

As a single mother and immigrant, Anicka Noah faces reversals. She finally becomes a cardiologist in New Mexico. She recognizes injustice to minorities in healthcare based on her personal background. She's compelled to expose the troubles she's seen. When she bears witness, she receives increasing threats to her children, home, and career.

THE TROUBLES I'VE SEEN
WHICH IS MORE IMPORTANT, PATIENTS OR PROFITS?
By LUDDY LEONG

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A NOVEL BY LUDDY LEONG

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TWELVE

"Anicka, listen," Reeann said. "We have a crisis. Somebody's playing hardball."

"Oh, no. What happened?"

"Get to a TV in a jiff."

"What station?"

She was phoning me on my cell while I was at the clinic. Never did that before. At first, I thought something dreadful must have happened to my youngsters. My heart rate increased.

"Every news station. Gotta watch what's going on."

"I'm hurrying on my way to the doctor's break room. Is everyone OK?"

"At home, yes."

Other employees also ran into the break room to watch. A box with fragrant chocolate-frosted donuts sat on the counter next to the half-full coffee maker. No one snacked now. Every eye was on the TV.

My relief about my children soon changed to dread. I saw the replay of a plane flying right into one of the World Trade Towers. Before I could even be horrified, another replay showed a second plane fly right into the other tower.

Everyone was silent. Many placed their hands over their mouths.

"Lower Manhattan," one person finally said. The TV image switched to show damage to the Pentagon. Someone said, "D.C. area." That wasn't all. After a while, the announcer talked about a deadly plane crash in a field in Pennsylvania they felt was connected to the other events.

Incredible to see two Trade Towers crumble to the ground with dust and debris flying up in the air as if the buildings had been nothing substantial. I worried about people in the area.

What a dreadful event. Germany experienced this before, when foreign soldiers fought in German cities during wartime.

The U.S. hadn't experienced that since the Revolutionary War. Newscasts featured threats of another attack daily. The U.S. President declared a War on Terror. Within a short time, U.S. soldiers invaded Afghanistan. Getting involved in wars was the second outstanding problem for the U.S., whether as big as racism or not.

I pondered U.S. history, bound by bigotry and also by wars. This nation came into existence based on winning the Revolutionary War. It has continued to wage wars from that time. The Civil War, World Wars One and Two, many many more, and now this War on Terror. The U.S. had been fighting wars for the great majority of its existence, and was still fighting.

Despite the warlike history of the U.S., I was ready to become a citizen.

On a day with beautiful cumulus clouds, Reeann drove me through the city streets of Santa Joana to the federal citizenship building. When she drove into the parking lot, she stopped whistling.

"Dreamy aria from a Faure opera," she said.

We passed through a security check-point and entered a noisy waiting room, holding adults and children. Almost every chair was taken. I walked to the main desk and spoke to the clerk.

"I'd like to become a U.S. citizen. Here's my Green Card and passport." The Green Card gave me permanent right of residency and let me still be a German citizen. I was now ready to change my citizenship status.

"Fill out these papers at home." She waved my papers away and handed me a multipage application. "You can schedule your interview now."

We arranged that. Before we left, I found a pamphlet in the waiting room about the U.S. government.

Reeann helped me at home and then gave the pamphlet to my schoolchildren. They read the information. Once I became a citizen, they could apply as children of a citizen. They were old enough to learn the information. Rodney was twelve, Elsa eleven, Irma ten, and Konrad nine, each already learning U.S. history in school. Easy peasy, Reeann would say.

For me, learning this would take much more effort. In Germany's schools, we studied history within the context of Europe and Russia, with virtually no information about the Americas. What I learned about the U.S. came from reading since I had lived here.

Saturday came for my interview for U.S. citizenship. I gathered my papers, ID, application, and marriage certificate. A thunderstorm made loud crashing sounds, which I took as a bad omen. Reeann and I returned to the building. Indoors, we quickly passed through security. The crowded waiting room was almost as noisy as the storm.

After about ten minutes, a man invited me into a small, quiet side room with one closed window, a bookcase filled with fat books, a desk, two chairs, and a dusty smell.

The interviewer told me to sit down. He asked my name despite holding my papers.

"Anicka Noah."

"Miss? Mrs? Miz?"

"Doctor."

He looked curiously at me and reviewed every part of my application. He looked at my other papers, and asked questions about that information. He also asked if I had any problems with the law.

"Police came to our home eight years ago after we had a report of domestic abuse." When I explained more of the situation, he said that would not pose a problem.

"Read this English sentence out loud," he said. Then, "Write this English sentence."

I guess that showed I could read and write English. By then, English was surprisingly easy for me. I had to answer ten questions about the history of the U.S. and the Constitution. I'd studied and was pretty sure of my answers.

"Good job, Doctor Noah." The man stood up and I stood. "You passed the exam and are able to become a citizen. You will get a letter with the date and time of the oath ceremony held here in this building. You must arrive on time." He shook hands with me.

"Thank you. Can my four children attend? They're school age."

"Yes. Good for them to watch."

While I waited for the day of the ceremony, I dreamed of arriving late. In the dream, I was walking in through a doorway while everyone else walked out. They wore clothes colored red, white, and blue, and sang a song I didn't recognize. No one looked at me. For days, I woke up at about 5 a.m., in the dark, worried I'd be late, and then couldn't get back to sleep.

The big Saturday arrived. I awoke early. Reeann drove us to the building, whistling all the while.

"What is that music?" I asked.

"An old opera by Mozart, the composer I'm crazy about."

"I'm not familiar with it. Do you know the words?"

"No. It's German."

When we entered the building, we had to go through security. The young man standing ahead of us caused piercing sirens to go off. The children grabbed on to me and Reeann. Security guards patted the man down and found something. They handcuffed him immediately and dragged him away while he was yelling.

My children were in awe of his arrest. After a while, we were able to walk through security with no problem. Reeann and my youngsters walked over to watch from the back of a room.

A small stage with thick red velvet curtains filled the front of the room. The red, white, and blue United States flag hung on one side. The yellow and red New Mexico state flag hung on the other. A podium stood in the center. It was ringed by electric cords for the loud-speaker system and flanked by potted plants. With no windows, the room felt stuffy.

While we waited for the ceremony to start, we immigrants chatted with each other.

The ceremony started with the pledge of allegiance. Then, visitors sat down while the group of about two dozen of us remained standing. Each of us raised our right hand and recited the citizenship oath together. I trembled and tears floated in my eyes. I was able to say all the words, loudly and proudly. When I finally said, *I will support and defend the Constitution and laws of the United States of America*, I knew the pledge was over.

I finally became a citizen of the U.S. I completed these steps successfully, giving me courage to go on and take more steps.

Corona Takeri, recently from Chennai, India, had been in my group of new citizens. We chatted before the ceremony. I mentioned I was a cardiologist. She decided to see me at the clinic at Salud Hospital because of intermittent chest pain.

