

AFTER THE FALL

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What's Next...For You?

AFTER THE FALL
A NOVEL



PATRICIA GUSSIN

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FIRST EDITION

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*This book is dedicated to my brothers and sisters
Joanne, Don, Ed, Mary, and Terri*

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After the Fall is the fourth Laura Nelson novel and completes the series. I am grateful for the help from so many over the span of time from *Shadow of Death* through *After the Fall*.

AFTER THE FALL





CHAPTER ONE

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 1992

“Mr. Parnell, I’m a surgeon, not an administrator.”

“And I’m a pretty good judge of character and talent,” Paul Parnell told Laura. “You have to give me that. I handpicked Fred thirty years ago, and now he wants to retire and get some use out of that yacht he gave Christina for their fortieth anniversary. You’re our choice to replace him.”

Dr. Laura Nelson sat between Parnell, Keystone Pharma chairman of the board, and Dr. Fred Minn, vice president of research, at a well-appointed table at the Fountain Room of Philadelphia’s Four Seasons Hotel. Laura had assumed dinner to be a gesture of appreciation for her research on their new drug, Immunone, and her recent appearance at the FDA Advisory Committee hearing on their behalf. Now it was clear—they were trying to recruit her.

As Parnell spoke, Laura admired the fit and fabric of his charcoal gray suit with the thinnest of stripes—but why not spend money on clothes? Paul Parnell was a billionaire and a mega-philanthropist, as well as a Nobel Prize recipient.

“Not a yacht, a forty-foot Sea Ray,” Minn said. “First on my agenda is a trip to New Zealand.”

“On your Sea Ray?” Laura couldn’t imagine the frail man negotiating that journey.

Minn chuckled. “No. By air. I have twin grandchildren there whom I’ve never even seen.” Minn looked his age at sixty-seven,

a small man with a neatly trimmed gray beard, intelligent blue eyes, and a ready smile.

“I have twin daughters,” Laura said, glad for the diversion. “Are yours boys or girls?” She normally did not mix business with family, but she needed a gracious way out of this hard-sell recruitment situation. She loved surgery; couldn’t imagine life without an operating room. She loved her job as chief of surgery at Tampa City Hospital and head of the surgical department at the medical school. An office job was out of the question.

“So much for twins,” Parnell said. “Among my grandchildren, I have two sets. What does that have to do with Laura becoming vice president of research? Look, Laura, I’ve followed your career ever since that epidemic you got yourself into in Tampa.”

Seven years ago, Keystone Pharma had provided an investigational drug, ticokellin, which had saved innumerable lives, including that of one of her twin daughters. Yes, she did owe Paul Parnell and Keystone Pharma a debt, but did she owe them her career? Her heart began to race just thinking of that epidemic disaster...

“I’ve briefed Paul on the role you played in organizing the clinical trials for Immunone,” said Minn. “You recruited the most influential heart-lung transplant surgeons across the country, designed the protocol, guided the statisticians, presented at the FDA—the whole nine yards.”

“It’s been a real pleasure working with you, Dr. Minn, and your team, and collaborating with other heart-lung transplant surgeons, but I’m *not* a clinical pharmacologist. I’m *not* an immunologist. I’m *not* an administrator—”

“How can you say that?” Parnell interrupted with his wide, charming smile. “You’re the head of the surgical department of a major university, a department that has fared very well in your hands, judging from the NIH grants you pull in.”

The conversation went round and round. Laura said “no.”

Parnell and Minn said “yes.” Appetizer, main course, pecan pie with coffee.

“Will you promise to think about it?” Parnell concluded.

“I need you to say ‘yes,’” Minn said. “I promised my wife. Once Immunone is approved, we’re off to New Zealand. And Paul won’t let me go until I have my replacement.”

“You think about our offer, Laura,” Parnell said, pulling a folded sheet of paper from his jacket pocket, handing it to her. “This summarizes the elements of compensation. Salary, bonuses, stock, stock options, health benefits, use of the company aircraft, moving expense reimbursement, that kind of thing. Now, I’m heading to my room. Sales meeting’s here in the morning to get our reps all fired up about Immunone.”

“I’m spending the night in the company apartment on Rittenhouse Square,” Minn said. “Snow’s forecasted for tonight, and I want to walk there before it starts.”

“Are you staying in the hotel tonight, Laura?” Parnell asked.

“In town,” she said. Not, *I’m staying with my boyfriend*—or whatever a woman her age calls the man she’s seeing. “I have an early flight home to Tampa.”

