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The Fence Mender

This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

THE FENCE MENDER

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Chapter 1

Dr. Vera Drake examined the unconscious young man. “He has lost too much blood,” she murmured. She figured he was about the same age as Marshal, her grandson, making him no older than thirteen or fourteen years old.

As the doctor in charge of Raven Hills Regional ER, she was surprised she had never seen this teenager before. All of Raven Hills came through her emergency room at one time or another. She turned to the nurse on duty.

“Mabel, who is this boy?”

“His name is Blue, Blue MacGregor. After his father became a drug addict, he lived with an uncle who died then with his grandmother, who became

terminally ill and was sent to hospice. He has been on his own for a few months now.”

“Where does he live?”

“I don’t know. His grandmother had a trailer in Ergo Estates,” snarled Mabel, as she walked away.

A ghost of a smile wafted across Dr. Vera’s lips. *Ergo Estates*, she mused. No wonder Mabel was acting as if she did not want to touch the boy. Ergo Estates was a trailer park, home to many of the county’s poor whites, blacks and Hispanics. It was the place for petty criminals, drug dealers, methamphetamine abusers and prostitutes to ply their illegal trade.

The hospital staff would have been surprised to learn she had grown up there. Back then, most of the residents of Ergo Estates worked for Mr. Ergo Himes. Himes’ Mill produced over fifty percent of all the bed sheets made in the United States. Ergo Estates was a mill village. It was modeled after William Gregg’s Graniteville Mill. Graniteville in Aiken County was South Carolina’s first cotton factory.

But transferring the idea to another county in South Carolina had not worked. Three decades ago, the factory/mill had gone bankrupt. Later Mr. Himes’ grandson had turned the place into a large low- maintenance trailer park. Dr. Vera was deep in memory when she felt a gentle tug on her lower left arm.

“Here,” Mabel said with characteristic gruffness. She had returned with a large blood-spattered backpack in tow. “This came with that boy in the ambulance.”

“Thank you, Mabel. Please collect any insurance information from the sheriff and make sure you take care of your duties as head nurse.”

“Yes, Dr. Vera.” Inwardly, Mabel heaved a sigh of relief. *Let the good doctor take care of trailer trash*, she thought. Personally, she did not care for the open-door policy that Dr. Vera seemed to favor. As a nurse, she wanted nothing to do with the likes of Blue MacGregor. *What if he had impetigo or something even worse? Who knows what a blood test might reveal?*

Dr. Drake continued to examine Blue. He reminded her so much of her grandson, Marshal. Like her grandson, he was fair and blond. Blue was lanky, a tad bit taller than Marshal. Her grandchild was growing wider and muscular.

Marshal resembled his mother, who had married Dr. Vera’s son. She disliked his mother, Nora, but for reasons that were unworthy of a woman whose intellect was stellar.

Dr. Vera had always resented Marshal’s mother because she was everything Dr. Vera was not. His mother was tall, a former model, born blond with blue-green eyes. Her grandson had inherited his mother’s good looks. As Marshal’s grandmother, she was no longer considered that shorthaired old- looking Italian woman or even more often called that “Jewish doctor” .

In fact, she was neither Jewish nor Italian. Dr. Vera’s ancestors were French Huguenots who arrived as settlers in South Carolina over 200 years ago. Her parents had not been prosperous and eventually were able to secure employment at Himes Mill. After that

business went under, her father worked as the manager/maintenance man in Ergo Estates until his retirement. She would have suffered the same fate but she was smart enough to make the best grades and, later, wily enough to marry a wealthy “good old boy”. The husband always bragged to his friends that his wife was unique. She could take care of him in sickness and in health. One day, as he played golf, her husband had a massive heart attack, which killed him where he lay. She decided to forgive and to forget his insensitive treatment. Her son now ran several million-dollar businesses. She lived in a big mansion and her parents resided in a nearby home with assisted living. Marshal III and the hospital were her life now.

Still, the road to the top of her profession was littered with despair about past decisions made and numerous regrets, such as having but one child. Yet Marshal III had made all negative thoughts go away. Unlike his grandfather, her deceased husband, Marshal truly loved her. As a little boy, he had always been concerned about his “grandmamma.” She, in turn, adored him. Marshal II, her son, and Nora, his wife, were just close enough to be respectful and leave her to her own devices.

As Dr. Vera reminisced, Blue opened his big blue-green eyes. He emitted a gurgling sound, which surprised her. She gently admonished him to lie still. Every movement jeopardized his horribly injured body. He quickly shut and opened his eyes, moved his lips as if trying to tell her something. Then he fell into a fitful sleep.