I knew I could help her. I'd had Indian and Pakistani patients in Germany who were trying to learn German as a second language. She seemed intelligent, merely unsure of medical terms used in English. I understood since I had the same problem years ago.

I asked about her symptoms, her medical history, and other questions. I was ready to compile the information.

"Here's my health program for you. High blood pressure and high cholesterol makes your heart work harder," I said to her after I examined her. "They add to fatty buildup in your arteries."

"What do you mean?" Corona said.

"Blood flows through a highway called a blood vessel. High blood pressure and high cholesterol can damage the walls of your blood vessels."

"Blood highway, yes."

"Have to push fat to the side like pushing snow away that gathers on the highway. Let's say your blood is a red car trying to travel on the blood highway. Foods high in cholesterol made fatty road blocks in your blood vessels."

"I understand. My red blood can't get past the white snow, which is really fat from foods I eat. What is wrong?"

Your heart works harder since fat is on the sides of blood vessels. Fat doesn't melt away like snow does. We need to make your heart work easier." I walked to my file cabinet.

"Here is a list of foods showing the ones you should eat in smaller portions." I gave her the paper and sat down. "Stop eating the food on this list so your heart can work easier."

"All right. I will do that." Corona glanced at the paper, folded it, and put it in her embossed leather purse.

"Not good to let fat build up on the sides of your blood vessels," I said. "Can cause traffic jams and make blood slow down, even stop. If the blood stops, if the red blood-cars stop, they form a clot." I touched the fingertips of one hand with those on my other hand to form a loose ball.

"Not this big, of course. Parts of your body, maybe your heart, won't get the needed blood. You'd be at a risk of a heart attack. Understand?"

"Blood-cars flow around my blood highways and get into traffic jams. Fatty snow stuck on the edges of my blood's highway makes the highway narrow. My blood highway is not wide

enough to let the blood move. The blood cars crash into each other and form a pileup." With her hands, she made the same sign for a clot as I'd made and smiled with success.

"Right," I said and smiled, too. "You're in jeopardy of getting a clot. Here's a prescription for a blood thinner to try to avoid a clot and another one to reduce your cholesterol. Take them every day. Also pay attention to what you eat."

"I will."

"Here's an order to get your blood drawn shortly before you come back. I want to see you in three months. My nurse will show you where to schedule the appointment."

When I talked to Corona, I used images to help her understand her heart disease. She seemed to catch on. I was relieved. I had experience relating to patients who had difficulty understanding English. Like me, she'll learn how to speak English in the U.S.

Meanwhile, I looked forward to my next step, a new job as Fellow in Cardiology. Wherever my new job would take me, I knew it was right to help others. Everyone needed to receive good healthcare. It was wrong to withhold care.

A translation of part of the Hippocratic Oath said, *Practice two things in your dealings with disease: either help or do not harm the patient.* I believed that withholding care actually harmed the patient. The amazing fact was physicians, healers, were the ones withholding the best care.

I hoped to find a clinic where physicians were open to treating patients with equity. A clinic where my ideas were supported. More important, where all patients were supported with good healthcare. That was my purpose in life.

SEVENTEEN

"Reeann, can you help me learn how to drive? Need to pass another test."

"Can I come?" Rod said.

"Yes and yes," Reeann said. "Let's get moving now, before I have to rustle up something for dinner." She started to lock the door, which seemed important to her.

I could finally get my own car, now that I anticipated a good salary. Never owned my own car before. Never drove on the opposite side of the road. Never drove an automatic.

We practiced on the edges of Santa Joana Mall's parking lot. I drove Reeann's Heavy Chevy slowly, learning how to start and stop smoothly, how to steer, and how to parallel park along a curb. I practiced turning on headlights and windshield wipers, and using the car horn. Over and over, I did the same tasks until I did them smoothly. Later, we practiced on Santa Joana's crowded streets.

Rod sat in the back seat and listened carefully to Reeann's suggestions. He would be next to drive.

I studied the driver's manual on rules. After a few weeks, I was ready to take the written and road tests. Passed on my first try.

"Let's go find me a car this weekend, Reeann. My own car, finally!"

"Swell. I won't have to drive day in day out."

"I need something I can depend on in snow."

"Something large enough to tote your teens. They grow like weeds."

"Maybe you feed them so well." I giggled.

"Maybe they eat so well." She nodded.

I decided on one of the largest SUVs the dealer had in stock, a Toyota Highlander in a dark blue with three rows of seats. I took on a six-year loan. The dealership helped me get it registered immediately. I arranged for insurance and I was ready to drive it by the next weekend.

For my first trip, I took Reeann in my New Blue to Albertson's grocery store on Vista's busy main street.

"Look!" I pointed as I drove. "A rainbow. Usually see rainclouds and rainbows together. Clouds stay. How brief the rainbow is."

"Don't get what you're saying."

"How brief happiness seems. Consider patients with their health problems."

The rainbow disappeared. It began to rain so hard I had to turn on the wipers.

"Brief?" Reeann said. "Dark clouds bring rain for now. Rotten breaks are brief. Ran up against it in my life as did you."

I thought about the abuse from Torsten, tests I struggled to pass, and physicians who railed against me. Reeann said more would come. And pass away.

It seemed the rain already slowed down, like a short monsoon downpour.

"See?" Reeann said. "Rotten luck can change to happiness as easily as happiness can change to headaches."

I drove into Albertson's parking lot. Before we got out, Reeann spoke some more.

"Remember the framed calligraphy hanging on my wall? Can't read the Chinese pictographs. Been told the translation says, *Hot, cold, tasty, sweet, and salty, we take them all and accept them as they are.*" She shrugged. "That's life."

As we walked into the grocery store, I thought about the meaning of Reeann's calligraphy. My patients were of all flavors, too. I accepted them as they were.

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I got another letter from Nadine.

Dear Anicka,

I hear what you're saying about your low-income patients and their struggles against the kind of healthcare they receive or miss receiving. Maybe the situation is different in Germany than in the U.S. I haven't noticed it happening here.

I'm sad you're experiencing such harassment. I know you. You're strong and will persevere.

I read in the news that you had a multiple-day government shut-down. If the government were involved in providing healthcare, like here, what would happen if people needed to access their provider while the office was closed?

Please tell Konrad that I'd also broken my leg when I was a teenager. Life will get better and to hang in there.

Love from Nadine

Maybe her situation was different in Germany. Frankly, I didn't remember much poverty when I was a physician there a couple of decades ago.

Here more people lived in sub-standard housing in New Mexico's towns and cities. More homeless people slept on streets and in tents. More families lived in cars. More children were hungry. I understood healthcare problems here and couldn't avoid seeing the familiar problems of my patients.

I read that fifteen percent of U.S. residents had no health insurance. Approximately seven thousand uninsured patients in Santa Joana and about six hundred in our little city of Vista were affected. Without healthcare, these patients faced a greater risk of illness and death.

I loved getting letters from Nadine and would reply soon. Right I had more details to work on because I was going to have a great job with a more-than-decent salary. Exciting!

