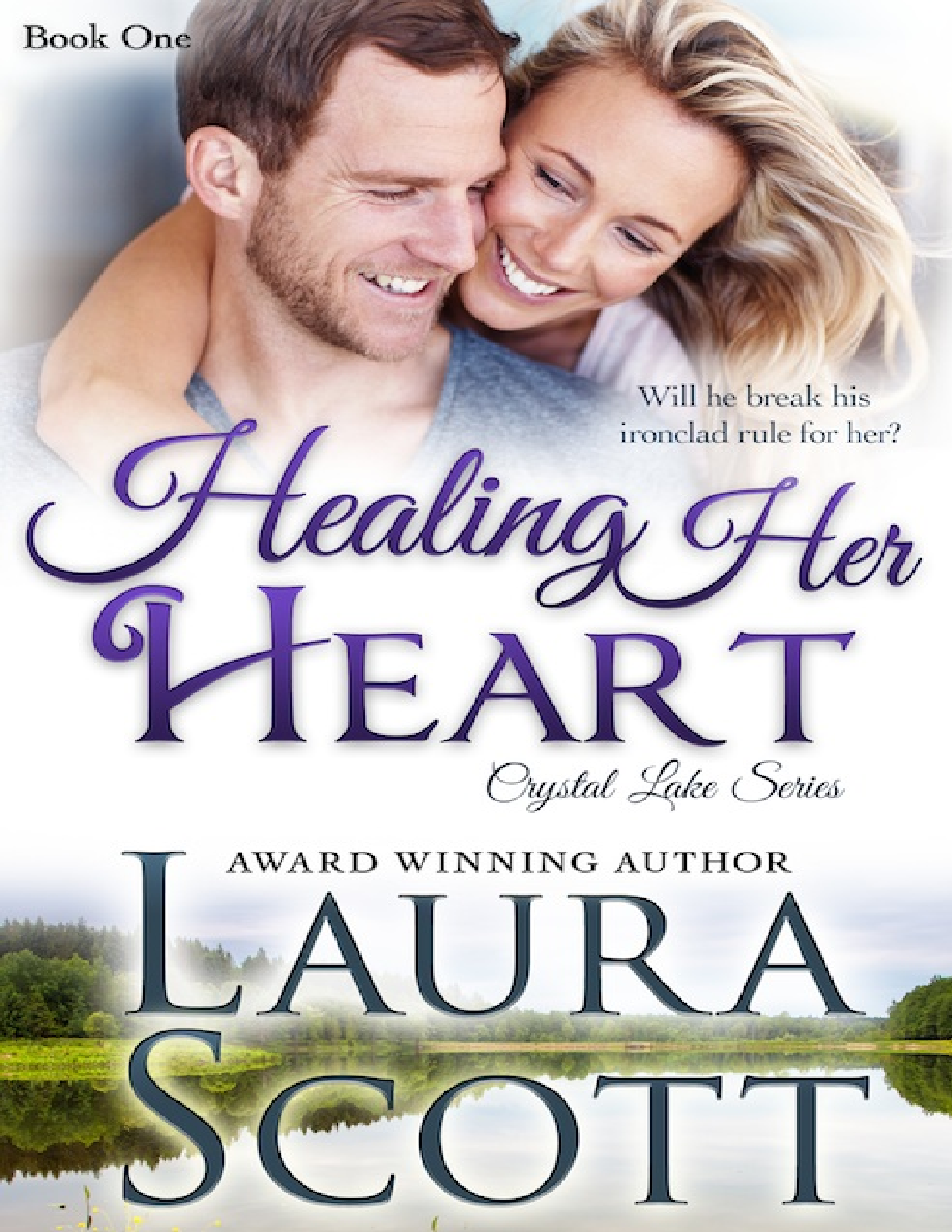

Book One
Will he break his ironclad rule for her?
Healing Her Heart
Crystal Lake Series
AWARD WINNING AUTHOR
LAURA SCOTT

Healing Her Heart

A Short Story

by

Laura Scott

Healing Her Heart

Book 1 in the Crystal Lake Series
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Thank You

Chapter One

“Larissa, I put a new patient in room four for you,” Merry Haines, the Hope County Hospital ER charge nurse, called out.

“Okay.” Larissa Brockman finished documenting on her recent discharge and then pushed away from the computer. The hour was well past midnight, but the ER remained incredibly busy on this Memorial Day Friday night. Or rather, Saturday morning.

She crossed over to room four but then stopped abruptly in the doorway as she saw the familiar face of her patient. Annie Hinkle, a fifty-year-old woman looking a decade older than she should, was seated on the gurney cradling her right arm against her chest.

No. Not again. The tiny hairs lifted on the back of her neck in alarm. This was the second time Annie had been here over the past month. The last time was for a black eye that she swore was not caused by her husband, Kurt’s, fist.

What would be her story this time? Larissa took a deep breath and let it out slowly before entering the room. “Hello, Annie.”

“Hi.” Annie’s gaze barely met hers before skittering away.

“What did you do to your arm?” Larissa asked, keeping her voice gentle as she approached. She had the distinct impression the woman was on the edge and wouldn’t hesitate to flee if cornered.

“I fell off the front porch—you know how klutzy I am.” Annie refused to meet her gaze but kept staring down at her arm as if the injury might heal itself if she concentrated hard enough.

“I don’t think you’re klutzy at all,” Larissa murmured. “Show me where it hurts.”

“Right here,” Annie said, removing her left hand to reveal a darkly mottled bruise encircling her wrist. Larissa felt a little sick looking at the injury, knowing there was no possible way this had happened from a fall. She could clearly envision a man’s large hand squeezing hard enough to cause this. She’d be surprised if there weren’t a few broken bones hidden beneath the horribly discolored skin.

“Okay, I’m going to get you a cold pack for that, and I’m sure the doctor will want X-rays, too.” She kept her voice calm with an effort. “Do you need something for pain?”

Annie lifted her shoulder in a half-hearted shrug. “Maybe a pain pill would help.”

Larissa nodded, thinking the poor woman needed far more than a pain pill. She batted a wave of helplessness aside. “Are you hurt anywhere else?” she asked. “Maybe you hit your head? Or your ribs?”

“No, just my wrist.”

“All right, I’m going to check in with Dr. Allen, and then I’ll be right back.”

“Sure.” Annie’s gaze jerked away, causing Larissa’s stomach to knot painfully.

She recognized the signs and symptoms of abuse. Only too well. Dark memories from the past threatened to overwhelm her, and she fought them back with an effort. Struggling to keep her emotions under control, she grabbed an ice pack from the supply rack and then went searching for Dr. Gabe Allen, the physician in charge of the patients on her team.

He was on the phone talking to the inpatient hospitalist about a patient he wanted admitted. She hovered nearby, waiting until he finished his call. He hung up the phone and flashed a warm smile. “Hi, Larissa, what’s up?”

His smile was far too attractive, an effect she’d been fighting for months now. So far, she thought she was hiding her feelings pretty well. “I need you to examine my patient in room four,” she said in a soft tone in a voice. “I’m convinced she’s being physically abused.”

Gabe’s smile faded. “Are you sure?”

