

Chapter One

The Fawn

Tewksbury, NJ

Spring — May 26, 1999

Secure in the warmth of my horse's body, I leaned over his neck and gave a gentle tug on his mane.

"Tchk tchk ... let's go, Justinian."

We were in the groove of the new day and blended with a spectacular landscape where songbirds chatted beneath cornflower-blue skies, and morning haze swirled like spun sugar through rows of corn at the bottom of historic Fox Hill Road. Even the rolling buzz of empty-bellied bees in search of sweet nectar sounded muffled.

Quietly alert, a family of deer watched our progress from the edge of the field. I grinned at the playful awkwardness of a couple of long-legged fawns vying for the attention of a mature buck. He stood tall and vigilant, dark eyes missing nothing, snorted a small alarm, and stomped his foot. In one intuitive swoop, four flared white plumes and two slender feather-like tails played catch-up into the trees, and out of sight.

Life was there for all to enjoy; except of course, if you lived life as a target.

The earth smelled clean and alive.

Vintage Tewksbury.

My saddle squeaked with the sounds of well-cared-for leather as I urged my horse near the trunk of a gnarly old tree loaded with floral rosettes, the first in a long row hugging the southern slope of the old orchard. The rich musky aroma of damp earth mingled with a slight scent of apple blossoms.

Feeling the moment, I opened my arms wide and blew a kiss into the bright morning sky.

“Want an apple, Justinian?” I reached into the leather pouch clipped across the back of my saddle. “Yummy. Da-licious. Bet you didn’t know eating two apples a day is like brushing twice? It’s nature’s toothbrush. Trust me. Here.” I stretched across his white mane. Justinian turned toward me, nickered, and took a three-quarters-bite of the apple I held out.

“Hey, don’t be oinkish.”

I ate what was left, picked up the reins, and signaled my Arabian into a smooth canter toward home.

In a little more than half an hour, we were trotting under a dense canopy of oaks bordering the small farm we called Unicorn Hollow. I dismounted and led Justinian across the narrow bridge. It rained the night before—a soft spring rain, and I listened as our temperamental stream surged into a gurgling current over the rocks below. Timid by nature, Justinian was worried, but followed.

I unlatched and pushed open the gates. Five white pear trees edged the blacktop driveway leading to our red gambrel-roofed barn, only fifty feet from the road. The weathered wood was wet, darker today, in contrast to the barrels of salmon-colored geraniums around its perimeter. The barn had a hayloft, four stalls, a washing area, and a tack room.

The air felt thick and damp by the time I untacked, washed, and brushed Justinian. I opened the stall to the grassiest paddock where our other two horses were grazing. Justinian whinnied and trotted toward them.

The front of our house snuggled into the slope of a hill in Tewksbury, New Jersey. Horse country—within the mini-boundaries between what passed for the rural wilderness, and the more suburban “commuter” towns, an hour west of New York City. We’d wanted to live in Tewksbury for years; I’d longed for a barn—my husband, Pino, had his heart set on a vegetable garden. One day a “wrong” turn up a hill, a scenic view, and horseback riders in the street led us to the home we would buy a year later.

It needed work, but so what? The setting was perfect.

The low-profile ranch fronted the woods across Wildwood Road, dipping dramatically in the back along the roll of Fox Hill Road toward Oldwick. The real charm and pizzazz began with the view from the back wall of windows that allowed us to watch our animals closely in the serene, ever-changing color palette of the countryside. Soft paisley summer greens turned into the crimson brilliance of autumn, then to the stark gray and white shades of winter.

I heard our Maltese pup, Kaya, yip as she raced down the lawn toward me. Pino must have let her out. I didn’t see him on the patio but waved anyway.

“Silly girl. Come with me.” I walked the fence line to check out what might have been a cracked board. Kaya was full of fun and courage, all eight pounds of her. She skittered through rotting debris and new vegetation in places I would have negotiated only with boots and a stick.

“Oops!” I said, as she tripped, rolled, and continued to traipse around the hardwoods and bushes bordering the stream.

A quiver of motion at the edge of an old yellow forsythia caught my eye. The flutter of nesting chickadees sounded like a mini-military honor guard, a warning of sorts.