"Reeann, let's talk to one of Vista's real estate agents. I'll drive my New Blue."

"Gotta pick up my income info first. Then we can go for a spin." She left the kitchen and soon returned.

"Have to consider distance from my job," I said while we traveled along.

"Gotta be near a main road straight to Santa Joana."

"Have to get there fast in case a heart patient needs an emergency procedure."

"Filed for divorce yet?" Reeann asked after a while.

"What? No. No hurry."

I heard her deep sigh while we continued on to the real estate office. I needed to be independent and make decisions on my own. I didn't understand why Reeann was concerned. I was the one to decide on a divorce. Soon, I'd have a permanent job and address and maybe would take care of it then. Maybe.

While we drove around with the real estate agent, Luisa Dolinski, in her large SUV, we found an attractive eight-year-old southwestern style house. We both liked it. We decided to think about it overnight.

That night, I dreamed I was being swallowed alive by a substantial mirror. It spit me out onto a sandy beach. Snakes slithered in and out of spaces in the sand. I woke up and turned on my bedside lamp. I wrestled with the image. Fought the urge to drift back to sleep, to drift back to that snaky beach.

Next day, we went for another tour of the attractive house in a quiet neighborhood in the south end of Vista. It was a tan stucco house, flat roof, arched doorways, with an atrium

surrounded by four bedrooms. My children would still share two bedrooms. Each room had large windows, high ceilings, and a tan tile floor. Very different from our old house in Germany. The weirdest aspect in the house was one whole living room wall covered by floor-to-ceiling mirrors.

Now I understood where last night's dream came from.

Yesterday, as we first toured the house, we laughed at the mirrors.

"These mirrors are placed opposite windows to reflect sunlight," Luisa Dolinski had said.

"They're ostentatious. Obnoxious," I said. If we bought this house, we'd have to take them down. I pictured them swallowing me alive and spitting me out onto a snaky beach.

Reeann and I agreed on that house, took on a thirty-year mortgage, and were able to sell the Santa Joana house in a little over a month. Reeann's little rental house in Santa Joana took longer. Eventually it sold.

"It's summer," I said. "My kids won't have to be taken out of their classes. Let's sign them up today in their new schools."

Rod would start middle school. The other three were in elementary school. Classes began in about a month.

"When school starts, I'll hustle the kids around," Reeann said after I finished enrolling them.

"What? Why? We're on a school bus route now."

"Despite that, I want to keep on trucking. It's safer. I'll keep an eye on them. Round 'em up after school and take 'em to their sports interests."

I phoned to have Santa Joana's newspaper delivered daily. On her laptop, Reeann arranged for a paper subscription to Time magazine to be delivered to us. Maybe I'd have time to read.

I was surprised when a letter was also delivered to our new house. It was originally sent to our old address and redirected to our new one. The envelope held a return address for Doctor Lili Cheung, and had a San Jose, California, address.

Most of the important moving boxes were unpacked and I was ready for a break. I sat down in our new living room to read her letter.

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Dear Anicka Noah,

How are you doing? I have good job in San Jose near family. Do you

have new job? I got your address from Santa Joana Salud Hospital.

Why do you still fight for minority? Why do they not work harder?

Being equal is not important. Every person get what they deserve.

If they are sick and do not pay for insurance, is not my fault. I think you stop now, no? Do not make changes?

Sammy is sick. Diabeets. Gets shot every day in old housing

project clinic. He need to see brain doctor. Why? No money for doctor.

What to do?

LiLi Cheung, M.D.

LiLi didn't understand why people needed equal access to healthcare. And why some low income people who already held two jobs couldn't work any harder. Sammy was ill. I'm sad for him. His family won't make needed appointments with a psychiatrist. Unusual for a Chinese family.

After I read her letter, I looked around our new living room. I saw my reflection in the outrageous mirrors. I had four wonderful children, a grand opportunity with my new job, my first car, and this beautiful home. Everything I needed. Still, I wasn't pleased.

I didn't like what I saw in the mirrors. My imagination ran down to oblivion. I felt depression settle down over me. I didn't like the kind of person I had become. What I lost in my struggle was immense.

I ignored my parents. Left my husband. Virtually paid no attention to my growing children.

I held my head where Torsten had struck it. My tears were doubled in the overbearing mirrors.

I finally thought of an option in my struggle against bigotry. One that would surely give me more time with my family. The existential question, *To do or not to do?* Also known as the Q word.

Maybe I spent too much time on my unrealistic intent. Maybe I should have saved more time to enjoy my youngsters. Maybe it was dangerous to confront others on Vista Clinic's Board. Especially those three worked-up physicians, who had their own ideas about healthcare. Who ran the biased local healthcare system. Who stood by other colleagues whether they were good physicians or not, as long as they patted each other's back.

If I continued my struggle I might lose my license. I'd lose my new job. I'd no longer be able to pay for my car loan and house mortgage. I'd lose everything I gained. Just as I had lost closeness in relationships that I'd spent too little time developing.

I started to look at this seriously. I wanted to achieve something worthwhile. I wanted to help patients in need. That was my goal, although unrealistic. Probably better to stay safe. Probably shouldn't talk about bias in healthcare anymore. Probably too wrapped up in my own ideas.

Besides, I had no idea how to achieve the needed change. I wasted my time. Threatened my future.

No question why Reeann told me I must be more realistic.

I'd tell her she was right, now while she was preparing our dinner. Whistling a melody, probably from another opera. Tell her I made up my mind to be more realistic and stop doing stuff that threatened my family. Spend more time at home and stop ignoring my precious children. Keep on being cardiologist, but stop trying to make a difference.

I got up from my recliner, walked toward the kitchen close enough to smell fish cooking, and went on past her recliner, past the bookcase, past the pile of Time magazines I thought I'd have a chance to read. I noticed the latest magazine cover depicting veterans suffering from poor healthcare at VA hospitals.

I turned around and returned to my recliner.

I remembered my patients who struggled with serious cardiac problems. Their eyes overflowed with tears when they found out the extent of their heart disease. They realized they couldn't afford medications and procedures they needed. They couldn't enjoy a healthy life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

My dear patients were immigrants, elderly, disabled, African American, Hispanic, Native American, a few LGBTs, one Asian, and a few veterans from wars in Korea and Laos. My best personality attribute was compassion. I understood and felt my patient's pain. That was as realistic as I could be.

I loved my youngsters, my patients, my job, this sunshiny location. I searched for justice and equity for everyone but found bigotry and unfairness. Would I quit? No! I had to continue. Especially now, I had to stop being cowardly. Keep following what I felt was right.

The Troubles I've Seen: Which is More Important, Patients or Profits?

Maybe the universe would take my shabby compromises, broken promises, and numerous failures, change them, and give them back to me as opportunities for a better life.

The mirrors reflected my attempt to dry my eyes. I regained my balance. I decided to skip telling Reeann.