She’d only been a nurse here at the Hope County Hospital for six months, but she’d thought she’d proved her competence by now. She scowled. “Trust me, I’m sure.”

Gabe gave a terse nod. “All right, let me finish up this inpatient admission, and I’ll be right over.”

“Thanks.” She hurried back over to Annie’s bedside, squeezing the disposable ice pack between her hands to activate the chemical reaction inside. “Here, place this around your wrist, okay?” she instructed. “Dr. Allen will be here shortly.”

Annie winced but didn’t say anything as she placed the cold pack over her wrist.

Larissa struggled to find the right words that might break through the woman’s wall of denial. “Annie, you don’t have to put up with anyone hurting you. We have programs that can help keep you safe.”

“No one’s hurting me,” Annie swiftly denied. “I told you I fell off the porch.” Her voice rose with indignation, and instinctively, Larissa knew she needed to back off or the woman might bolt.

“Okay, I’m sorry. I just don’t like the idea of anyone hurting you.” She forced a reassuring smile. “You’re such a nice woman, and you certainly deserve to be treated as such. Oh, look, here comes Dr. Allen now.”

“How are you, Mrs. Hinkle?” he asked. “I understand you may have broken your wrist.”

“I fell off the porch,” Annie said, repeating her story like a parrot.

“Hmmm,” Gabe murmured as he removed the ice pack from her wrist. His eyebrows pulled together in a dark frown when he saw the extent of the injury. He probed the skin gently, his expression serious. “We’re going to need several X-rays of this wrist,” he said.

Larissa swiftly logged on to the computer. “AP and lateral views?” she asked as she entered the order.

“Yes.” Gabe replaced the ice pack and gave Annie a stern look. “You know this didn’t happen from a fall,” he said bluntly.

“Yes, yes, it did.” Annie’s voice was beginning to sound desperate. “I’m klutzy and I fell off the porch.”

Gabe’s frustrated gaze locked on Larissa’s, and she knew exactly what he was thinking. She gave him a tiny nod, acknowledging their dilemma, and then turned toward Annie. “Okay, just relax for now. The radiology tech will be here shortly to take you over to get the X-rays. Dr. Allen, do you think she could have a dose of Percocet for the pain?”

“Of course.”

“Great, I’ll be right back.” Larissa walked over to the automated drug-dispensing machine and punched in her password along with Annie’s name and ID number. The Percocet drawer popped open, and she removed one dose before closing it up again. When she spun around, she nearly bumped into Gabe.

“We have to notify the sheriff’s department,” he said in a low voice.

“I know.” The Wisconsin state statutes were pretty clear regarding cases of suspected abuse. Still, she knew that doing the right thing could also backfire in a big way. “But you heard her. There’s no way she’s going to press charges against her husband. And I’m afraid that he’ll only get angrier once the deputy questions him. What if he takes that anger out on her?”

Gabe thrust his fingers through his dark brown hair. “You could be right, but what choice do we have?”

“I don’t know,” she admitted, hating the feeling of helplessness. The system was supposed to work for victims, but more often than not, it created a vicious cycle, one that couldn’t be broken unless the victim took a stance. But too many of those victims didn’t. “Let me talk to the social worker first, okay?”

“Okay, but giving her pamphlets on domestic violence isn’t going to help,” Gabe said with a dark frown. “We have to call the authorities.”

She nodded, knowing with a sinking heart that he was right. She could only hope that the police could get through to Annie better than she and Gabe had

been able to.

She closed her eyes and prayed that Annie wouldn't end up back in the ER with injuries that were far worse than a black eye or a broken wrist.

Please, Lord, keep Annie safe!

Gabe stared at the deputy in disbelief. "You're telling me there's nothing you can do?"

Deputy Armbruster held up his palms in a helpless gesture. "What do you want me to say? I could haul Kurt Hinkle down to jail, but if she doesn't press charges, he'll be out by morning."

That couldn't be right. "Surely there's enough evidence there to charge him with abuse even without her testimony?"

"Look, maybe he admits he grabbed her too hard, and she jerked away and oops? Look what happened?" The deputy sighed heavily. "Without Annie testifying against him, this could be made to look like some sort of accident rather than an intentional act of abuse. With no priors, he'll walk."

Gabe sensed Larissa beside him, and he was annoyed that he'd recognized her vanilla scent. Regardless, he kept his attention focused on the problem at hand. He just couldn't believe there wasn't something that could be done legally to prevent Kurt from hurting his wife. Again.

"What about the black eye from a few weeks ago?" she asked.

Gabe scowled. "I don't remember that."

"You weren't working that shift," Larissa pointed out. "I was on with Dr. Gardener."

Deputy Armbruster pursed his lips. "We could maybe argue that it's a pattern, but again, not likely. I got a black eye myself playing softball with my girls." He smiled grimly. "My daughter Elise has a good arm."

Gabe understood what the deputy was saying, but that didn't mean he had to like it. "So what can we do?"

"Look, I can go chat with Kurt if you want me to. At least he'll know that we're on to him and—"

"No," Larissa interrupted harshly. "Don't."

"What?" Gabe glared at her. "Why not?"

"Because he'll be mad and take his anger out on her, that's why." Larissa turned toward Deputy Armbruster. "If you can't arrest him, then just leave it alone."

Gabe couldn't believe what he was hearing. What was she doing? Why wasn't Larissa standing up for their patient? "I think it would do Kurt good to know

we’re on to him.”

“Why?” Larissa asked, her green eyes sparking fire. “So next time he can hurt her where the bruises won’t show?”

What? He took a step back. “No, of course not.”

“Leave it alone,” she pleaded. “I’ll talk to Annie, okay? Maybe I can help in ways the police can’t.”

Deputy Armbruster shrugged. “Okay, let me know if anything changes.”

“Gabe? We need your help over here,” Merry called. “This patient’s breathing is getting worse.”

“Go ahead, I’ll talk to Annie,” Larissa said.

Reluctantly, he nodded and hurried over to where Merry was standing beside another patient who was clearly in distress. The beeping oxygen-saturation monitor showed numbers that were steadily declining. “Get me an intubation tray now.”

All thoughts regarding his other patients vanished as he quickly focused on saving this gentleman’s life. He placed the breathing tube and then quickly connected the oxygen supply, giving him several slow, deep breaths.

“O2 sat up to 90 percent,” Merry announced with satisfaction.

The respiratory therapist came over to secure the tube. Gabe kept an eye on the guy’s vital signs, reassured that he was holding his own, at least for the moment. “All right, call up to the ICU and let them know we have a patient for them.”

“Will do,” Merry promised.

Gabe did a quick visual check on the other patients under his care before heading back over to where Larissa was sitting beside Annie Hinkle. Annie was staring down at the cast he’d ordered to be placed on her wrist after determining that indeed she’d suffered two minor fractures.

Which could have easily been far worse. The good news was that she wouldn’t need surgery.

The bad news was that he’d have to discharge her home. Back to her abusive husband.

He paused outside the doorway, listening as Larissa spoke softly to Annie. “Here’s my name and phone number,” Larissa said, pressing a small, folded piece of paper into Annie’s uninjured hand. “Call me if you feel afraid, or if you just want to talk. I’d be happy to help in any way I can.”