Poor child. She had to get professional help for him. This hospital had no trauma physicians. She decided to call Dr. Patel in Spartanburg. He was one of the best trauma surgeons in the world. He was married to one of her best friends and he came *pro bono*. On his way through Greenville, he picked up the best anesthesiologists in the state. The husband and wife team, Dr. and Dr. (Mrs.) Wang, were willing to come just for the experience of the work. Dr. Vera was happy to have all of this doctor power available to her hospital, General Memorial.

After a long two-hour wait, the doctors finally arrived. Dr. Vera and a resident had prepped Blue for surgery because his condition refused to stabilize. She welcomed all of her comrades with open arms. Dr. Patel was one of her favorite people. Having been born on a dirt floor in a Delhi slum, he was humble, always willing to help the less fortunate. Sometimes, people who escape poverty choose to pretend the condition is unknown to them. He did not. His work with Doctors Without Borders indicated a genuine concern for the wretched of the earth. However, by the time the trio was ready to operate, Blue's condition had worsened.

Dr. Patel did an initial examination and shook his head as he stood over Blue. "I don't think I can help this young man but I will try."

Dr. Vera begged him to do his best. That was all that was required. Dr. Patel insisted that a nearby hospital in Anderson provide another surgeon for standby, just in case he was needed. There was not enough time, so Dr. Vera chose one of General Memorial's young surgeons for that purpose.

As the orderlies rolled Blue in for the surgery, Dr. Vera moved slowly toward the elevator. Tears flowed down her cheeks as she pushed the button to leave all of this misery on the floor above. When the doors opened, Nurse Mabel grabbed her hand and brusquely steered her into the elevator.

“Dr. Vera, the duty roster indicates you have been here for more than two days. You ought to fire some of these sorry doctors who don’t want to do emergency room duty. As women, we have to make it clear our orders are to be followed.”

Dr. Drake ignored her while nodding in agreement. If she fired her doctors, willy-nilly, with whom would she replace them? Few qualified surgeons and physicians wanted to work in rural areas, such as Raven Hills. So often she took what she could get and considered that a gift.

Dr. Vera walked back to the emergency room to resume her duties. In one hour, Dr. Hollis would relieve her for a couple of days. He never shirked his emergency room duties. Perhaps, he had the same type of home life as she did.

As she entered the room where Blue had been, she stumbled over his backpack. She picked it up and carefully emptied the contents on top of a hospital cot. There were three paperback short juvenile novels checked out from the public library, an algebra textbook, some pens, several legal pads, loose leaf papers, photos and a couple of binders. Her eyes were drawn to the legal pads and papers. The back of each pad was numbered and the papers were stamped with the words, “Lieutenant Governor’s

Writing Award for Fifth Grade, Aiken County School District 5 Winner.”

“You’re smart, aren’t you, Blue?” Dr. Vera muttered. She shook her head. *Why must she always talk to herself in the emergency room?* It was disconcerting to patients. Yet worse than that, was the constant comment by Mabel, “Senile old people talk to themselves that way.”

Dr. Vera put everything except the numbered pads and paper back into the bag. Usually she did not spend this much time trying to find out about a patient. For some reason, Blue intrigued her and she believed his writings must be well worth reading. She decided to take them to her office for a more thorough examination.

By the time she got back to her office, she realized she only had a few minutes to snack and no time to read. She locked the legal pads and papers in a metal cabinet in her office, munched a Baby Ruth bar, and guzzled a Fresca. Dr. Vera carefully locked her office and hurried back to a slow day in the ER. She slowed her walking pace as two men came toward her.

“Sheriff Thompson and Dr. Springham, to what do I owe this visit? Both of you should be resting after the accident.”

The sheriff, with a large hand bandage fastened securely, held up Blue’s backpack.

“Is this all that was brought with him, that Blue boy?”

“Yes, Sheriff, that’s all,” Dr. Vera replied, with a firm voice and direct eyes, which told a perfect lie.

Blue?”

“Sheriff, do you know what happened to

“We suspect he set fire to the college

research center last week. Videotape footage places him in the building. We think he may have set the fires at the Methodist AME Zion Church and at First Baptist on Friendship Drive. We were taking him in for questioning. I figured he was just a boy and there was no need for handcuffs. He and Dr. Springham were seated in the back of the police car. Then, for no reason, he tried to escape from a moving police car, causing us to collide with an eighteen-wheeler. My official car was completely destroyed. He was hanging out the door. A truck missed him but a car hit him as he was clinging to the door on the side of the highway.”