Instead, I wondered what would help with my situation. I needed to find something so I could pay more attention to my growing children this summer. Something that would please them and give us more enjoyable time together. Something that would please Reeann, also. As I sat in my recliner, I thought about a way to accomplish that.

Then Reeann entered the living room and rubbed her chin.

"Have a hunch I should let you in on this...," she said.

TWENTY

"What on earth happened?" I stepped up to our small porch, unlocked our front door, and walked in. I was appalled. I trembled. Became short of breath.

"Don't come in!" I shouted to the others.

"Why not?" asked Reeann. She walked up, shuffled in, and gasped. "What the...?" she whispered. The youngsters followed one by one.

We had returned home from a delightful hike in Santa Joana National Forest, exhausted, hungry, thirsty, and intent on getting indoors. Reeann drove to the front of our house and told me about the opera aria. I stepped out of the car, and was stunned to see a dead possum dumped at the bottom step of our porch, squashed like road kill, and reeking like musty fur.

Indoors a pile of soft, stinky feces lay on the center of our tan tile floor. More showed up on our white walls, black leather sofa, and cream-colored lampshade. A smelly brown swastika was drawn on the TV screen. I read a sticky-note on a clean part of the TV screen, *This is just the beginning. More will come if you do not shut up.*

I took stock of the room and was bewildered at the mess. I phoned the police. Fortunately someone other than Officer Butterman arrived at our home shortly.

"Got nothin' of value taken," he said to a younger detective.

The two of them began to look around, jot down notes, dust for fingerprints, and write their report.

"U-g-l-y," the officer said slowly. "Like stuff I saw in rat holes I worked in Hoboken."

"Where?" Reeann said. "Hoboken? Oh no."

I watched while she took several steps back. Wondered what had upset her.

"Someone wants to give you a message," the policeman said. "Know anyone who'd do this to you?"

Reeann and I each shook our heads, pretending to be in the dark.

When the policeman and detective left, I carried in a pail of water, a sponge mop, and a roll of paper towels.

"Who was in here?" Reeann opened the windows. "Someone from this neck of the woods, or not? Weren't the doors and windows locked? How'd they barge in?" She started to walk through the rooms.

"What's the design on our TV mean?" Irma said.

My youngsters had studied the failed Nazi movement during World War Two in their history classes. We also talked about it at dinner. Regardless, Irma didn't recognize their logo.

"Stands for a belief in white supremacy and the Holocaust," I said. "You remember Anne Frank's story and how she had to hide in the Netherlands. Nazis rounded up six million Jews along with millions of others. They took their land and sent them away to be massacred.

Irma opened her eyes wide.

"Many of them died in cold, bleak nights," I said. "Nazis said their country's success was more important than an individual's needs. Their ideas were dreadful. Your great-grandparents had to escape Germany in a big hurry."

"Our great-grandparents?" Irma said, with her eyes wider.

"They fled to the Netherlands," I said. "Nazis lost in World War Two. White supremacists still exist in many countries, including the U.S. In fact, U.S. history says colonists rounded up Native Americans, took over their lands, and massacred thousands of them."

"I understand," Irma said.

"How could anyone do this?" Elsie said while looking around the room.

"A couple of guys broke in," Rad said, "squatted and—"

"Don't be gross," Elsie said. "That's not what I mean. I mean how could they? Why did they?"

Elsie put on protective gloves like we had in Vista Clinic. She used soapy water smelling like bleach to scrub the stained walls.

"This harassment's gone far enough," Rod said. "Come on, Rad. Let's get rid of the stinky mess." He grabbed the pail, sponge mop, and paper towels.

Before the boys started, Reeann came back into the living room.

"Spotted something the policeman passed up," she said.

We turned to look.

Reeann held up a pair of boy's white shorts.

"In the boy's bedroom. Not one of theirs," she said.

"Wait. How do you know it's not Rod's or Rad's?" I said. "I'm the one who buys clothes and does the laundry."

"You gotta check initials on the underpant's waistband. Only way we can dope out who they belong to. Your kids are almost doubles in size. We can't decide easily. But I know this mark isn't ours."

"Reeann, you're better than the police!" Elsie said.

"You saw initials on those shorts?" Rod said.

"Yes."

"Whose?" A couple of children spoke at the same time.

"Those shorts might belong to a boy with brothers," I said.

"Yes," Reeann said again.

"Good detective work, Mom," Elsie said.

Reeann handed the shorts to me.

"Oh yuck," Rad said. "Don't touch 'em."

"W," I said as soon as I saw the letter.

"I figure it's an M," said Reeann.

"Now we'll never find out whose it is," Rad whined.

"Nothing to do if we figure it out," I said. "You want to break into that person's house and do this?" I pointed around.

"No," Rad stepped back.

"Not me," Rod said

Elsie and Irma shook their heads.

"If by any chance you're able to solve this mystery," I said, "don't let anyone outside our family know your guess."

"Teen-aged guys pulled this off," Reeann said. "Not adults. Not girls."

"Not girls," Irma said.

"Mom," Rod said. "Think it was kids of angry doctors? Standing up for what their dads believed?"

"We have no proof," I said. "Keep this secret. Don't talk about it to your friends. Boys who did it will be proud to be talked about. This is nothing to be proud about."

Rad and Rod finished scrubbing the tile floor. They left for their bedroom. I knew what they would discuss.

This was the worst harassment we received. Someone must have planned it and broken in. Someone who heard about my struggle against bigotry in healthcare and worried about the consequences for their jobs or their parent's jobs. Someone who felt disgust at my actions

and treated us with disgust. I clasped my hands, leaned my chin on them, and worried if this mistreatment would ever end.

I knew I couldn't turn back. I had to continue my struggle for equity in healthcare. I would say *Yes* to those who said *No* to me. I would say *Yes* to life, however it played out. I'd chosen my path, although when my journey started out, a route was not clear. I pondered for a minute to fully realize what I faced.

I would travel out to the coastline of my beliefs, up to the mountaintop of commitment, down to the desert of my fears, and maybe step into the valley of the shadow of my death.

Next week I spoke to Reeann while she worked in the kitchen.

"I filed for divorce. Had to file more than once. Torsten kept moving around. He sure refused to admit defeat. I finally won. Didn't ask for support and won't receive any."

"Gives me a boost. You're here for sure."

"Getting beaten by Torsten gives me a greater respect for women's troubles. I could thank him, but no."

"You're a wounded healer."

"You've said that before. Some of my patients face the same problems I had. By the way, can you serve our dinner a little earlier today?" I explained my plan to her.

Later, we sat around our table, eating cauliflower and hot open-faced beef sandwiches covered with gravy. I spoke to everyone.

"I'm going to drive you to Santa Joana for an adventure tonight. We can go in my New Blue."

"Why, Mom?" Rod said. "Something going on down there?"

"We're going to the area where railroad tracks are," I said.

"Hooray!" Rad said. "Railroad trains. Big ones."

"OK, let's have an adventure," Irma said.

"We don't usually go out at night." Elsie said.