“Hope the snow holds off,” Parnell said.

“And the ice,” said Minn.

“Back to the sunshine tomorrow morning,” Laura said as she bid good-night to Parnell, collected her coat, and walked with Minn to the front door.

“Taxi?” the doorman inquired, his voice muffled by the wool scarf that all but covered his lower lip.

“Yes, please.” Laura sniffed the frigid air, wondering if the subtle smell was that of impending snow.

Minn stayed by her side as the doorman stepped to the curb to hail the lone cab lurking across the street. The frail older man seemed swallowed up by his thick cashmere coat. Why wasn’t he wearing a hat?

“You go along before these conditions get worse,” she urged. “Better yet, let’s share the cab.”

“Don’t be silly, I’m just a block away.” With a wave, Minn headed for the sidewalk.

As Laura reached to open the cab’s door, the rumble of a motor starting up distracted her. In the eerie lighting outside the hotel, she could make out a vehicle, an older-style Jeep, across the street, maybe a half block away. Dark green or camouflage, or maybe black. On the roads tonight, a Jeep seemed an appropriate vehicle. As she climbed into the cab, she saw the Jeep pull out into the street.

“Where to, ma’am?” her bearded, burly driver asked.

Laura hesitated a moment, her attention on the Jeep, now accelerating.

“Ma’am? Where do you want to go?”

“Sorry. 1900 Delancy Place,” she said. “I know it’s not that far, I’ll pay double.”

“Too far to be walking in those high heels, ma’am,” he said with a chuckle. “And here comes the snow.”

Laura leaned back into the seat and opened the window for just a second so she could feel an icy flake on her hand. She’d moved from Michigan to Florida twenty-one years ago, never missing winter at all.

During the brief ride, Laura’s mind drifted to a disturbing message from a man who had called her office in Tampa after she’d left for Washington, DC. A man claiming he was assistant to the mayor of Detroit, whom she knew to be Coleman Young. His name was Lonnie Greenwood, a name Laura did not recognize. His reason for contacting her: his son had cystic fibrosis and needed a lung transplant. Fine, that’s what she did: lung transplants. Then he’d specifically stated that she be “reminded about Johnny Diggs.” Johnny Diggs had died twenty-five years ago at the age of eighteen. How did she know this? She had pulled the trigger on the gun that killed him. *Could this Lonnie Greenwood know? Impossible!* With a force of will that had served her well in the past, she closed off that compartment of fear. Focus on the here and now.

The here and now jolted her back with a skidding approach to the curb at Tim's place.

"Careful on the ice, ma'am," the cabbie said as she paid him. Before Laura stepped into the condo building, she stood for a moment, letting the white flakes caress her face, tasting their crispness on her tongue.



CHAPTER TWO

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 16

Parked along the curb down the street from the Four Seasons Hotel, Jake Harter was positioned just right, ready to fire up and go. He'd hung around the bar of the Fountain Room long enough to watch the headwaiter present the bill to the dinner party, then he'd slipped out and headed to his vehicle. He didn't need to kill the old man, only seriously disable him, but once the Jeep made contact, the outcome would be out of his control. Steel and g-forces on flesh and bone.

Jake pulled the black knit cap over his crew-cut, salt-and-pepper hair. The temperature had plunged, but what was that for a tough former Marine? He hunched further down in the olive-drab Jeep, the vehicle that had been through a lot of years with him. He had nothing personal against Fred Minn. Matter of fact, he admired him. The guy was a straight shooter, pretty much a novelty in the pharmaceutical industry. But retiring the old guy was now necessary, a temporary solution as he finalized his ultimate plan.

Keystone's drug, Immunone, must not be approved—at least not yet. Dr. Minn, the mastermind behind the approval process, knew every detail about that drug. Without him, the company would scramble for direction. That would give Jake the time he needed.

Jake watched as the doorman held the door for the woman,

Dr. Nelson, and the hatless gray-haired man with the stooped shoulders, Fred Minn. A cab immediately pulled up to the Four Seasons entrance.

Shit! If Minn got in that cab, tonight was a loss.

As Jake watched, only the woman climbed into the back seat. Okay. Good. He started the Jeep, noticing for the first time how loud it sounded. Just as Jake had anticipated, Minn turned right, heading away from the hotel. A short walk down the deserted sidewalk and he'd be on 18th Street. Just a few steps after that, he'd reach Cherry, cross at the light, and take a right, heading to Keystone's corporate apartment in that high-rise on Cherry Street, less than a block away.