At that point, Dr. Vera understood why Dr. Patel felt he could not save Blue. She believed any child who could survive in a feral manner on his own might make it. In her heart, she prayed for his survival.

The sheriff made it clear he wanted to examine the contents of the backpack. “I need that bag for evidence. A nurse told me the boy was in surgery. When will he be out?”

Dr. Vera found the bloody backpack and turned it over to the sheriff. She forced a smile. “Blue is in surgery. As soon as the operation is over, I will call you, Sheriff.”

“Thank you, Doctor. But I will leave a couple of deputies here to insure everybody’s safety. That boy is a natural-born maniac.”

protest.

Dr. Vera nodded. She knew better than to
“I appreciate that you and your deputies are

looking out for this hospital, Sheriff.”

Dr. Vera watched them leave. She had no idea why she had chosen to keep the pads and papers to herself. The sheriff and Dr. Springham gave her the heebie-jeebies.

Sheriff Thompson had worked as head of her late husband's security detail for ten years before becoming Raven Hills' chief law enforcement officer. Since he had taken the helm, there had been many unexplained, mysterious occurrences but they were too vague to point clearly to an incompetent or corrupt police department. Crime appeared to be spiraling out of control. Mrs. Thompson was always coming to the ER, claiming she had fallen. Her motor skill responses had been checked and she was free of any major illnesses. Dr. Vera suspected the sheriff beat his wife, who tried to cover it up. His wife always described herself as a klutz.

While the sheriff annoyed her, Dr. Springham filled her with dread. He was the albino great grandson of the founder of Raven Hills. While serving in the U.S. armed services, his father had married his German mother, who was rumored to be Hitler's cousin. Others said she was the daughter of a commandant of one of the German extermination camps in Poland. No one really knew the true story.

Many people credited Dr. Springham with turning Raven Hills College into America's premier pre-med school. He was trained as a chemist, so this was quite an achievement. There were questions

about how a school with over 5,000 students could afford to award full scholarships to more than 40 percent of the student body without the benefit of federal money. Raven Hills College had the largest private endowment of any college of its size in the world.

Dr. Vera stifled a yawn as she walked toward her office. Her shift was now officially over. She decided she was too tired to drive the distance to her house. She would definitely have to take a quick nap before going home.

Chapter 2

Restrained knocks on her door roused Dr. Vera. She heard the voices of Dr. Springham and an orderly.

“She must be at home, Sir.”

“Could you please open her door?”

“No, we are not allowed in the doctors’ offices,” said the orderly, quite firmly. Apparently, Dr. Springham gave him the heebie-jeebies, too.

“No problem. I will call her in the morning about the contents of that boy’s backpack. When I checked it earlier, there were note pads inside.”

When Dr. Vera could no longer hear footsteps, she took a flashlight from her desk. She peered at the clock. It was after midnight, 0145 to be

exact. Why was Dr. Springham trying to get in her office so late, at a time when she would not be there?

Earlier, when she had returned to her office, she had a can of tomato soup and some saltines. If she had gone home, she would have stopped by a grocery store and loaded up with food. Even though she was five feet four, she was a foodie and did not care about being twenty pounds overweight. After eating, she called to get information about the progress of Blue's operation. Dr. Patel had called in two special nurses, whom she had agreed to pay.

When she had last checked, at 2300 that evening, Dr. Patel had assured her Blue was still alive. She was assured his fate would be known by the afternoon of the next day. So everyone at the hospital had assumed she'd gone home. Her regular car was being repaired and the people at Lexus had given her a brand new one to drive for the interim. She knew the tricky shenanigans the car dealer was trying to pull. The car was in her favorite color, a sapphire blue. They were hoping she would buy this new one and trade in her regular car. Her car was only three years old. No new car until the present one was ten years old.

It was better if everyone assumed I'd gone home but I actually just took a brief nap on the couch in my office, she thought. Her conclusion was confirmed when she checked her home telephone messages. She had so many calls she decided not to respond to any of them.

Instead, as she talked to herself, she ruminatively chewed her lower lip. *Why were the sheriff and Dr. Springham so interested in Blue's*

notebooks? She came to a conclusion. She had to read the legal pads without being disturbed. Carefully, she took her change purse out of her handbag. She listened at her door then opened it for an escape to the huge vending machine area. She was in luck because nobody was around as she gathered lots of snacks. She found a box full of trash bags, confiscating one. The sack was thrown across her left shoulder as she returned to her office. After all of that, she was able to just walk right into her office, for she had forgotten to lock the door. The key was still in her pocketbook. This time she made sure the door was locked and sat on the couch, eating junk food that, within thirty minutes, had made her so hyper she wanted to stay up and see what was written in those notebooks.