Driving to Santa Joana in the dark was something my children had not yet experienced. As we got closer to the city, traffic picked up. We veered off the main road and headed down toward the railroad tracks to an area with small factories. The road sank lower and became foggy. A chalky mist drifted around my New Blue in curling wisps, swirling closer like filmy curtains. I drove more slowly while trying to find my way through the milky atmosphere.

The look of the area changed. On one foggy street, tents were set up along sides of dark buildings. This was worse than anything I had seen many years ago in Germany. I pulled into a parking space along the street and turned off the headlights.

About twenty adults and children were standing around or walking up and down the sidewalk. Many adults were smoking.

"Why are these kids out while it's so dark?" Elsie said. "What are they doing? Where are their homes?"

I remained silent. I wanted my youngsters to come to their own decisions.

"Hey, look!" Rad said. "Dumpster diving. What fun! Can we get out?"

"Wait, Mom," Irma said. "What's the man giving to the little girl? Something he got out of the dumpster?"

"Oh yuck," Rod said. "She put it in her mouth."

"OK, Reeann," I said.

Reeann got out of my car and handed a twenty dollar bill to each of the first ten people near her. She quickly returned to the car, but not fast enough to stop a strange odor from coming inside. I drove off, away from the fog. I wondered about any conversation my children would have on our way home. It started pretty soon.

"Are we going home already, Mom?" Rad said in his whining tone.

"Geez, Rad," Rod said. "We're lucky to be going home. Like, do those kids even have a home?"

"Were tents their homes?" Irma said. "Were they camping? In the city? It smelled ugly there."

"How can they live like that?" Elsie said. "Where do they brush their hair? Or their teeth? Do they sleep in pajamas like we do? Right on the ground? Must feel cold."

"No TV," Rod said.

"No dinner table," Reeann said.

"Was that girl eating something out of the dumpster?" Elsie said. "Musta been dirty."

"Where do they go to the bathroom?" Rad said.

"Reeann," Irma said. "Did you give them money?"

"Mom," Elsie said. "Are these your patients? Ones too poor to get good healthcare?"

"Do they go to school?" Irma said. "How do they get ready?"

"I think they're homeless," Rod said. "Not sure they can go to school if they don't have a home."

"I think that man got something for the girl to eat 'cuz she was hungry," Irma said. "It's not fair."

"I wonder if they have fun, you know, camping out every night." Rad said. "Seeing stars and everything."

"I think it's sad," Elsie said. "They're not having fun. No place to play. I think they have to live there. Maybe can't afford a house."

"They could live in a motel for a while," Rad said.

"Costs way too much money," Rod said. "Something's wrong if Santa Joana doesn't have places for them to live."

"I don't think they can go to school," Elsie said. "No place to wash up and they'd have to wear dirty clothes."

"Not eat any breakfast before school," Irma said.

"OK," Rod said. "This doesn't look right. But what can we do? We're just kids."

"Mom, is this happening in Vista?" Elsie said. "Do you know? Maybe I know friends who are homeless. I want to do something."

"I'm thankful to have a roof over my head," Rod said, "especially in nasty weather."

"They have no yard to play in," Rad said. "It's not right. I'm gonna tell my friends in school tomorrow."

"Me, too," Irma said. "Tell 'em what we saw. Tell Mrs. White. Maybe she can do something."

My youngsters saw how life was for children without a home. I hoped the vandalism of our home held a different meaning now.

THIRTY

"Good for you!"

"Felicidades!"

"We're going to miss you."

"Good luck on your retirement."

We held a big party after hours in Vista Clinic's conference room. Red crepe paper swags and good luck messages hung on each wall. Aromas of chili-laden snacks catered by local Mexican restaurants filled the air. Spirited Latino music played through the sound system. Colorfully wrapped gifts lay on a conference table for Doctor Lopez's retirement.

He spoke to the group in his deep voice. Then he ceremoniously bowed and handed the pager to me. His wife and everyone clapped. Everyone except me.

Now whenever an emergency occurred, the responsibility was mine. Weekends, holidays, Christmas, snowy days, sunny days, and any child's birthday. Now I was the only cardiologist for Vista, for residents in all four towns around Vista, for those in far-away little communities, and for those living on Pueblo native land.

Next week, the party feeling at Vista Clinic disappeared.

Skinny-as-a-snake Doctor Gary Taylorini barged into my room during our lunch break. He stood at the open doorway to my exam room, glared at me, and started up in a voice loud enough to echo down the hallway.

"Me and other doctors here work for a just cause and not your futile idea. Work long hours to do what's right. While you think what's important is to offer healthcare to others. Even to those different from us. Who pay nothing to get health care." Taylorini stopped.

I remained silent and looked at him. He stepped closer and I noticed how hard Taylorini swallowed. I watched his Adam's apple bob. He continued.

"Not enough resources and time for everyone. Not our fault they don't follow our programs. If we did it your way, we'd have to ration care like they do in Europe and Canada." He took a deep breath and looked around my exam room.

"If government becomes involved," he said, "God help us. They'll tell us what to do, how to do it, and how much we can get paid. We won't stand for that nonsense." He stopped.

I stood still and remained silent. If he was waiting for my defense, he wouldn't get it. I wouldn't give my words to this angry man. He took another step toward me and started up with a louder voice.

"Doctors will leave their practices, making it only worse. Small hospitals and clinics like Vista will have to close. Disaster for us. Stop telling everyone your flaky ideas. Just stop!" He stamped his boots and walked off.

Of course, I wanted Vista Clinic and Salud Hospital to stay open. Doctor Taylorini was only one of the Vista physicians I needed to work with. He seemed to be the spokesman. Other Vista physicians also fought against my efforts. Taylorini mentioned good points. Yes, physicians were healers, and not to be blamed for poverty's effect on healthcare.

I thought my points had a higher moral imperative. I wanted to offer healthcare to those who could afford to pay for insurance. I also wanted to give it to needy patients. It was never right to lift up one group of people by putting another group down, regardless of their economic situation. Nor did I want to take anything away from those who could afford the best healthcare. I only wanted it to be fair.

I had no idea if morality and fairness could actually be parts of my life or parts of any physician's life.

After clinic ended, I hurried home on a stormy day to tell Reeann about this latest tirade. She was sitting in the kitchen with her head in her hands, sliced onions sat on one counter, and her open flip phone and notebook on the counter in front of her. She was not whistling.

"Good you showed up," Reeann said. "My blood pressure must be soaring to the moon. Heart's beating like it's outta my chest. Feet and hands have turned freezy."

"Reeann! What happened?"

"Five phone calls putting our home on shaky ground."

"What? Who?"

"Didn't own up. Came across as adults. Each rattled away in a different voice. Scribbled down everything they said."

Reeann handed me her list of calls and I read them.

"You have pushed us to the limits. We have had enough. The earlier vandalism of your house was only the beginning. Do not strip us of our way of life. Take a leave of absence already. Find better ways to practice medicine."