“Thank you,” Annie whispered. “But really, I’m fine. Just a bit klutzy.”

“Remember what I told you?” Larissa asked.

Annie slowly lifted her gaze to meet Larissa’s. Her softly spoken “yes” sounded almost like an admission.

“Call me anytime,” Larissa repeated.

“I will.”

Gabe stood there for a long moment, wishing he’d heard the entire conversation between the two women. He’d sensed right from the start that Larissa had identified with Annie on a level that he couldn’t possibly imagine.

Because of her previous ER experiences? Or from something more personal? He was surprised by the flash of anger at the thought of someone hurting Larissa.

He signed Annie’s discharge orders, unable to get the thought out of his mind. From the moment he’d first met Larissa, they’d connected on some sort of subliminal level. He was attracted to her, not just because of her pretty face and soft, wavy, blonde hair. But because they were both extremely dedicated to their patients and shared the same interests, like running. He’d caught sight of her several times when he took to the running trails, always giving her a nod of recognition but never stopping to chat.

He’d had to work hard to keep his distance from her. Romance and work did not mix, a lesson he’d learned the hard way.

He’d come to Crystal Lake a year ago, his pride battered and his reputation tarnished. After a year, he’d gained the respect he’d so desperately needed. Soon, he hoped to win the position of medical director for emergency medicine, putting his painful past away once and for all.

He refused to even consider a personal relationship, especially with one of the nurses.

But as he watched Larissa give Annie a brief hug and escort her out the door, he couldn’t help wishing that he’d met Larissa under different circumstances. That she wasn’t a nurse working in the ER with him.

Because he liked her, far too much.

Chapter Two

Larissa finished off the rest of her twelve-hour night shift, grateful when the steady stream of patients slowed to a mere trickle. Between her deep concerns over Annie Hinkle and her ridiculous awareness of Gabe, she was physically and mentally exhausted.

Outside, she paused to stare in awe at the rising sun sliding up the horizon in the east. The beautiful sight helped restore her sense of peace.

Church services would be nice, too, even though it was Saturday she knew Crystal Lake Church always held an early morning service. She slid into her car and headed in the direction of the small, beautiful, white church steeple clearly visible between the leaves of the trees. She was glad it was Memorial Day weekend as she had the next two days off before she had to return to work. As painful as the twelve-hour shifts were to endure, the extra days off were wonderful.

At the stoplight, she yawned so wide her jaw popped. Her eyelids became unbearably heavy, and she pried her eyes open with an effort. Maybe it was better to forgo church services and head home since she was likely to fall asleep anyway. Her apartment was only a few miles away. Thankfully, she made it home without a problem.

Inside, she set her alarm to go off in five hours, so she could try to get back on a day-shift schedule. The worst part about working nights was switching back to day shifts on her days off.

When her alarm blared five hours later, she groaned and staggered over to shut it off. Every cell in her body craved more sleep, but she forced herself to stay upright.

A cup of coffee and a light breakfast helped clear away the lingering fog hovering along the edges of her mind. She stared outside at the bright sunlight. What she needed was a good rush of adrenalin. She tugged her running gear on, pulled her wavy hair back into a ponytail to keep it off her neck. A visor helped block the harsh rays from the sun as she headed outside.

The first half mile was the hardest, but once she hit her stride and wound her way along the jogging trail, shaded by towering trees, she felt every one of her muscles relax into an exhilarating rhythm. Other than being in church, these were the times she felt the closest to God, and she silently recited a prayer as she ran.

Distant sounds of laughter wafted up from the lake, where locals and tourists

were enjoying the water. She lived in a small apartment building outside of town without direct access to the lake, although buying a small house on the water was one of her goals.

Maybe next year, she thought with a smile. She'd come to Crystal Lake to escape a bad relationship and to get far away from the high crime rate of Chicago. The night the cops busted up a drug deal going down in the apartment across the hall from hers had pushed her over the edge.

So far, she absolutely loved it here in Crystal Lake.

Her peaceful run was abruptly interrupted by the harsh roar of a motorbike. She hugged the side of the trail, peering over her shoulder to make sure she saw the cyclist before he came upon her unexpectedly.

The growl of the engine became louder, and she stifled a sliver of unease. One wrong move on this dirt-packed, hilly trail could result in disaster.

The motorbike abruptly crested the hill, heading straight toward her. She leaped off the trail to get out of harm's way. But she landed off balance, her foot slipping on loose rocks and branches. She went down hard. The motorbike swerved around a curve, the driver letting out a loud whoop.

"Idiot," she muttered, assessing for injuries. Her knees and the palms of her hands were scraped raw from her tumble, but it could have been worse.

She stood, and her right ankle zinged with pain. Great. Just what she needed —a sprained ankle roughly two and a half miles from home.

The sound of the motorbike grew louder again, and she stared at the trail, unable to believe the guy had the nerve to come back after the reckless stunt he'd pulled. Sure enough, he was riding down the trail, once again headed straight for her.

For a split second, she had the distinct impression that he was purposely trying to run her down. She scrambled out of the way, grasping the trunk of a tree for support as the motorbike whizzed by, so close that she could feel the heat from the engine blasting against her legs.

She clung to the tree for several long moments, afraid the motorcyclist was going to come back for a third time. She sent up a silent prayer, thanking God for her safety, before she finally let go of the tree and hobbled back onto the trail. She limped as pain reverberated up her leg with every step. Finding a thick tree branch, she improvised, using it as a walking stick.

The soft thud of footsteps on the trail made her tense. She forced herself to relax; there was no reason the driver of the motorbike would decide to come back on foot. It wasn't unusual to pass other joggers on the trail.

Sure enough, a runner came into view. A tall man, wearing a sweaty orange T-shirt and navy blue shorts, with ear buds tucked into his ears blocking out the

noise. Personally, she didn't get why anyone would want to listen to music while running when the peace and quiet was so much more soothing. But to each his own.

As the jogger approached, she grimaced when she recognized Gabe Allen. She shouldn't have been surprised; she'd passed him on the running trails before, and they'd exchanged brief greetings before heading their separate ways.

When he caught sight of her, he frowned and immediately slowed down, tugging the ear buds from his ears. "Larissa, are you all right? What happened?"

She willed her heart rate not to jump as he stepped closer, concern darkening his warm, brown eyes. She cleared her throat and strove for a light tone. "Did a hotshot on a motorbike fly past you?" she asked wryly. "Because he ran me off the trail—twice."

"Yeah, I saw him." Gabe dropped down to a crouch to examine the scrapes on her knees before he gently prodded her ankle. She sucked in a swift breath, and he glanced up at her. "This looks like a bad sprain."

"Thanks for the diagnosis, doc," she said lightly. "I realize I'm just a nurse, but I kinda figured that out all by myself."

Gabe didn't take offense but sent her a lopsided smile. "You should probably get an MRI to rule out ligament damage."

She shrugged. "Yeah, but I can't do that until the swelling goes down, anyway, right?"

"Right. You'll get a better picture if you wait a few days," he agreed, rising to his feet. "Come on, lean on me, and I'll help you get home."

