? C’mon, Shel, it’s an adventure.”

“Hey, Nick, see the White Top out there?” Dennis asked as he walked from the cockpit.

“I know – it’s our ride to the hospital.”

“Very cool,” said Dennis. “But why didn’t we send one of ours?”

“Well, you guys didn’t have one available, so I made a call requesting an escort. I didn’t know it would be a Presidential White Top.”

“Remind me never to piss you off.” Dennis smiled.

“The president sent his helicopter?” Barry piped in. “This is awesome!”

“Well, the kids will love our landing, that’s for sure,” said Nick.

As they walked over to the helicopter, the engines started up.

“What’s that whining sound?” asked Shelly.

“Your blood pressure,” Nick said as they were greeted by a member of the Marine team that flew the helicopter.

“Mr. Harris?” he yelled over the sound of the engine.

“Yes, sir!”

“We have orders from the President of the United States to take you to St. Theresa’s Children’s Hospital. Is that correct, sir?”

“That’s correct.”

“Watch your step, sir,” he said, then guided Shelly up the first stair. “Ma’am, welcome aboard.” The four of them strapped themselves securely in for the quick jaunt west, especially Shelly.

The sound of the approaching helicopter could be heard throughout the hospital. Children who were mobile were drawn to the windows as the massive chopper prepared for landing. Staff as well, intrigued by the commotion, looked out of the windows to watch. As it descended to one hundred fifty feet, the chopper flew right over Marie Mellon, the hospital executive director, as she was getting into her car.

“Wow,” she said looking up at the gargantuan aircraft with the seal of the President of the United States.

As the chopper reached its pad, Nick looked at Shelly, who was holding on for dear life.

"At least we know how to make an entrance," he said.

"This thing is too big for me," she said.

"Beats walking." He smiled. They came to rest, the doors opened, and the stairs lowered to the ground. Shelly saw Dr. Wall at the door of the hospital. She waved, then looked up to see dozens of children looking back at her from all five levels. Above their tiny heads, the medical staff was doing the same thing, including Doris.

Shelly ran to the entrance door and hugged Dr. Wall.

"How is she?" she yelled over the helicopter's whirling engines.

"Not well, but she's still with us."

"Dr. Shoo," said Shelly. "I'd like you to formally meet Dr. Gregory Wall."

"Great to finally meet you, Doctor," said Wall.

"Where is she?" Shoo asked.

"This way." Wall turned and led the group to the nearest elevator.

"I tried to estimate her body mass, but it's a shot in the dark," Shoo continued.

"At this point, I don't think it will matter," said Dr. Wall.

"Gotta have faith, Doc," Nick said as they got into the elevator. "Right, Henry?"

"You are correct. You must have faith, Greg. Or should I call you Popcorn?" He grinned.

"I think I'll go with Dr. Wall today." He gave Shelly and Nick the evil eye.

"As you wish, Doctor," Shoo said as the elevator door closed.

When the door reopened, a crowd was waiting. Word had leaked. Shelly was a bit concerned about security, but she was pleased to hear from Nick that the Marines had secured the perimeter, another gift from President Riley to Nick. All eyes were on the team as they headed into Mary's room. Two nurses and a priest were in with Mary, as was Sal. Nick hugged his dad with gusto.

"Very weak," said Dr. Shoo as he looked at the monitors.

"Son, is this going to work?" asked Sal.

"Gotta have faith, Dad."

Dr. Shoo opened his case and prepared to inject the serum into the IV that ran into Mary's fragile and bruised arm. Shelly stood next to Wall as Barry leaned in the doorway, holding back the crowd, then eventually shut the door.

"Okay, honey," Shoo said, "what do you say we change the world?" He injected Mary's almost lifeless body. Shelly held her breath. All eyes were on the little girl. The room had gone quiet. Across the room, the lone priest prayed.

"C'mon, honey," Shoo urged and, almost on cue, the medical monitors began to show strength. Her blood pressure was rising. "That's my girl," Shelly said.

The room remained quiet with anticipation. Shelly stood with Nick, tears forming in her eyes. Nick reached over and squeezed her trembling hand.

SIX MONTHS LATER

Thirty-six years had passed since Shelly had been released, cancer free, from St. Theresa's. Throngs of people stood in a warm, Atlanta October breeze facing a priest. Nearby a statue stood alone. Many of those present had been part of Shelly's amazing journey. Most of the participants wore dark clothes. Small children held single roses in their hands. Nick stood next to Shelly, flanked by Sal and Tanya. Dr. Wall and Dottie were in front of them. Shoo, Barry, and Dennis were nearby, as were Robert Smith, Jerry and Bella. Even Jim Bongero was present. So was Joe Fazio.

Attention was fixed on the clergyman as he spoke. Nick tuned out. He heard little of the priest's message. A song plays over and over in his head—a powerful tune that ended with a poem that seemed to make what he saw real. The words of Graeme Edge of the Moody Blues resonated in his mind, the poem at the end of "Nights in White Satin" perfectly describing this moment in his life. For all that he had been through, Nick was the one who decided which was right and that today was not an illusion. Today was the journey's end—the end to chasing a dream, and after it all, catching a miracle.

As “Nights in White Satin” faded from his mind, Nick looked up. The priest stopped speaking and motioned for the children to place their flowers at the foot of the statue. The youngsters eased forward with their bright red roses, past the priest to the statue, which from the back, appeared to be a nurse holding a child’s hand. From the front, the nurse also held a child in her other arm. A stethoscope hung around her neck. She stood above a plaque at its base, now almost obscured by roses: “Dedicated to the memory of Kristen Elizabeth Spinicelli. Our Compassionate Angel.”

Mary was the last child to lay her rose at Kristen’s feet.

“It’s perfect,” Shelly whispered.

“That’s because we decide which is right, and which is an illusion,” Nick said quoting a line from poem playing in thoughts.

Shelly smiled. “Speaking of what is right,” she whispered, “what about the money?”

“Now that’s a problem that we’ll have no trouble figuring out, Doctor. We just changed the world. Now, we get to make it better.”

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