

CHAPTER 1

*April 13, 1988*

Wednesday Evening

Shortly after 11:00 P.M., Laurel slid under the maroon comforter and into bed next to her husband, Jack. She wrapped her strong arms around him from behind and worried at how easily she could feel his ribs. She remembered the many years when he'd weighed considerably more than she had.

Assuming Jack was already asleep, she began her nightly routine. Laurel breathed in deeply, expanding and filling every corner of her lungs. With her full lips closed tightly, she let the air slowly escape through her nose. It calmed her.

She closed her eyes; she prayed for each of her children—Matthew, Malcolm, Samantha—and for her only granddaughter, Angela, and for her only sibling, Allyson. Then she pleaded with God for more time and cursed herself for not being stronger. She ended her silent prayer with her first and last tears of the day.

“Hi.” Jack’s voice startled her.

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“Hey you, I thought you were asleep.” Laurel dabbed her eyes on her navy blue cotton pillowcase.

“Not quite. You feeling better?”

“I’m fine, but I’m leaving the dishes for Rain to get when she comes in tomorrow morning. I’ve got some heartburn still. Is it possible I’m too old for my own quesadillas?” She ran her right hand through a single, thinning patch of his grayish, silver hair and with her left hand rubbed her chest. “How ’bout you? Dizzy?”

“Nope, peachy.”

“You’re a horrible liar, Jack Cooper.” Laurel slid her hand from his hair to his forehead.

“You’re right. I blame the lump in my head.” For eighteen months Laurel’s seventy-one-year-old husband had fought an aggressive, inoperable brain tumor that, when discovered, was the size of a perfect shooter marble, but now resembled a Ping-Pong ball. The headaches were inconsistent; he could sometimes go two or three days without suffering. But when they returned, they brought pain, nausea, and vertigo that rendered him, for all practical purposes, tied to his bed. A bucket was never far away.

Though his doctors assured him that new drugs and therapies were rapidly being approved and readied for the market, Jack knew that nothing short of the hand of God would save him. And surely, he thought, God had better things to do than heal a small town bed-and-breakfast owner. “Like bringing peace to the Middle East or getting my Chicago Cubs back to the World Series,” he liked to

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tell Laurel. She'd heard the joke, and at least fifty variations of it, after every doctor's appointment since his initial diagnosis.

Their Inn, dubbed by the previous owners as *Domus Jefferson—The Home of Jefferson*—rested in the heart of the Shenandoah Valley, squarely between the Allegheny and Blue Ridge Mountains. Jack often said that if he survived judgment day and his Maker granted a choice between heaven and that hillside, the inner-debate would be short.

On this spring Wednesday night, their beloved B&B was nearly empty. The only guest was Anna Belle Prestwich, wealthy heiress to a pet food manufacturing fortune. She was no doubt still awake, reading a romance novel in the \$190 room for which she insisted on paying \$300 a night. The room, decorated with expensive, handmade replica furniture from Thomas Jefferson's home at Monticello, overlooked the four acres of meadow sweeping from the back of the seven-bedroom Inn to the narrow creek at the forest line. When she finished three or four chapters, she'd escape outside with her husband's flashlight to walk her cat, Castro. She knew most people didn't walk cats, but most people weren't Anna Belle. And most cats didn't have weight problems.

Anna Belle had become a regular guest in the last several years, usually staying once or twice a month, though she'd been known to stay for up to ten days at a time. Her own home, a gorgeous, cavernous Southern mansion with four guesthouses—rumored by the chatty townsfolk to be worth anywhere from half a million to

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one hundred ten million dollars—was less than a mile away. On clear winter mornings, long after the trees had thrown their leaves to the ground, the tall silo of one of her unused barns and the roof of the white main house could be seen through the trees to the east.

The short, rotund, middle-aged Floridian met her husband, Alan Prestwich, on Miami Beach while the two were walking the shore very early one fall morning. He was collecting seashells for his secretary's daughter. Anna Belle was teaching Castro not to fear water.

Their encounter that morning led to an unlikely marriage, the first for both. Her new husband said he loved Anna Belle for being genuine, for having large, bold hips with personalities of their own, for her milky-white and buttery-smooth skin. But mostly he loved her dark red, almost maroon, and now gracefully graying hair. "The women I date," he had told her as they walked the boardwalk that first morning together, "wouldn't dare leave the house without dyeing their hair. But you, Anna Belle—you're a different fish in a sea of sameness."

"If I'm so wonderful," she answered as their first date ended, "how have all the good men eluded me?"

"They haven't. There just haven't been any good enough for you yet."

Six weeks later they were married.

During their third blissful year, Alan, the six-foot-two-inch

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classic American entrepreneur and freshman pilot with adventurous eyes, crashed his brand-new 1984 Gulfstream III into the Everglades on his very first solo flight. All they recovered was his seventeen-inch Maglite, shining in three feet of murky water two hundred yards from the plane's impact crater. Since then Anna Belle carried the flashlight everywhere, convinced it was a sign that some day she'd need it to find Castro in the woods after a donut binge, to fend off a black bear, or to use in some other noble effort.

Anna Belle had always been just north of overweight. When she took a job at the local A&P stocking groceries, a gaggle of cruel high school classmates began calling her just that: *A&P*. Just to spite them she happily adopted the nickname. It stuck and she never let it bother her. *Nicknames mean you matter*, she told herself. Now A&P wondered what they'd call her if they knew she'd inherited most of her husband's fortune. She was a millionaire many times over.

Not long after her husband's crash, Anna Belle picked Woodstock, Virginia, as her new home after seeing the town's name circled in ballpoint pen on a Civil War Reenactment Association brochure she found in one of her husband's filing cabinets. She was a resident less than a month later. Jack and Laurel quickly befriended their quirky new neighbor. They privately speculated that her purpose in life was to spend every penny of her wealth at their B&B.