"What?" His offer was so unexpected she nearly lost her balance. The last thing she needed was to cozy up to Gabe for two and a half long miles. "There's no need for you to cut your run short because of me. I have my trusty walking stick. I'll be fine."

"Don't be ridiculous. I'm not leaving you here like this. Leaning on me is way better than using a stick, and my place isn't that far, just a mile and a quarter from here."

A mile and a quarter still seemed like a long way, but it was better than going all the way to her apartment. She reluctantly nodded. "All right. But I'm hot and sweaty," she warned as he wrapped his arm firmly around her waist.

"Me, too," he said easily, shortening his stride to match hers.

Their progress was still awkward, and she was far too aware of being so close to Gabe. "I wish I knew who that motorbike driver was," she muttered in an attempt to distract herself from his nearness. "I'd report him to the police. He's a menace on these trails."

"I'm pretty sure that was Tommy Hinkle," Gabe said. "I've taken care of him

a few times in the ER."

"Annie's son?" The knowledge almost made her feel sorry for him. "Do you think his father hits him, too?"

Gabe was silent for several moments. "Actually, I think the kid is probably too much like his father," he said finally. "The last time Tommy was in the ER was because he was under arrest for driving under the influence. He bragged that his dad would bail him out, no problem. I got the impression his dad lets him do whatever he wants. Maybe even encourages him."

She sighed and shook her head. "Poor Annie. I'm getting the feeling it's two against one in that household."

"Yeah, I'm afraid so." They walked along in silence for a few minutes. Then Gabe's arm tightened around her waist, drawing her to a halt. "There, see between the trees? That's my place. Think you can make it that far?"

"Yes, I can make it," she assured him, even though in truth, her right ankle still throbbed like crazy. Not to mention, being this close to him was wreaking havoc on her hard-won control.

Larissa knew she couldn't afford to let her guard down with Gabe. No matter how much she wanted to.

Gabe grimly paced off the distance to his place as they made their way along the trail. He couldn't, in good conscience, leave Larissa to hobble along on her own, but holding on to her like this hadn't been the brightest idea he'd ever had.

She fit against his side perfectly, her slight frame hiding a strength he couldn't help but admire. Her ankle looked terrible, but she didn't whine or complain. In fact, if he hadn't offered to help her, he knew she would have continued on her way without asking for assistance.

He had to remind himself for the tenth time that she was an ER nurse, which meant she was off-limits. Permanently.

Knowing that Tommy Hinkle was the one who'd run her off the trail made him grit his teeth in anger. Larissa was right, the kid was a menace, but he suspected that there wouldn't be much the police could do about it now.

"Gabe? Is something wrong?" Larissa asked.

He glanced down in surprise. "No, why?"

"Your arm around my waist is getting tighter and tighter," she admitted. "You might want to lighten up a bit."

He mentally smacked himself. "Sorry about that," he said, relaxing his grip. "I was getting mad thinking about Tommy. How's your ankle holding up?"

"Just peachy," she said in a wry tone. "I'm trying to take heart in the fact that

your house is slowly getting closer."

"We'll be there soon, and then you can relax," he promised. His modest, wood-sided A-frame overlooking the lake was his private sanctuary, and while he wasn't accustomed to having women over, it wasn't as if he could drag Larissa all the way to town on foot. He knew she lived in the same apartment complex that Merry Haines and several of the other staff lived in because he'd overheard the nurses comparing notes one day about an exceptionally noisy neighbor.

"Your home looks very rustic," she said as they finally approached the driveway. Only ninety more feet to go. "Somehow I expected something more...flashy."

"Flashy?" He grasped his chest as if wounded. "Do I really look like the type that goes for flashy?"

She chuckled. "No, but doctors generally live a much higher lifestyle than the rest of us."

He hid a stab of disappointment regarding her observation. Was she like so many of the other nurses? The ones who set their sights on marrying a doctor? And when they didn't get what they wanted, stooped so low as to tell lies, not caring that they destroyed a man's reputation?

"It's so beautiful," she murmured. "You must love the peace and quiet."

"I do," he agreed, refusing to waste any time thinking about Rebecca. She was out of his life, for good. Three more feet and they were up to his front stoop. "Can you navigate the step all right? Or should I carry you?"

"I can do it," she responded quickly.

He held the door open for her, and she limped inside, heading for the closest chair. "Thanks," she said with a sigh. "Feels good to sit down for a moment. I hate to ask for any more favors, but I'd appreciate a ride home."

"I'll drive you home as soon as we clean up those wounds." Didn't she realize there was blood oozing out from the dirt filled abrasions? "Sit tight, I'll be right back."

"Wait, you don't have to—" she began, but he ignored her. He went to rummage through his bathroom cabinet, finding everything he needed: dressings, tape, antibiotic ointment. When he returned, he discovered she'd made her way into the kitchen.

"I don't want to bleed on your carpet," she said with a hint of defensiveness. "And I washed the scrapes on my hands with soap and water."

He set the supplies on the table and then went over to fill up a bowl with soapy water. He brought it over and knelt beside her. "This might hurt," he warned as he took a soft washcloth and began cleaning her knees.

The abrasions weren't too bad, and she didn't say a word as he cleaned them up. "What's the matter?" he asked when he finished putting fresh dressings in place. "Did you think a measly doctor wouldn't know how to dress a wound?"

"No, you did a fine job," she said in a low voice. She avoided his gaze. "Thanks so much. It's a good thing I'm off work for the next two days. A bit of rest and I'll be as good as new."

"You might want to see your doctor. He'll write you an excuse to stay off work longer if needed."

"I'll be fine," she repeated. "I'm sure you want to get back to your run, so if you could just drive me home, I'll get out of your hair."

She was acting a bit strange, and he thought she might be having more pain than she'd let on. He loosened her running shoe. "First, let's wrap up this ankle." The swelling hadn't gotten too much worse, which was a good sign since she'd been walking on it for the past twenty minutes. Maybe there wasn't any ligament damage. "Better?" he asked when he'd finished wrapping it snuggly.

"Much." Her voice sounded strained. "Thanks. Again."

He stared at her for a moment, trying to gauge her mood. He rose to his feet and crossed over to the fridge. He pulled out a bottle of water and handed it to her. After taking a swig of his own water, he took a bag of frozen peas out of the freezer. "Here, use this as an ice pack," he said, draping the bag over her ankle.

She let out an unexpected chuckle. "Too funny. I have a bag of frozen peas that I use as an ice pack, too."

He couldn't help but return her smile. "I bet every runner has a bag of peas in their freezer."

"Maybe," she agreed. She took a long drink of water before recapping the bottle. "So, is there anything else you think you need to fix, Dr. Allen? Or should we get going?"

He had the insane urge to offer to make her dinner but stopped himself just in time. "I'll drive you home. Here, lean on me. My car is in the garage."

"No problem." She held on to the peas and the water bottle with one hand and held him around the waist with the other. It was a short distance, but he found he missed her touch once she was safely tucked into the passenger seat.

Larissa kept glancing out her window on the ride home, and he got the sense she was avoiding him for some reason. After about ten minutes, he pulled up to her apartment complex.

He insisted on helping her up to her apartment despite her protests that she'd be fine. "Do you need anything else?" he asked after she unlocked the door.