"You are in jeopardy. Your house is at risk. Get on the right side of this argument. Or leave Vista. If not, we will punish you. You will see."

"You and your four kids better be careful. We are ready to set fire to your house. You have to bow out of this fight. Your ideas do not make sense. We will round up your patients to work against you. We will stop your nonsense."

"We will wreck your house. We are braver than you. Healthcare does not need to be equal. Those other patients are simply not like us."

"No changes are needed in our clinic. We are not going to change our treatments. We have the upper hand. Patients do not deserve better healthcare without paying. We will inflict damage and burn your house down."

What on earth was going on? Was this the consequence of standing up to indignant physicians? Their words seemed to represent evil itself, entrenched and stubborn. They threatened to take away any hope of ending bigotry. I looked out at rain falling from dark clouds into black puddles in our yard. A chill passed through my body.

"They think they can make me change my mind? Stop working for equity? No!" I pounded my fist on our kitchen counter. "I need to stand up for the poor more than ever."

"I've broken out in a cold sweat about a possible fire in our house," Reeann said. "Got a creepy feeling this is a sign of worse stuff coming. I feel it in my bones. We need to pay attention. Better get cops in the picture, yes?"

I phoned the non-emergency number of Vista's police department.

My children saw the police car arrive. They stopped playing outdoors and ran into the kitchen. A new uniformed police officer came indoors to take our report.

"Doctor Noah, phone threats can be frightening. We step in only after a person does something against the law. Give us a record of any calls, letters or acts."

"Glad to," I said. "What else can we do?"

"Keep us informed of more threats. You know, in case your home burns down."

I gasped.

Fear caused by the threats remained palpable in the room. I was bewildered. I didn't want fire to destroy our home. I didn't want to buckle under the threats. People who made calls would feel they'd been effective. I had to avoid that.

The officer gave us his contact card, shook Reeann's and my hands, nodded to my children, and left.

"Should we get an upgrade of our alarm system?" I said to Reeann.

"Already phoned our agent. He's making the scene tomorrow afternoon."

"Mom, you have to pull back," Rod said. "Hotheads could destroy our home."

"I won't give them power to stop me," I said.

"They could break windows," Rad said. "Throw stink bombs into rooms. Spray dark paint on walls. Graffiti them. Start fires."

"We'll beef up our alarm system," Reeann said.

"Alarms only ring after bullies cause harm, Mom," Rod said. "You have to tell everyone you'll stop."

"Look, I won't do that," I said. "I've made up my mind."

"What if someone gets hurt?" Irma asked me.

"Number one is that we must stay safe. We don't want to encourage more of these calls. They're trying to coerce me. I will not let them change my mind. I will not let them succeed. If I—"

Before I could say more, the phone rang. Each of us stared at Reeann's flip phone on the table. The ring sounded like a rattler. The open sides of the flip phone were like snake jaws spread open, ready to attack. I picked up the phone to breathe my fiery-hot anger down its throat. I heard a man's voice.

"You are going to run into hardship. We will destroy your house.

Nothing will remain. You and your family will suffer. You wanted more conflict and you will get it soon."

The speaker ended his call before I said anything. Hearing his threat was so terrifying I had to sit down. I touched my head where Torsten had assaulted me. I had to appear calm. Didn't want my youngsters to become more frightened. I took a deep breath.

"Reeann, despite this meddling, did you have a chance to prepare dinner?"

"I'll defrost something pronto that tastes even better than usual. Irma, please set the table. I'll have dinner prepped in five minutes."

Reeann served us chicken legs covered in tomato sauce and fried onions, with spinach, and small boiled potatoes. What a relief for us to sit around the table. We had a serene conversation. My youngsters had much to say about what they did in school.

I couldn't forget that threats were escalating at home and at the clinic. The more threats I received, the more I had to stand strong against irate physicians. I was beginning to believe they were scared by my ideas and, even more, scared of change.

I had to let go of any terrible problems that could happen at our home, and remain involved in my clinic patients.

"Here is Susana," Maria said when I walked into my exam room the next morning.

"You need to see what fellows are dispensing in the parking lot," Susana said right away. She gave me the flyer in her hand. I glanced at it.

In the middle of the page was a picture of a blue car confronting a choice of two roads, one brown and one white. At the top the printing said, *Citizens Defending the City of Vista*, in big letters.

Below the picture, smaller print read, *Vista Clinic Cardiologist has dangerous ideas about Healthcare. Her radical plan is to remove good Healthcare from us and give it to others. She will steer us into trouble. Act now to stop her.*

At the bottom it said, *To revoke her physician's license sign the petition at B.man.net.*

"May I keep this?" I said, trying to sound calm.

"Sure. Too ugly for me to carry home."

"Thanks." I put the paper aside.

"How are you doing?" I said. "How's your recovery?"

An echocardiogram I did several weeks previously at Vista Clinic showed that Susana's mitral valve had vegetation, meaning bacteria grew on her heart valve. The old valve opened and closed inefficiently. I told her she would need open-heart surgery.

At my referral, Susana's mitral valve was replaced a month ago at Salud Hospital. Surgery was successful. The replacement valve worked well. I saw her today for a follow-up appointment.

Susana told me she increased her amount of daily exercise, slept better, and enjoyed a positive view of her future. I made no changes and encouraged her to continue that path. She could return home.

As soon as Susana left, I called for Maria to come.

"What happened in the waiting room, Maria? Susana had a flyer. I guess others had one, too."

"I saw others holding a paper, Doctor Noah. What's it about?"

"They're making another effort to revoke my license. Don't know what to do. I need to solve problems my patients face because they're important. If they decide to—"

Maria interrupted and gave me a big hug.

"No, no. Won't happen. We need you here."

I was needed. I was the only cardiologist for hours and hours around.

The fact I was needed didn't seem important to physicians who stood against my ideas. If enough people signed the petition, I could lose my New Mexico license. I'd be chased out of the state. I'd lose the job I love and our attractive house. I'd lose what I gained through these decades.

I took another glance at the flyer, especially its large picture. The choice for roads was brown or white. Now I understood what the roads referred to. Made my stomach hurt.

THIRTY-SIX

"Hi Reeann," I said. "Noontime. What would you like for lunch?"

"Can you stay put for a sec? I want to own up to something."

"Sure. Own up to anything." I settled down on the edge of her bed, smoothing her navy bedspread.

"Need to come clean about something from before I joined up with you."

When I had walked into Reeann's bedroom, I noticed her blinds were shut, making her room dark. The Price is Right game show played on her TV. Reeann was watching in her recliner with Rindy on her lap and Kelsey Ann on the floor beside her.

"There was a time I wanted to blow someone away." She muted the TV. "The man I lived with in a third floor New York City walkup. A disgusting dump. He'd hit the bottle, howl, and kick furniture. Hurl stuff at me. Slug me."

I clapped my hand over my mouth. She also endured beating. I suspected her story was going to get worse before getting better. I hugged myself, squeezing hard.