I jogged toward Kaya, laughing at the way our lovable pup bounced through the tall switch grass—ears flapping, tail wagging—a come-to-life ping pong ball—full of joy. She spotted something and stood her ground, barking.

“Now what?” I wondered.

I got close enough to see a tunnel-like hole punched through the grass. There was a good-sized stick nearby, which I grabbed, tense and prepared, in case of snakes.

I hate snakes.

“Kaya, what is it?” I began to imagine other things—creatures stirring, ready to strike at my little dog. She was easy prey for aggressive animals, even large birds. It was not a comforting thought that her only defense was me.

“Come here, NOW!” She didn’t listen, unusual behavior for her. I tried to see, then tentatively moved forward, reached out, and parted the tall grass with the stick.

I gasped in surprise. “Oh, my God!”

“Aehh ...” The soft cry of distress from a small fawn sounded like mewling from a kitten.

So tender and tiny, the baby lay flat on a patch of matted grasses, as if someone forgotten—head arched, legs stiff and straight, almost lifeless—the little mouth fixed open in a mock cry, taut edges curled, straining to breathe. Under a blanket of dew, her polka-dotted skin appeared stretched tight over fragile bones, while the hollow beneath her ribs jumped in time with her heart.

“Oh, no baby,” I cooed and knelt to cup her damp chest and rump with my hands. The chilly night had drained the warmth from her. The most obvious threat to her survival was dehydration and exposure.

She exhaled a weak puff of air.

“Careful, Kaya!” She continued to sniff at the petite black feet, her tail wagging nonstop at her find.

Where was the fawn’s mother? I scanned the fields to the tree line, hoping for a glimpse of the doe. Disappointed, but not surprised, I saw no-one.

She was perhaps only a few days old—and she was dying.

I remembered the warnings in a local magazine: “Don’t mess with a downed wild animal, not even a newborn! Diseases, bugs—who knows what's lurking around, ready to tag on an unsuspecting passerby. You’ll drive off its mother; she’ll abandon her baby if she detects the scent of a human.”

“*Aehh ... aehh ...*” As if her tiny heart were breaking, the fawn called for her mother, again and again. Another dog barked from somewhere.

The fawn’s ears twitched, and big eyes opened, wide with fear. I lifted her head. Suddenly, she stared at me, at first in terror, and then with soft, pleading eyes.

This baby would not survive.

In the late 70s I was a paramedic in Miami. Now, I pushed myself into a calming routine—my training turned on the gears in my mind and fingers, searching for the protocol to save her life.

“Where's your mama?” I tried to comfort her with gentle whispers and humming. “Let's take a peek at you.” She allowed my soft prodding.

I felt no bumps, abnormalities, or tenderness along her spine or bones. Pale gums and rapid breathing were a sure sign of shock. What was I not seeing?

I remembered what Captain Randy reminded me of in paramedic class: “Anna, stay calm—assess your patient first, then verify.” The ABC's of life: Airway open—check; Breathing—check; Circulation—check. “Remember, shock kills. Move fast but efficiently, and keep in mind that the most visible injuries may not be the worst.”

I put my finger in her mouth. She weakly sucked on it.

I slid my arms under her shoulders, neck, and backside, balanced her head in the crook of my arm, and scooped her off the ground. She weighed only a few pounds, as light as a bundle of feathers. I held her limp body close to my chest for warmth and turned toward the house. I felt her tremble, and her long legs dangled at my sides.

I didn't know about the language or sounds of deer then, so I cooed to her in soft, mellow tones and hums our mama alpacas used with their babies—soothing chatter, probably more comforting to me than the fawn.

“Live, little girl. You can do it.”

When I hurried through the old barn paddock, Justinian started toward me, his silver-white tail swishing from side to side and his bright white body reflecting the sun. He stopped to watch.

“Not now boy.” He appeared puzzled.

One more gate to open—single-handed. I slipped through the area where a few of the alpaca females were resting on the lawn with their babies on the steep rise behind the house.

I was out of breath and only halfway there when a flurry of gunshots boomed and echoed against the hills, like roiling clouds building on the edge of a thunderstorm.

“*Ugh!*” I jumped and realized the likely fate of the fawn's mother.

I rested my hand on the pitifully sick animal. If she lived, would she be safe here?

Don't think about it.