"Nope, but thanks again. See you later," she barely got out before she shut the door firmly between them.

He stared at the closed door for several long seconds before turning to make his way back outside to his car. The thought that she'd been so anxious to get rid of him didn't sit well.

And much like the way she'd interrupted his run—granted, through no fault of her own—she annoyingly infiltrated his thoughts for the remainder of the day.

Chapter Three

Larissa slid behind the wheel of her car, intending to attend Sunday morning church services. However using her right foot to drive proved nearly impossible. After several jerky attempts at driving with her left foot, she let out a frustrated groan, turned off the car, and awkwardly climbed back out from behind the wheel. No way was that going to work. She was more likely to hit something than not.

She stared up at the cloudless sky, fighting a wave of helplessness. This stupid ankle was going to ruin her few days off work if she couldn't manage to drive a car. She propped herself against the vehicle, enjoying the cool breeze as she tried to figure out what to do next.

Less than one day and she was already heartily sick of being stuck in her apartment. Maybe she could manage to hobble down to Rose's Café? Josie would keep her company at least for a while. There was nothing the café owner liked more than gossip.

"Larissa!"

She turned when she heard her name, surprise widening her eyes when she caught sight of Gabe Allen walking toward her. He'd parked his car a few spaces down from hers.

"Hi, Gabe." She was glad that this time she didn't smell like sweat and was dressed in a flowery skirt and a matching pink, short-sleeved top. She tried not to fidget with her clothing. "What are you doing here?"

"I brought over a pair of crutches in case you needed some help getting around." He gazed at her attire and lifted his brow. "Are you headed somewhere special?"

She blushed and wished she could stop this ridiculous reaction to him. "I planned on attending church services, but driving is apparently not an option." Had he mentioned crutches? She brightened with the possibility. "I bet I could walk to church, though, if you're serious about allowing me to borrow those crutches." Church and then Rose's café. Much better than sitting around and staring at the four walls of her apartment.

"I think it would be better if I drove you to church," Gabe said slowly. "Crutch walking isn't easy for long distances."

"Oh." She was flabbergasted by his willingness to take her to church because she'd never seen him attend services in the past. "That's very kind, but I don't want to take you out of your way."

“It’s no problem. Here, lean on me, and we’ll get you over to my car.”

She found it unsettling to realize she was standing close to Gabe with his arm anchored around her waist for the second time in less than twenty-four hours. She had no idea why God kept sending this man into her path, but for right now, she couldn’t think of an excuse not to go along with his offer. Other than the obvious one, that spending time with Gabe wasn’t smart.

But she breathed a little easier when she was safely seated in the passenger seat of his car. She waited until he slid into the driver’s seat before glancing at him. “You know, I wouldn’t mind if you dropped me off at church and came back in an hour if you don’t want to go in with me.”

Gabe looked past her, over his shoulder as he backed out of the parking space. “Is that a polite way of saying I’m not welcome?” he asked.

“No! Of course not.” She was horrified that he would think that. “I guess I just never noticed you attending church services before.”

A smile bloomed across his features. “Isn’t it the job of a good Christian to convince us non-goers to attend church and to rediscover our faith?” he asked in a teasing tone. “At least that’s what my sister always tries to do.”

She relaxed after hearing his sister was a Christian. “Yes, you’re right about that. I would love for you to come to church, but I can’t force you to believe in God. You have to come to that realization on your own.”

Gabe was silent for a moment. “I have to be honest with you. I haven’t been to church in well over a year.”

She wondered what had happened to cause his lapse in faith. And given what he’d just told her, she had no idea why he’d even offered to come with her in the first place. But she didn’t want to pry into his personal life by asking. She, better than anyone, understood the need for privacy. “Well, I have to tell you that out of all the church services I’ve attended in my lifetime, Pastor John gives one of the best,” she said lightly. “He’s down to earth and yet always helps remind us what God would want us to do. Maybe I’m being presumptuous, but I think you’ll like him.”

Gabe made a noncommittal noise but didn’t say anything more as he pulled up to the parking lot of the church. She struggled to get out of the car, which wasn’t easy, but within moments, Gabe was there, helping her.

“Thanks,” she murmured, hoping he wouldn’t notice the breathlessness in her tone.

“Stay there,” he told her. “I’ll get the crutches.”

He pulled the aluminum crutches out of the backseat and set them next to her. “Try these. I set them up for your height based on memory, but I might have the measurements wrong.”

She took the crutches and propped them beneath her armpits, not surprised to discover they were perfect. “They’re great. Thanks so much.”

“I broke my foot once, so trust me, I know what you’re going through,” he confided. “It’s not as easy to crutch walk as it looks.”

She flashed him a smile and made her way over toward the sidewalk leading up to the front door of the church. Gabe stayed right beside her, his hand hovering on the small of her back, as if he was worried she might fall.

There weren’t many parishioners in attendance as it was the holiday, but those who were there greeted her by name. She didn’t know if she should introduce Gabe, and if so, as what? Her friend? A colleague? One of the doctors she worked with? She couldn’t bring herself to use any of those options, so she decided not to say anything at all.

Gabe was likely regretting his offer to bring her, based on the knowing looks being flashed their way. Did Gabe realize the power of small-town gossip? She could feel her cheeks turning red and ducked her head, hoping no one would notice.

She told herself not to worry what anyone else thought. If this was what Gabe needed to bring him back to the church, then the minor discomfort was well worth it.

Closing her eyes, she sent up a small prayer. *Please, Lord, show Gabe the way home.*

Gabe stood beside Larissa in church, wondering why on earth he’d agreed to this. She’d given him an out, had offered to be dropped off and picked up in an hour when the service was over. Honestly, that was exactly what he’d considered before she mentioned it.

But he hadn’t taken the chance to skip out. Instead, here he was, attending church in the first time in over a year. His sister had dragged him to services whenever possible back in Madison, but after moving to Crystal Lake, he hadn’t bothered.

When Larissa had mentioned that she couldn’t force him to believe in God, he’d relaxed his guard. He loved his sister, Kimberly, but she was constantly preaching at him, trying to get him to buy into every one of her beliefs. Instinctively, the more she pushed, the more he’d backed off.

He picked up the hymnal and found the opening hymn. One thing he’d rather liked about the church services was the music. It occurred to him now just how much he’d missed it.

As the organist began to play, they rose to their feet and began to sing along.

His baritone was a bit rusty, but he soon got into the rhythm.

He caught Larissa's pleased smile as she joined him in singing along. Her arm lightly brushed his, and he kept his eyes centered on the hymnal, pretending not to notice.

Even though he did.

The pastor was younger than he'd anticipated. Gabe hadn't expected to enjoy the service, despite Larissa's glowing praise of Pastor John Gorman, but since the theme of the sermon today was forgiveness, he found his attention riveted on the pastor's words.

Pastor John paused for a moment and then read, "*And whenever you stand praying, if you have anything against anyone, forgive him, that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses (Mark 11:25).*"

The passage struck a chord deep within. He'd remained so angry with Rebecca after the way she'd destroyed his reputation at the University Hospital in Madison. Telling his boss and the hospital leadership that he'd sexually harassed her when, in fact, she was simply upset because he'd broken off their relationship. She'd cost him his job. No matter how much he'd tried to deny her allegations, he knew there was no way to recover from the stigma.