"One day he came home", she said, "already boozed up to the max. Gunned down my doggie, my little Sally. He wobbled, opened up on me. Only grazed my wrist." Reeann took a deep breath, rubbed a little scar on her wrist I hadn't noticed before, and then held her hands in fists.

I couldn't imagine she'd undergone all this trauma. Encountering Tortsten at our home with a gun years ago must have awakened terrible memories.

"I hurled his dinner in his face. Kicked him in his you-know-what. He let go of the gun and curled into fetal position on the rug. Tried to claw melted cheese off his face."

"Still hot?"

"Yeah. I made a break for it. Ran like mad downstairs. I should've snatched the gun. Should've snuffed out the bastard."

"Picked up the gun?" I looked around. I couldn't believe what I heard. "Do you know how to use a gun?"

"Never held one in my hand. Could have at least zipped downstairs with it. See? He must've gotten hold of his gun while I did my vanishing act. Neighbors prob'ly got an earful of the gunshots. Cops were already outdoors."

"Oh, good. Police came."

"Not good. Soon as the cops sprinted upstairs, he zapped one. If I'd've grabbed his gun....If only I'd've grabbed it away....The cop wouldn't've gotten messed up."

"He shot one of them? He's in prison?"

"Hope so. Stumped when he'll get set free. Maybe he'll take off after me. I always lock our house."

"You always do."

"I lugged Sally to be cremated. Peeled off to the airport and blew my cash on a one-way ticket to Portland." She combed her fingers through her gray hair and took a deep breath.

"I never owned up to this. To no one. Except now, to you." She took another deep breath. Her eyes filled with tears.

"Anger's still deep inside me," she said in a shaky voice. "Hate it. Wish it would disappear."

"Dear Reeann, I'm very sorry."

"No. *I'm* sorry I'm still hanging on to the hate. You said the ugly doctors threatened you and the kids. I'd've finished 'em off if they'd've touched anyone. Opposite to what I believe in,

to act toward others the way I'd want them to act toward me. Well, I'm trying to get past it—" She sniffed.

"We were all dismayed," I interrupted. "You went through terrible trauma and still treat us with love. The anger is only a tiny part of you. The love you show is huge."

I stood up, bent over, and held her close to me for a few seconds. She looked older and more tired than I recalled. I sat down when she started to speak again.

"Been sitting here stewing. Missed by a mile being the person I wanted to be. I didn't do the right things. Didn't say the right things." She wiped sweat off her forehead, rubbed her hand dry on the front of her shirt, and squeezed her shoulders with her arms crossed in front of her.

"Reeann, it's all right," I said softly. "No one is perfect."

"No, it's lousy. I didn't even write the right things. After I wrote stuff on Facebook, everything..." She took another deep breath. "I kick myself for that."

She gave a long yawn. Her hands shook while she removed her glasses and wiped her eyes. Sweat glistened on her face.

"That's what I needed to get off my chest," she said. "Nothing more I can pull off. Nobody shall sleep. Nobody shall sleep." She shifted her position in the recliner.

"What?" I looked at her quizzically.

"You know, words from one of my favorite arias." She wiped hair away from her still-damp face, looked up at the silent TV, and shook her head. "Did you say noontime? Fix me scrambled eggs with Saltines?"

"Sure," I said. "Eggs with Saltines. Very important you shared those events, dear Reeann. You're so brave. I'll be back soon."

Kelsey Ann followed me to the kitchen. Right away, I noticed the blinds were open. Sunshine reflected brightly off white kitchen cabinets.

I put Reeann's flowered plate and fork on the counter, took the egg carton out of the fridge, and pulled a small fry pan out of the cabinet.

I had to sit down. Her confession shattered my image of the sweet, gentle, intelligent Reeann. She held onto much anger and yet was kind to us.

I thought I knew her fully after living with her for almost twenty years. Maybe a person cannot know another fully, no matter how long or how closely we live with each other. We might still hold on to secrets others would never know.

I should have realized Reeann faced serious problems. Of course she repressed them while she lived with us. To have kept that secret must have been awkward. Tough for anybody to keep such a disturbing secret and still have a healthy self-image. Maybe everyone in the whole world held ugly repressed memories.

Could I have ever wanted to kill someone? Of course not! True, I also was not the person I wanted to be. I didn't do everything right. I believed I was decent, innately good. I was a physician with a desire to heal.

The room was quiet and brightly illuminated. I closed my eyes for a second, took a deep breath, and shook my head. If someone came after my children, threatening their life, could I have struck out and killed them?

Of course! I had to admit it. Under a crisis involving my children I could kill to protect them.

How, I had no idea. I also never held a gun. Never held mace. Never held a switch-blade knife. Only held a scalpel and only in the Special Procedure Room. I still would have done whatever was needed.

I realized Reeann wasn't the only one with secrets. I had secrets I never told anyone. Secrets that weighed me down. With Torsten's death, I only needed to admit them to myself. I sighed and finally acknowledged them.

Twenty-two years ago, Torsten threatened to commit suicide if I didn't marry him.

I believed him, just in case. I pondered my choices. I wanted a family and he was the prominent route to that. I wasn't dating anyone else while busy with my internship. If I married him, I could achieve my aim.

Or I could have waited and found a better husband. I could have had great babies without Torsten's abuse.

No, I couldn't have done that. It was a dilemma. If I didn't marry Torsten, he'd probably kill himself. I didn't want his death on my conscience. Of course, whatever he did was his responsibility. But I might have been the only one to stop his act of desperation.

Love was never part of my consideration. Nor his.

Our marriage was a sham, a fake. Worthwhile only because I had four beautiful babies.

Suicide was Torsten's first threat. Our marriage was based on threats to make me do whatever he wanted. He identified my soft spots. Used them to manipulate me.

Maybe Torsten acted that way because of the way he was brought up. Maybe someone had abused him physically or emotionally. Maybe it was due to the social situation in Germany. Maybe it was his way to respond to his sense of insecurity. He had a reason for his behavior, still obscure. I was sorrowful for the way he had to live.

Life has been much more complicated than I'd expected when I was a naïve young woman in Germany.

I stood up, fried two eggs, and slid them onto Reeann's plate. I opened our blue metal canister of Saltines and removed six. Poured hot water into her Thinker mug with her chamomile tea bag. Added an ice cube to the cup, as she always wanted.

I put Reeann's lunch on a plastic tray, placed a fork and paper napkin with it, and carried everything to her dark bedroom, with Kelsey Ann beside me. I noticed the TV sound was still muted. I put the tray down on the little chair-side table.

Reeann was in her recliner. Her head hung down.

She didn't respond when I said her name.

I knelt beside her, touching her wrist for her pulse. Nothing. Felt for a pulse at her jaw. Nothing. Tried to detect her breaths. Nothing.

I laid my head on her knees, moaned, and cried. Kelsey Ann pushed her nose around to reach my tearful face.