After she had her fill, she carefully retrieved the pads and folded papers from her metal cabinet. She picked up her cell phone from the top of her desk and almost made a call to her son but decided it was just too late for that. Instead, she put it in its cradle to be recharged.

Dr. Vera tidied up her office and surveyed the room. It looked undisturbed, down to the couch on which she had slept. Nodding her head with satisfaction, she grabbed her cell phone and tucked it into her purse. No one would know she had been there, even if her room was opened. As she walked into her closet, she parted the coats and uniforms. Dr. Vera pressed a tiny indenture in the wall. A spring clicked and the closed wall opened into a small room, which was flooded with natural moonlight let in by a thick glass ceiling. On one side of the room were a

recliner, a desk, and a chair. On the far side was a door leading to a very small bathroom with a sink and toilet. The office had belonged to her husband before his death. His money helped to run this hospital and he had shown her the trap door. She demanded his office after his funeral, realizing that very few people knew about this secret enclave.

In the center of the room, a spiral staircase was sandwiched leading to the parking garage from the rooftop. These old hospitals had many secrets. As far as Dr. Vera knew, only her beloved grandson Marshal knew about this room and he had been sworn to secrecy. She returned to her office and retrieved her purse, keys and additional goodies. She scooped up three bottles of water, carefully surveyed her office and switched off the light. It looked as if nobody had been there.

Dr. Vera closed the closet door and, with a barely audible click, locked herself inside her secret cubbyhole. She sat down at her desk. She glanced at the sheets and the legal pads. Each was numbered and the printed handwriting was superb. Dr. Vera arranged the sheets and legal pads in numerical order and began reading an essay titled, "The Fence Mender."

Before my mother, Mrs. Mackenzie Marlin MacGregor died, my family life was wonderful. We lived in a three bedroom, two-bath doublewide trailer built in our own yard. We had trees, flowers and even a willow bush fence, the type that is common in Ireland,

Scotland and England. My ancestors came from those places.

Ryan Corey MacGregor, my father, married my beautiful mother when they were teenagers, both without a high school education. My father liked to pretend he was a pirate like Sir Francis Drake. He was not a pirate; he was a fence mender. He specialized in custom fencing and gate making. He forged wrought iron into the most beautiful fences you would ever want to see. He also created custom-made wood enclosures. Making fences was not steady work so he mastered the art of mending fences. At three years old, I began to learn my father's trade and watch him work.

Our family traveled to Aiken, Allendale, and Barnwell—three places in South Carolina known for breeding beautiful thoroughbred horses. South Carolina is the greatest state for Quarter Horses. If you're lucky, sometimes, while driving through my state, you can spot beautiful, graceful Arabian horses fit for the stables of a king or queen.

Expensive horses need sturdy fences. You have to know some math, science and about local zoning laws. Fences, believe it or

not, can cost upwards of ten thousand dollars or more. When people invest that kind of money, you have to do a good job. The fence should be made to last. If not, my father could make or mend them. The real steady money was in the mending.

Fences are so practical. They can be used for many purposes and can be made in many styles. They help to keep out that which should stay out. A fence can be made of aluminum, bamboo, concrete, plastic or vinyl. My daddy used to say that the most reliable material is wood, especially Canadian or western red cedar. Wood is beautiful because it is alive.

Summer was the best time for us to travel together to build or to repair fences. As I grew older, I felt my father did not receive respect for what he did for a living. Nevertheless, he was a proud and happy man. He made enough to support his family while loving the work he did.

When I was ten, my mom became pregnant. My mom was a free spirited and passionate lady. She liked to travel with me and my dad. One day in July, we headed for Aiken. We never made it there. The police

were pursuing a criminal who crashed his car into the front passenger side where my mom sat. She and my unborn sister were pronounced dead at the scene. The criminal died that day, too. I don't miss him. I miss my mom.

Since my mother's death, my father has buried his grief in illegal drugs, alcohol and jail time. Each day, I pray he will somehow overcome and join me when I get older to become again the greatest fence menders of them all.

Written by James Casey MacGregor Winner of the Fifth Grade Aiken
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Lieutenant Governor's Writing Award
for Grade Five

Adviser and teacher: Mrs. Rachel Epping

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