It was her word against his, and he'd lost. Big time.

Shaking off the past, he focused on the pastor's sermon. According to Pastor John, if he wanted to find peace, he first had to cleanse his soul. And that meant forgiving Rebecca.

Could he really do that? He knew he should, but saying and doing were two different things.

The organist began the closing hymn before he'd even realized the service was nearly over. And he was even more surprised that he hadn't been watching the clock, the way he used to. In fact, he'd enjoyed the service.

"Thanks for bringing me, Gabe," Larissa said softly. "That was exactly what I needed this morning."

"My pleasure," he responded. "Don't tell my sister, but I liked it, too."

She laughed, and the sound reminded him of picnics at the beach. Or maybe that was just the last time he could remember being happy. Odd that he felt more lighthearted and relaxed around Larissa.

"How would you like to go out on my boat this afternoon?" he offered. "I know the lake will be busy considering it's the Memorial Day holiday, but we can still have fun."

Her blue eyes glowed with excitement and surprise. "Oh, I'd love to do that. You have no idea how horrible it is sitting inside the apartment while everyone else is out having a good time."

“Great. How about we grab some lunch and then head over to my place. Unless you need to go home first for some reason?”

“No, I’m fine.” She blushed. “And I was thinking of stopping at Rose’s Café, anyway.”

“Rose’s Café it is.” He was glad she’d agreed to come with him, even though he wasn’t exactly sure why he’d brought the idea up in the first place.

Nothing had changed. Larissa was still a nurse at Hope County Hospital, and he was still vying for the medical director position. He couldn’t afford to get emotionally involved with someone he worked with. Yet he could relate to where she was coming from. Sitting at home alone didn’t hold a lot of appeal for him, either.

He would just have to make sure that spending the day with Larissa was about being friends and nothing more.

Larissa told herself that being out on Gabe’s boat didn’t mean anything. Even though Josie had wagged her eyebrows when she’d noticed Larissa and Gabe together. Larissa tipped her face to the sun and tried to calm her racing heart. Maybe this wasn’t the best idea she’d ever had.

So why had she said yes?

The logical answer was that she’d been bored and hadn’t wanted to sit around in her apartment. But the real reason was that she liked Gabe. As a person, not just as a physician she worked with.

And she hadn’t liked a man in a really long time.

For the first time, she realized that she’d been running away from her past. As much as she learned to love Crystal Lake, the fact of the matter was that she would have worked anywhere that wasn’t Chicago Central.

Gabe wasn’t Rolland. She’d made one bad decision, but did she have to live with that one bad decision forever? Maybe it was time to forgive herself. Wasn’t that what Pastor John had suggested?

“I brought you here to relax, not to be stressed out,” Gabe said as he slowed the boat, banking gently around a curve.

She hadn’t realized that her distress had been so evident and cleared her features. “Sorry about that. I guess I was wallowing in the past. You’re right that being out on the water like this is very relaxing. You must come out here whenever you have a day off, weather permitting.”

“I don’t come out often enough,” he admitted. “I tend to lose myself in running instead.”

She grinned. “Yes, I know.”

He was silent for a long moment. “I’ve been working hard to let go of the past as well,” he finally said. “So I understand how it can creep up on you at the worst time.”

She lifted a brow, surprised he’d admitted that much. “We should be able to let go, right? Considering how nice and peaceful it is here.”

He nodded as he glanced around. “Yeah, nothing like the city, that’s for sure.” He lifted his brow. “It’s a bit ironic that we’re both relatively new to the area.”

She remembered her first few weeks here and suppressed a shudder. “At least you were a Wisconsinite.” She’d heard he’d moved here from Madison. “I came from Chicago, and let me tell you, that was a huge hurdle to overcome.”

He laughed. “I can only imagine.”

She smiled in spite of herself. “Thankfully, Julie Crain befriended me, and since she grew up here, the locals finally stopped treating me like an outsider.” Julie was working this weekend or she would have had someone to hang out with.

Someone other than Gabe Allen.

Not that she was complaining or anything.

“I bet if we asked around, we’d find more transplant residents than those who were born here,” Gabe confided.

The thought of people who were born and raised here made her think of poor Annie Hinkle. According to Julie, the Hinkles had been here as long as she had. Her smile faded. “You might be right,” she agreed.

Her cell phone rang, surprising her. She stared at the screen for a moment, tempted to let the call go to voice mail as she didn’t recognize the number. Reluctant curiosity compelled her to press the green button to answer. “Hello?”

“Larissa? It’s me, Annie.” The woman was speaking so softly she could barely hear her.

A shiver of apprehension rippled down her spine. “Annie? What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

There was a loud crash followed by nothing but silence.

Annie had hung up.

Chapter Four

“Was that Annie Hinkle?” Gabe asked, every sense on alert. When she nodded, he tried to remain calm. “What happened?”

Larissa’s tortured gaze met his. “I don’t know, but I think we should call the police.”

He quickly turned the boat back toward his pier. “Are you sure? Maybe she just didn’t want anyone to know she was calling you.”

“She was talking really softly, as if she didn’t want anyone to hear her. But then I heard a crash and then—nothing. I’m worried something terrible has happened to her.”

He understood where she was coming from. The dark bruise around Annie’s wrist had revealed an ugly story despite her claims of falling off the porch. He’d seen his share of domestic violence cases when he’d been in Madison, but he couldn’t figure out why the women didn’t just get out. He knew being a victim was part of the cycle, believing the guy was going to change, thinking that next time the same thing wouldn’t happen, but it was still frustrating.

“Call 911 and send the deputies over there just in case.”

He could hear Larissa on the phone, speaking to Deputy Thomas, explaining Annie’s abrupt call and the crash she’d heard. After she finished, she turned back toward him. “They said they’d send a squad out to check things out.”

“That’s good,” he said as he pulled up next to his pier. “Wait for me to help you,” he cautioned. He made quick work of tying up the boat before giving her a helping hand.

She crutch-walked up the front lawn at a fast pace. He followed close behind. “Do you know where Annie and Kurt live?” she asked as they rounded the house.

He had a bad feeling about where this was going. “Yes. They live in a small house in the woods. They don’t have access to the lake, but their house is tucked into the trees. I think Kurt likes his privacy.” Privacy that gave him plenty of opportunity to hit his wife without anyone overhearing.

“Will you drive me there?”

He didn’t want to because he was worried about her safety. Both Kurt and Tommy could be unpredictable. Yet how could he refuse? If anything, Larissa might be able to calm Annie down if she was upset since she’d established a good rapport with the patient during her last visit.

“I’ll drive you there,” he agreed. “But we’re not going inside until the cops

show up."

Larissa looked like she wanted to protest, but she didn't say anything as she slid into the passenger seat. He took the crutches, stuffed them in the back, and then jogged around to the driver's side.

"Hurry," Larissa urged.

He was already pushing the speed limit, but he nudged the gas pedal a bit more. "Try calling Annie back, see if she answers."