Bad night like this, there wasn't much traffic in Logan Square, and that made Jake's job a lot easier. Cherry was a one-way street heading west, so he had an unobstructed view. Minn would have to step off the curb onto Cherry, his left side exposed. Conditions were perfect—no other pedestrians, no traffic, a moonless night, and snow obscuring the ground. Jake took one last look. Any sign of a cop and he'd abort the mission. Wait for the next opening.

Nothing suspicious. Go!

The Jeep shot forward in a direct trajectory. The man reacted, turned, his chest exposed to the oncoming vehicle. The impact was direct, flinging Minn onto the adjoining sidewalk. Jake felt and heard a thump, but had no time to glance back. The puny guy was either dead or a bag of broken bones and crushed organs.

Jake sped on, just a few blocks west to 22nd Street. The Jeep was the lone car on the road. A right on 22nd would take him to the Vine Street Expressway. With ease, he merged with the few cars heading east toward the Delaware River. At this time of night, a five-minute shot to I-95, his route back home to Rockville. As the Vine Expressway took him over the Ben Franklin Parkway, Jake glanced furtively off to the right for signs of police activity.

No tail. He drove with caution, attracting no attention, fitting in among the lanes of scant traffic. Somewhere on the way

home, he'd pull over, reattach his own Maryland plates, and lose the Pennsylvania plates he'd lifted from a car in an off-airport parking lot. He'd check out the Jeep body. The vehicle already had its share of dings, but any damage from ramming the old man could be covered up by a tussle with a tree trunk.

Snow started to accumulate on the drive back home to Rockville, and Jake kept to the speed limit. He'd had a tense day at the office, trying to dampen his agency's enthusiasm for Keystone's new drug. The FDA Advisory Committee yesterday had been overwhelmingly positive. For the first time in his project management career, an advisory committee had wholeheartedly endorsed a drug, pressuring the FDA to approve it expeditiously. As the assigned FDA New Drug Evaluation manager for this project, Jake had organized the public meeting. He'd tried to insert as much pessimism as possible, but once the pro-approval frenzy started, Jake knew he'd have to come up with a new plan to slow the approval process. By chance, in the elevator on his way out of the FDA Parklawn Building, Dr. Fred Minn, Keystone's key scientist, and his consultant, Dr. Laura Nelson, were discussing their dinner appointment for Sunday night in Philadelphia. Perfect timing: get rid of Minn.

He was ready now for his next step, but Karolee might not go down so easily.



CHAPTER THREE

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 16

Laura and Tim Robinson met when they were in medical school in Detroit. That'd been twenty-five years ago. Laura had been married. Tim had been, and still was, single. They'd reconnected on and off ever since Laura's husband, Steve, died fourteen years ago. A long-distance relationship since Laura was chief of surgery in Tampa and Tim a pediatric heart surgeon in Philadelphia. But a relationship that had progressed from platonic, to intimate, to romantic, to what? Love? Could that even be possible for her?

Now, as they snuggled on Tim's living room sofa, each with a brandy snifter in hand, Laura told him about her dinner meeting with Paul Parnell and Fred Minn.

"You wouldn't believe Keystone's agenda," Laura told Tim. "They want me to be vice president of research. *Me*. I almost laughed in their faces, but they were dead serious."

She set her drink down and lifted her blond hair off the collar of the bulky robe that Tim had lent her. "Imagine me wearing a suit every day. A big office in the Executive Suite. Jetting off in the company plane. Of all the perks, that definitely would be my favorite."

Laura looked up at Tim, expecting an incredulous grin. No grin. A serious, concerned expression, instead.

"What did you tell them, Laura?"

"I told them 'no-way.'"

“Why?”

“Because I don’t want to be a bureaucrat.”

“You should think about it. Think about the influence you’d have in developing new drugs that would save thousands of lives. Right now, when you operate, you have a direct impact on several patients’ lives a week. But when you develop a new drug, like Immunone, you’ll save so many more patients who would have died from organ rejection.”

“Tim?” Laura said, reaching over to tousle his rust-red curls. “Of all people, you should know what it’s like to be a surgeon. There can be no better career. I take out diseased lungs and insert new ones. That’s what I do. I’m good at it.”

“But you did enjoy organizing that big clinical trial for Immunone, right?”

“Sure, but the company did most of the organizing. I just helped out. Gave them advice when they needed it. Convinced all the other surgeons to come on board.”

“I rest my case, babe. You did a hell of a job.”