Chapter Two

Lifeline

The drama unfolding in the field below must have caught Pino's attention, because he opened the patio door, his voice urgent.

“What's wrong?”

I paused for breath, repositioned the baby's head in the crook of my arm, as my husband traversed the slope toward me, appearing more like a sprinter than a New York corporate-type turned farmer.

“How bad?” he asked and bent over the shivering fawn.

“Bad.”

“I'll grab some supplies from the alpaca shed,” he said.

“Check the levels of oxygen in the tank, bring a bag of Lactated Ringer's solution and new IV tubing. I'll set her up in the house, okay?”

For a few seconds, his large hand rested on the small animal, and then he was off at a run.

I took the shortcut through our office and carried the fawn upstairs to a bathroom we used when a newborn alpaca needed extra medical attention.

The baby deer flopped like an old Raggedy Ann doll on a thick bath mat in the corner of the glassed-in shower. I switched on the infrared ceiling lamp and grabbed a towel. Pino bought me an electronic stethoscope last Christmas. It was in the bathroom cabinet with an assortment of supplies we needed for emergencies.

“Aehh ... aehh ...” The fawn cried—long, drawn-out, high-pitched piteous wailing.

I was stunned at the depth of her grief. Just like a person. I didn’t realize ... I never thought about it.

She grunted when her head flipped over her spotted back and stayed there. Carefully, like touching a breakable doll, I brought it forward on the mat.

She shivered.

A seismic rumble of early memories blurred into a low-level ache in my gut, of being carried, my mother screaming, my sister Mary crying, while I tried to squirm out from under the cloak of chaos and pain.

It was as if she were me; I knew the fawn’s anguish and thought back to a time when I was a child alone in the hospital, filled with fear and bewilderment—begging for all to be made right again. I had almost forgotten.

Stop it! Don’t go there!

I tried to soothe the tiny deer. “Okay baby ... *shhh* ...” Her ear rotated toward me. She stopped crying.

She was listening.

All became still—too still.

“NO!”

The fawn’s eyes rolled back. Her tongue drooped between her lips.

Where was the next breath? Her chest was still.

I rubbed the little body and tried to visualize her heart, lungs, and breathing. My scope picked up an erratic heartbeat. Not great, but she wasn't dead either. Although her cardiac rhythm was abnormal, and her pulse weak, her heart sounds were crisp—no noticeable *whooshing* or arrhythmias.

Her lack of responsiveness scared me more than anything.

Traumatic shock can prevent oxygenation in the brain; blood pressure drops and causes a shutdown of the lungs and organs, and just like a mechanical engine, the whole system continues to spiral down, finally quitting.

“Let’s try this, baby.” I massaged her, hoping the added stimulus would invigorate her sluggish cardio-vascular system. “You can do it. . . . Come on.” I increased the pressure, using longer, pulling strokes. Open hands, one under her body, one over, kneading her flaccid muscles, from neck to tail and down her legs, hoping to raise her blood pressure.

She flicked her tail.

“What the —?” A slight movement of something on her rear end I hadn't noticed before. I raised her tail by the white-tipped end with stomach-squeezing disgust.

Damn maggots! I hated those opportunistic parasites, those disgusting creepy-crawlies that showed up to feed on death. I searched the medicine cabinet and found half a bottle of soapy antiseptic.

“Say goodbye, bugs!” I muttered under my breath and started the dirty job. I cleaned the parasites off with gauze pads dunked in the solution, followed by a soothing antiseptic ointment.

The parasites wouldn't have the meal they were hoping for today. This was war, on a microscopic level, and I was determined to win. She remained still through it all.

“Whew!” Pino grunted as he hauled the oxygen tank up the stairs on its chunky wheels.

“Full.” He set the unit outside the door and opened the flow-valve. “Is she still alive?”

“She's in shock. Heart's erratic—thought she wouldn't make it once.”

I eased my pinky finger into her mouth to keep it open and placed the soft baby-sized oxygen mask over her face. Once again, her head swung back and needed to be flexed forward to allow an open airway. I rested her head in the palm of my hand.

Suddenly, she inhaled a shuddering gulp of air—her heart and lungs battling for the number one essential ingredient for life—oxygen.

“If she goes into cardiac arrest, how the heck will I manage CPR?” I worried.