Larissa did as he suggested, but apparently no one answered because she dropped the phone into her lap. "I don't like it," she murmured. "Something's not right."

As he approached the south side of the lake, he heard the wail of sirens getting louder. The squad sped past them, kicking up dust and gravel, and he couldn't help feeling a sense of relief.

He could only hope and pray the deputies had gotten there in time.

When he approached the long, winding driveway, he pulled off on the side of the road and cut the engine.

"What are you doing?" she asked, her tone laced with impatience. "We have to check on Annie."

"Larissa, the police are there. We can't just barge up the driveway into the middle of what could be a bad situation. For all we know, Annie could be a hostage. There could be weapons involved." And from what he'd heard about Kurt, the guy was an avid hunter, so for sure he owned at least one gun, if not more. "Let's just sit here for a minute and wait."

Larissa's expression betrayed her frustration, but when she bowed her head to pray, he reached over to take her hand in his. "Dear Lord, we ask that You please keep Annie safe in Your care," he murmured.

"Amen," Larissa whispered.

Larissa stared through the windshield, searching for some sign of either Annie or the police. Both windows were down, too, but they couldn't hear anything, and she wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not. At least there wasn't any shouting or gunfire. But what if everyone was already dead? She couldn't bear the thought.

Usually prayer helped keep her calm, but she couldn't deny an acute sense of urgency. She was pleased that Gabe had prayed with her, and if the situation wasn't so tense, she might have asked him more about what had caused him to stray from his faith.

The sound of muted voices reached her ears, and she grabbed Gabe's hand. "Did you hear that?" she whispered.

He nodded. “Maybe there’s nothing to worry about,” he suggested.

As much as she wanted to believe that, she knew too well it wasn’t likely. Abusive men didn’t just turn over a new leaf. They always wanted to prove that they were in control, no matter what it took. And the abuse was always the victim’s fault.

You’re so stupid! How could you do something so stupid? Whack! Maybe next time, you’ll think before you open up your mouth! Smack!

Larissa shivered despite the warm air as memories of the past came rushing forward. Her stepfather had beat her mother on a regular basis, but it wasn’t until her stepfather started beating Larissa that her mother had finally escaped.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” Gabe whispered. “You suddenly got very pale.”

She needed to pull herself together. “Nothing. I’m fine.”

The sound of a car motor startled her, and she held her breath until the squad car came into view. The two deputies inside looked grim.

“What happened?” Gabe asked through his open window. “Is Annie all right?”

The two deputies exchanged a long look. “Apparently everything is all right. Annie claims she knocked a pot of hot water off the stove and that her burns are superficial. She’s refusing medical care. And Kurt has promised to take care of her.”

Larissa shook her head, knowing that there was way more to the story. But what could they do? If Annie wouldn’t come forward to testify against her husband or come in to get medical care, they couldn’t take any action against him.

“Sorry we bothered you,” Gabe said.

“It’s no bother,” Deputy Thomas said with a dark frown. “But it is frustrating. At the moment, our hands are tied. Let us know if you hear anything more.”

“Thanks,” Larissa murmured, feeling sick to her stomach. She didn’t say anything as Gabe started up the car and drove away. She knew it would only be a matter of time until Annie was hurt again.

The only question remaining was whether or not she’d survive the next attack.

Gabe glanced over at Larissa, who’d been unusually quiet during the ride back to his place. “How about some steaks on the grill?” he offered.

Her eyebrows rose in surprise, and he mentally braced himself for rejection. “Actually,” she said slowly, “that sounds wonderful.”

Despite his intent to keep Larissa in the friendship category, he was thrilled that they’d be spending the evening together. He assumed that Larissa didn’t

want to be alone, and he couldn't blame her, especially since he knew she was as depressed as he was about Annie's situation.

But he was glad all the same.

"I hope you don't mind if I stop at a grocery store," he said. "I need to pick up something to go along with the steaks."

"Sounds good. I'd be happy to pay for salad fixings," she offered.

"I'll pay for the salads," he said firmly as he executed a U-turn in the road to head back toward town. A few minutes later, he pulled into the parking lot of the local grocery store.

He helped her out of the car, once again distracted by her vanilla scent. He quickly pulled her crutches out of the back seat and handed them to her. "Ready?" he asked.

"Of course," she said, swinging into a crutch walk like a pro.

He grabbed a basket and followed her to the produce section. "Oooh, the tomatoes look delicious," she gushed.

He grimaced. "If you like tomatoes."

Her jaw dropped in mock horror. "You don't like tomatoes? How is that possible? Everyone likes tomatoes!"

"I don't," he said with a wry grin. "But help yourself. Do you like cucumbers?"

"Of course, what's not to like?"

"What about salad dressing?" he asked when they'd filled the basket with veggies. "I have ranch dressing at home, but if you want something else, that's fine."

"I love ranch dressing, so I'm good."

Ridiculous to be pleased that they had some tastes in common. They made their way over to the checkout lines, and he I ignored the surprised glances in his direction as he paid for the groceries. It was a little late now to be worried about the gossip mill, considering he'd already attended church with Larissa.

After the way Rebecca had ruined his reputation at Madison, he'd tried to avoid attracting attention here in Crystal Lake. He hadn't been seen with a woman before now.

But there was no denying that he'd been living a lonely existence. And what was the harm of picking up veggies for dinner with Larissa? He didn't care what people said about him outside the hospital. As long as his reputation within the Emergency Department remained untarnished, he was fine.

The drive back to his house didn't take long. Once inside, Larissa took over the kitchen. "I'll make the salads," she said, running the veggies under water to clean them. "You can grill the steaks."

“Yes, ma’am,” he teased as he pulled the steaks out of the fridge, where he’d been marinating them all afternoon. The fact that he’d planned on having dinner with Larissa all along made him pause for a moment.

Was he really considering breaking his cardinal rule against dating co-workers?

No, he wasn’t. He couldn’t afford to do anything that might jeopardize his career. They were friends, that’s all. And friends could certainly share dinner on occasion. Not a big deal.

He glanced up from the grill when Larissa came out through the patio doors, his breath catching in his throat at the pretty sight she made with her flowery skirt, her pink top and the soft smile that tugged at her mouth as she dropped into one of the deck chairs. “Salads are ready whenever you are,” she announced. “And don’t worry, nary a tomato to be found in yours. Mine, of course, is loaded with them.”

His response was strangled in his throat, and he had to pull himself together with an effort. “Sounds great,” he finally managed. “And how do you like your steak?” he asked, trying to find his balance even as his thoughts raced. How had this suddenly turned into a date?

“Medium-rare,” she said. “And let me guess, you’re the kind of guy who likes your meat to moo at you.”

He couldn’t help but laugh. “Not me, I like my steaks medium-rare, too.”

They ate out on his deck, overlooking the lake, and he couldn’t remember ever enjoying a meal more. When the sun set over the horizon and the mosquitoes came out, they reluctantly went inside. Since Larissa was on crutches, he brought all the dirty dishes in and set them on the counter. She tried to start the dishes, but he shooed her away. “I have a dishwashing machine, there’s no reason for you to do them.”

“All right,” she agreed. “It’s time for me to head home, anyway. Thanks for dinner, Gabe.”