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“Guess how much A&P tipped me for her evening milk,”
Laurel whispered.

“A hundred.”

“Higher.”

“Two-fifty?”

“Higher,” Laurel repeated.

“Five hundred dollars?” Jack’s voice rose.

“Five hundred and nineteen dollars and fifty-two cents. Every-
thing she had in her purse.”

“That’s good money for finding milk in the fridge and pour-
ing it in a glass.” He sighed and fluffed his pillow. “The woman is
incurrigible.”

“She’s harmless.”

Jack rolled over and faced his wife, looking into her experi-
enced brown eyes. His own once-lively eyes now appeared sunken
in his head an extra quarter-inch and were guarded beneath by
heavy half-moon circles. He’d inherited the raccoon eyes, as Lau-
rel teasingly called them, from his father, but in the last year the
dark circles had become even darker and appeared almost sepa-
rated from his cheeks. His nose almost touched hers. “One of these
days we have to tell her, you know.”

Ever since A&P’s first visit to *Domus Jefferson*, she’d left ob-
scenely generous tips for the most mundane services, and there was
no apparent system to her generosity either. If Jack carried a bag for
her, she pulled a hundred-dollar bill from her purse. If Laurel left a

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mint on her pillow after turning down her bed, A&P slipped several twenties into her hand at breakfast. Once, when Laurel's doctors discovered an irregular heartbeat and tracked the defect back two generations, A&P stubbornly urged her to accept money for the medical bills, even though their health insurance paid ninety-percent.

Another time, when Jack's twin brother, Joseph, was arrested on misdemeanor drug charges for the third time, A&P insisted on driving to Virginia Beach, bailing him out, and hosting him in her home because all the rooms in the B&B were booked. He stayed with her until he found work and a place of his own. Jack had been grateful to A&P and suspected the drive from Virginia Beach to Woodstock had been the longest of Joe's life.

The Coopers learned early in their relationship with A&P not to refuse her money. Their favorite guest was stubborn to a fault and would simply up the ante until they relented. Of course she had no idea they were simply giving the money to a children's shelter in southeast Washington, D.C. Without knowing it, in recent years the benevolent Anna Belle Prestwich had funded improvements to the shelter's kitchen, repaired a section of the dilapidated roof, and contributed the majority share to a new basketball court and adjoining playground with high, safe fences. There was even talk of creating a mini-library bearing her name.

"Sure, we'll tell her . . . Someday . . ." Laurel answered, but before Jack could respond, her eyes opened wide and she rolled from her side to her back, both hands grasping at her chest.

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“Sweetheart!” Jack lifted his head. “What is it? Laurel? Sit up.”

She struggled halfway up but fell back against the wooden headboard. “I’ve . . . no . . . breath . . . my chest . . . call . . .” The words were bursts of air.

Jack turned to the open window and called for A&P. “Mrs. Prestwich, come! Come quick! *Please!*”

But A&P was already on her evening walk, strolling along the creek’s edge, counting stars in the reflection of the slow-moving water and chatting astrology with Castro as she tugged his leash.

“Oh, Lord, *help us!*” Jack cried out as Laurel’s breathing became more pained and her eyes screamed. He looked toward the cordless phone cradle on Laurel’s nightstand.

It was empty.

“My arm, Jack!” Laurel’s eyes appeared to follow the pain from her chest down her left arm, past her hip, and to her foot. “Jack.” She somehow made the single word sound like an apology.

“*Dear Lord!*” he called again.

Jack fought to sit up. He screamed into her face, “Laurel!” But neither her mouth nor her eyes responded. He swung his legs over the edge of the bed and put his feet on the floor. He could take only two steps before losing his balance and falling forward. The room spun around him and he careened into a brass floor lamp. As he tried to steady himself, the lamp gave way and he crashed on top of it, crushing the glass lampshade beneath his weight on the hardwood floor.

“*Oh, Lord! Help us, Lord!*” Jack lay on his back, hands flat against

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the floor as he looked up at the ceiling. His head ached. Heavy tears pooled in his eyes. Turning his head to the side, his eyes found Laurel's old Tennessee license plate mounted on the far wall.

Gradually the room calmed and Jack pulled himself back onto their high, log-frame bed. Laurel's position was unchanged but her eyes were now closed. Her arms rested at her side.

"Laurel?" He put a hand on her cheek. "Sweetheart?" He placed his other hand on her quiet chest. "My sweetheart." Jack wrapped his arms around her and pulled her toward him. "My sweetheart," he said again. Carefully he rocked her listless body back and forth.

Moments later Jack tenderly placed his wife's head on her pillow.

Then from the top drawer of his nightstand, he pulled a pen, an envelope already containing several letters, and a piece of clean *Domus Jefferson* stationery. Using his King James Bible as a writing surface, he wrote:



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My Dearest Laurel,



Ten minutes later Jack finished the letter, sealed it in the envelope along with the others, wrote a short note on the outside,

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and buried the entire stack somewhere in the New Testament. He returned the book to the nightstand, and he slid back toward his wife. Once again he carefully wedged an arm beneath her and pulled her to him. He gently brushed her soft, light-brown hair off her neck and whispered something in her still-warm ear. He kissed the corner of her forehead.

Then he thought of his son Malcolm and prayed he would survive the days ahead.

Finally, Jack gave in to his very last headache. And he slept.

It was 9:04 the next morning when a worried A&P and Castro finally pushed open the Cooper's master bedroom door. They found Jack and Laurel at peace in one another's cold arms.