At 81 years of age, Reeann died from her second stroke, somewhat like her family members. I recalled the names of others whose death tore away from me, too many to name. Now I added the name of my dearest friend Reeann. Gone.

Life encroached on my plans to change healthcare. No, not life. Death. I'd been busy with death instead of healing.

I phoned Vista Clinic.

"I have to take time off. Reeann died."

I heard Maria gasp.

"It's difficult," I said. "Very difficult. I'm not dealing well with it. Please reschedule my patients through Monday."

"Of course, Doctor Noah. Right away. So sorry for your loss."

I notified Doctor Heinder's office. He called back and assured me an autopsy was unnecessary. I arranged to have Reeann's body cremated, according to her written directive. That afternoon was ugly and stormy with thunder and lightning.

My sons and daughters stayed home to attend Reeann's small memorial service.

They sat in silence, none of them looking at the others. Tears rolled down Elsie's cheeks. Rad stared out the window. Rod's knees trembled. He set his palms down on them to quiet the motion. Irma started sobbing.

After Reeann's service was over, I gave them each a long hug. We ate dinner together almost like we used to. Next day, they returned to their current life. The three younger ones went to college and Rod to his job. Meanwhile, Kelsey Ann and Rindy sniffed around the house for days, presumably to find Reeann.

How immensely helpful Reeann had always been. She was here when three angry physicians started their threats, and when each continued threatening on their own. She was here when the three rival physicians increased to five at the Vista meeting, and when the policeman hounded Rod. She was here when our house was vandalized and when we received phone calls threatening more damage to it. How often I depended on her being around, available to lean on. Now I had no one to lean on.

Days passed and I felt my loss more strongly. Reeann had always been here, always was the answer to my problems. Now she was cut out of my life. I sensed her presence like a person with phantom-limb pain. It hurt.

I sat in front of my uneaten lunch, rocking back and forth. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross had identified five stages of mourning. I teetered through anger, denial, bargaining, depression and acceptance, like waves, like tides, in and out, back and forth, over and over.

I made the wrong assumption, thinking harassment would stop after I suffered my terrible loss. Didn't take long before I found out how wrong I was.

"Hi Rod," I said on my cell phone. "It's Mom. I'm in Vista Clinic parking lot. Can you pick me up?"

"Sure, Mom. Right away. Why?"

"Flat tires."

After my clinic hours were over, I had walked toward my car in the dark. Only two other cars were left in the parking lot. No one else was around. I came nearer and saw them. All four tires, completely flat.

In the morning, I phoned to have my car towed to the tire store in town. Rod drove me to the shop, which smelled of rubber. I was curious if four tires could get flat on their own.

"All four tires are slashed," the mechanic said. "Not by accident, Doctor Noah. Someone with a big knife planned and acted purposely."

He confirmed my negative thoughts.

"You need to send a report to your insurance company and the police," he said. "It's called Criminal Mischief, which incurs a big fine."

"This is outrageous. I can't comprehend why any person would behave like that."

"You'll need new tires." He said with a shrug.

I sighed, withdrew my credit card, purchased four expensive tires, and had them installed. Rod drove on to work. I drove home alone.

I had times when my hope ran full and strong. Now my vision grew dim, my strength weakened, and hope was in short supply. I put my hands in my pockets and fingered the camera Reeann gave me. I needed strength and hope.

That evening, my youngsters and I sat around our dining table. I sat in Reeann's chair close to the kitchen. As we scraped clean our dessert plates, we considered what to do. My kids spoke, one right after the other.

"More harassment," Rad said. "Snotty doctors still wish you'd drop out."

"Let's not notify the police after the trouble I had with them," Rod said.

"Then we're alone. No one will help us," Irma said.

"We should report the damage. Make the person owe an immense fine," Elsie said.

That night, I wondered what Reeann would say from her realistic point of view. They wouldn't quit until I quit, she'd tell me. The bitter physicians would continue to resist my ideas.

I was less realistic. I wondered when they would stop.

I rested in bed. Thought about the last time I saw Reeann. My eyes became swollen, my vision blurred, and my pillow damp with tears. But, with the little camera securely in my hand, I felt protected. I fell asleep dreaming of my life's eccentric route.

Next day, I reassessed the situation. Maybe Reeann's beliefs held a message for me. She always wanted me to be more realistic. I better take the first step to follow her suggestion. I rubbed my head, uncertain how realistic I could be.

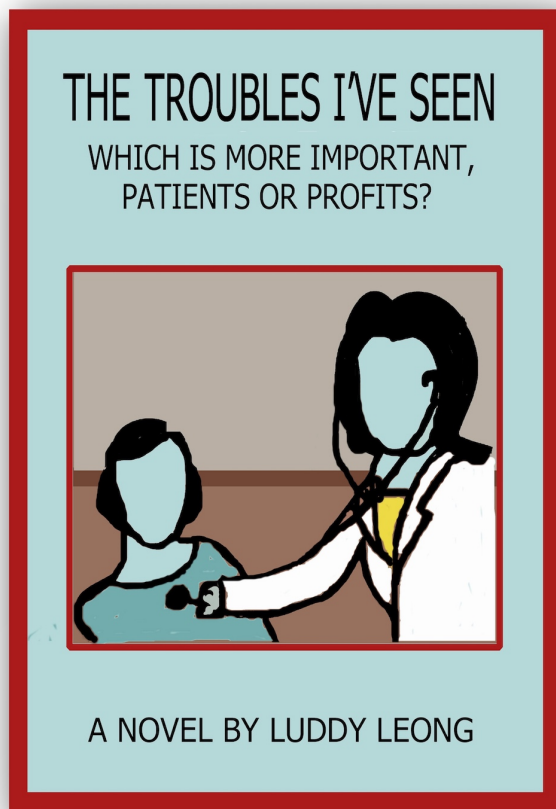
Slashing my tires was a vile case of harassment, worse than the others. The worst I'd endured. Realistically, it could have been more dangerous. The mechanic acknowledged the person wielded a large knife to slash my tires. What if the harassment intensified?

What if the person decided to use the large knife on me or one of my dear children?

I shivered, feeling weak. Tears surfaced and flowed down my cheeks. I felt more alone than ever during this dark and frightful time in my life.

That evening, I got ready for bed, took off my jacket, and fingered the objects in its pockets. My pager and Reeann's camera, although inanimate, imbued me with hope and courage. I understood my position better.

I heard nature's voice most clearly when I hit bottom. I saw nature's bright glory best during my blackest moments. I received nature's strength easiest while I was the weakest. I sensed nature's love even though I seemed deeply alone. Surrounded by its presence, I regained peace of mind.



As a single mother and immigrant, Anicka Noah faces reversals. She finally becomes a cardiologist in New Mexico. She recognizes injustice to minorities in healthcare based on her personal background. She's compelled to expose the troubles she's seen. When she bears witness, she receives increasing threats to her children, home, and career.

THE TROUBLES I'VE SEEN
WHICH IS MORE IMPORTANT, PATIENTS OR PROFITS?
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