Laura was about to say something, but stopped when she felt Tim lean into her, lift her face to his and kiss her. The kiss lasted quite a long time, the longest and best kiss she’d had for way too many years. And it made her feel dreamy and sexy and... *I’m a forty-eight-year-old woman for God’s sake...* But she did not pull back. After the longest time, Tim pulled her even closer and whispered, “Will you marry me, Laura?”

She froze. Didn’t say anything. Couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t look up at him.

Time passed. He finally said, “Laura, did you hear me?”

“I did,” she whispered.

More silence as she struggled for what to say. She’d suspected that someday Tim would ask her to marry him. He’d hinted at it. He’d joked about it. He’d even clowned around with her kids about it. They loved “Uncle Tim”; he was like a surrogate father—albeit long distance and occasional.

“And?”

“Tim,” she said, her eyes meeting his. “I’ve been single for so long, raising five kids on my own. I don’t know if I would even be a good wife.” She didn’t know if she even wanted to be a wife ever again. Sure, she’d thought about having a partner. When the kids were younger, she worried that she owed them a father figure. But she’d gone it alone, and now they were grown and launching their own separate lives.

“What about you, Laura? You’ve always been there for your kids. But what about you? You and me? You must know I’ve loved you for a long, long time. Maybe since that trip to Montreal when we were surgery students.”

“You were dating my best friend back then,” she reminded him. “And I was married.”

“Yes,” Tim said.

Laura wondered whether he knew more about what else happened to her on that fateful trip to Montreal. The falling snow outside, now huge flakes, reminded her of that snowbound experience twenty-three years ago.

In silence, they stared at the window, the ledge covered with white fluff. Tim took her left hand and gently rubbed her ring finger. She’d put away the ring long ago, without regret. *What would it be like, married to Tim?*

“I love your kids, Laura, and I think they like me, but it’s not about them. This is about you and me. Do you love me? There, I’ve asked you. The question that scares the life out of me.”

Tim, the entrenched bachelor, scared? *Scared that I might say “no?”*

In the silence, she wondered, *Do I love him?* Truthfully, she didn’t know. She’d never allowed herself to indulge in thoughts of love. Maybe she did. But one thing was sure. She couldn’t hurt him. Tim had been there for her whenever she needed him. Back when her son Patrick had needed heart surgery. Back when her daughter Natalie had nearly died. She *had* to say something. “Yes, Tim, I do love you. I really do.”

“Then marry me.”

“Can you give me some time to think about it? I mean, you caught me by surprise. I’m a little overwhelmed.”

“Let’s finish our brandy and then go to bed.”

Yes, go to bed. Over the past few years, Laura had gradually slipped into an intimate relationship with Tim. When she visited him in Philly. When he visited her in Tampa. They never slept in separate beds anymore. Yes, sleeping with Tim every night would be beyond wonderful. But marriage? Giving up her freedom? Giving up her surgical practice in Tampa? Giving up the department chair she’d worked and fought for?

Nestled in the crook of Tim’s arm, hearing his soft, regular breathing, Laura tried to relax, to just give herself time to consider Tim’s proposal. Tomorrow she’d be back on her own in Tampa, facing the usual round of problems that crept up in her absence. One problem, especially. That message from Lonnie Greenwood.



CHAPTER FOUR

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 16

Jake had planned to return to his home in Rockville, Maryland, after he sped away from what was left of the old man in Philadelphia. Lights off, he'd park the Jeep in his driveway, let himself inside, and hunker down. His wife was away and, for all appearances, he'd have spent the night home alone. But as Jake got closer, he found himself diverting off course. With Karolee away, he could spend what was left of the night with Addie. Tonight, of all nights, he needed her. Reaching Addie's apartment in nearby Bethesda, he took the elevator to the fourth floor of the high-rise. He tapped on her door with his fingertips. Tonight was not a night to draw attention to himself. *Open the door, Addie.*

No response. Should have made a key for himself. Jake knocked and waited, knocked again. Addie was a light sleeper. Certainly she'd hear him.

The door across the hall opened a crack. "What's going on?" The voice was cranky and he couldn't tell if it was male or female. "It's the middle of the night. Give it up. Go away."

"Shit," he muttered, turning, keeping his back to the crack.

Then Addie's door opened. Her hand grabbed his coat sleeve and pulled him inside.

"It's me, Addie," he said. Unnecessary. Who else would it be? "I tried not to wake you."

"What are you doing here?" Her eyes blazed and her words