“Is CPR possible on an animal? No way! How are you going to put your mouth around her face? Besides ...” Pino persisted, “... it's not clean!”

“Anything's possible,” I pushed back, cocking my head and shifting my jaw for a better feel of how to make my idea work. “I'll have to try though, won't I?”

“Your mouth over her mouth and nose?” He was serious, but the way he screwed up his face was full of good humor. “I'll get a washcloth. You're gonna need it!”

I hung the bag of Ringer's on a loop of twine around the shower head and let the tube and catheter hang free.

“Uh-oh!” The bag was cool. “Hey sweetness,” I called after him. “Bring me a pail of hot water.” The subcutaneous drip of replacement body fluids should not enter her body cool; it would drop her temperature to dangerously low levels. The technique I liked best worked well to regulate body temperature, and was simple, even on cold nights out in the barn.

“Careful.” Pino returned with the steaming pail and washcloth. I coiled a yard of surgical tubing and dropped it into the hot water. The liquid warmed within minutes.

“Okay, here we go. Thanks. Love you.” I smiled at him, then advanced the needle under the fawn's belly skin. I opened the volume slide on the tube.

She was not quite dead, yet not exactly alive either.

The large, flat, metallic shower head shimmered in the red glow of the heat lamp, dangling clear plastic tubes of life-giving fluids into the baby resting below. She lay on her side, exhausted, looking like a puppet of sorts, whimsical behind the plastic oxygen mask which had a painted-on smiley face. As she shifted her head, the mask moved, like a cartoon character come to life.

The baby deer jockeyed in and out of consciousness for several hours. My stethoscope told the story of a body in recovery as clearly as any visual screening. Her temperature climbed toward normal, for a baby alpaca anyway.

I had fallen asleep against the wall, my hand still resting on the fawn's slender back legs. Pino shook my shoulder. “You have to eat something. I'll heat some soup.” So very Italian.

“Should I get your back brace?” I warmed to the concern in his voice.

“Thanks. Ouchy.” The year before I had ruptured a disk in my lower back. I stretched and adjusted the earpieces of my stethoscope. “Be there in a minute. What kind of soup?”

“Chicken barley,” he said.

I could taste it already. Pino's comfort food always made the day better.

“Lungs sound clear.” I sat up and shut my eyes to concentrate. “No abnormal beats now, her heart is steadier.” Good. I flipped the scope around my neck.

A few drops of water every so often on her tongue with an eyedropper was the best way to keep her mouth moist under the oxygen mask. Later I decided to coat my finger with pure honey and offered the sleepy baby what I thought was a healthy sugar boost. She raised her head, flicked her tongue out, and curled it up on the sides, like a little scooper.

“Whoa! Where did that come from?” Strange, all this action in her neck and head, while the rest of her body remained so still. A disconnect in motion was an ominous sign—she might have spinal cord damage—an impossible situation for an animal trying to survive in the wild.

“Will she make it?” Pino asked.

“Don’t know.”

Kaya waited with us, sniffing at the tiny, black, cloven feet.

It was one of those quiet, cozy times when whispers and tiptoes replaced the frenzied sounds of a medical emergency. After the rush of doing what needed to be done, and the beginning of the wait for the body to take over and heal itself. I stroked the fawn’s silky fur while we helped her try to live, adjusting her body position every so often to prevent fluid buildup in her lungs.

Hours later she yawned and stiffened into a prolonged shuddering stretch.

“Look, Pino, she's watching us.” Beautiful brown eyes—searching eyes—started to follow the action in the room. I expected a measure of panic, but there was no evidence of terror in her demeanor.

As she rested on the edge of awareness, her ears rotated toward the quiet sounds around her, reminiscent of large satellite dishes searching for answers in the universe. I removed the catheter from her side and let the mask rest near her nose, still adding oxygen to the air. She breathed, even and steady.

I kissed her, just beneath the ear, then softly traced my fingers down her legs to her tiny, pointy, patent-leather-looking feet. Twinkle toes.

The fawn's eyes half-opened in response, and she sighed with a squeak. Content, she fell back into a deep sleep.

“Yes!” I gave the closed-fist arm pump like my son Glen uses when something good happens. “Hang in there, sweet baby.”

All became silent, except for the soft hiss of air flowing from the oxygen tank.