“You’re very welcome,” he said huskily. As much as he didn’t want her to leave, he knew that it would be best for him if she did. He was already far too aware of her. And far too comfortable around her. “Do you need help getting out to the car?”

“Hey, I’m a pro with these things by now,” she said, propping the crutches beneath her arms. “Although you were right about the fact that crutch walking isn’t as easy as it looks. My arms are already tired and sore from one measly day.”

He knew exactly what she meant. “You’ll get used to it after a few days.”

“I hope so.”

He held the door open for her so she could make her way outside. The ride back to her apartment didn't take long, another novelty of living in Crystal Lake compared to Madison. All the streets in Madison led to the capitol, which made traffic a total nightmare every day.

"Are you working tomorrow?" Larissa asked, breaking into his thoughts.

"Yes, are you?"

"No, I'm off one more day." Was that a flash of disappointment in her features? It was difficult to tell in the dim light. For a moment, he considered asking one of his colleagues to cover for him so they could spend another day together.

Bad idea, he told himself. Really bad idea. Besides, he'd see her the following night.

He tried to find a neutral topic. "If your ankle isn't better, get in to see your doctor. I still think you might need that MRI."

"I will," she promised.

He pulled into the parking lot of her apartment building and shut off the car so he could help her out. Of course, being Larissa, she was already trying to get out on her own.

Trying not to roll his eyes, he hurried around to assist. She attempted to pivot on one foot and teetered to the side.

"I've got you," he said, catching her before she could fall against the door. Her small frame fit into his arms perfectly, and suddenly, he didn't want to let her go.

"Thanks," she said breathlessly, her face buried against his chest.

He stood, fighting against the desire to wrap his arms around her, drawing her even closer. But then she pulled back a bit and tipped her head to look up at him. And he couldn't seem to help himself.

He lowered his mouth to capture hers in a tender kiss.

Chapter Five

Larissa melted against Gabe, lost in his kiss. It wasn't until there was a loud bang from someone slamming a car door nearby that she finally regained her senses.

She pulled away, struggling to catch her breath. Why had he kissed her?

Why had she kissed him back?

"Larissa," he began, and she immediately knew he was about to apologize.

"It's okay," she said quickly, cutting him off. "I really need to get going. Thanks again for everything," she said, desperately wishing she could just walk away.

But of course, she couldn't walk anywhere, not without the crutches.

"Can you get the crutches out for me?" she asked when he didn't say anything.

"Sure." He stepped back, opened the door, and pulled them out. "I'll walk you inside," he said.

"No!" The word came out much harsher than she'd intended. Couldn't he see she was hanging on by a thread? "Goodnight, Gabe."

She tucked the crutches beneath her already-sore armpits and made her way up the sidewalk. Of course, Gabe didn't just let her go inside by herself; in fact, he rushed ahead to open the door for her.

Keeping her gaze averted, she made her way toward the elevator. "Thanks, but I've got it from here," she said with a bright smile. "Have a great day at work tomorrow," she added as the elevator doors opened. She swung inside and jabbed the button to close the doors.

It wasn't until the doors closed and the elevator starting moving that she sagged against the wall in relief. The trembling in her legs had nothing to do with the exertion of crutches and everything to do with Gabe's kiss.

What had just happened? A better question might be—why had that happened?

She'd heard about Gabe's aloof reputation on her very first day. All the nurses talked about the fact that the good-looking ER doctor didn't date nurses. Not even ones who worked elsewhere in the hospital.

But that wasn't the only reason she'd been fighting her attraction to him. She didn't want or need the complication of a man in her life. She was here getting over a bad relationship, not to jump into a new one.

Still, she couldn't help lightly touching her tingling lips. Gabe's kiss hadn't

just barreled against the walls she'd built around her heart, it had broken straight through.

She closed her eyes and prayed for strength.

Larissa's ankle felt much better the next morning, so much so that she decided against going to an urgent care, her only option on the Memorial Day holiday. The swelling had come down to the point she probably didn't really need the crutches, but she used them anyway just to rest the ankle a bit more, especially since she was scheduled for another twelve-hour shift the next day. At least she was scheduled for the night shift, so she'd have the entire day to rest it.

Summer clouds darkened the sky, making it a great day to stay inside doing chores. Getting her laundry done was tricky, but she managed to scoot the basket into the elevator to get down into the basement.

As the day wore on, she couldn't seem to stop thinking about Gabe. Which was ridiculous, because she'd already decided that she needed to keep her distance from him. Yet she must have checked her phone a dozen times, wondering if she'd missed his call.

Or a call from Annie.

She thought about the poor woman as she placed the frozen bag of peas over her ankle. She'd called Annie's number several times, but the calls went straight to voice mail. Either Annie's phone was turned off or Kurt had destroyed it.

She shivered, hoping that Annie had managed to keep the phone hidden. If not, the poor woman had no way of calling for help. Not that she'd called the police so far.

Larissa had sensed Gabe's frustration yesterday when Annie had refused to press charges. She understood all too well what was going on in Annie's mind.

How many times had she begged her mother to leave George? Too many to count. Her mother always had an excuse—either she was afraid she wouldn't be able to find a job, or she was afraid George would come after her, or she was afraid George would actually leave her alone. She'd tried to tell her mother they were better off without him, but it wasn't until he'd attacked Larissa that her mother had sneaked away in the dead of the night, going straight to a women's shelter, one of the many Larissa had tried to convince her to go to in the past.

The years after George had been rough on both of them. Her mother had been depressed, and the only job she'd been able to get was that of a waitress, which hadn't brought in much money. Larissa had gotten a job as soon as she'd turned sixteen to help with the household expenses. When she was seventeen, she took the nursing assistant program through her high school and had gotten a decent-

paying job at a local nursing home. She enjoyed working with patients and had decided to go into nursing.

Ironically, once she'd headed off to college, her mother had found a new man, one that didn't hit her or abuse her in any way. He was significantly older, but as long as her mother was happy, she didn't care. In talking to Annie in the ER, she'd tried to explain to Annie that she could do the same.

But after the incident last evening, she could only assume her words had fallen on deaf ears. Well, maybe not completely deaf, as Annie had tried to call her.

Shaking off her depressing thoughts, she finished her laundry and then settled in for a movie marathon. She had a secret weakness for the old Star Wars movies and watched one after another, staying up as late as possible so she could sleep in before her next night shift.

The next afternoon, her ankle felt even better. She stayed off of it until she needed to get dressed for work. Even then, she wrapped it snuggly for extra support.

Dark storm clouds obscured the sun, streaks of lightening flashing across the sky as she headed to the hospital. She hurried, trying to beat the rain, making it inside the hospital with mere seconds to spare before the sky opened up and rain pelted the earth.

She grinned at her friend Julie. "I thought for sure you'd be off today. Didn't you work the past two days?"

"Tonight is my last of three shifts in a row, and then I'm off for four glorious days," Julie responded. "Can't wait!"

Julie was lucky to have purchased a townhouse on the lake. She'd gotten a decent price because one side had suffered a kitchen fire. If Larissa had managed to save more money, she might have put in a bid for the place herself. Although she was glad her friend had gotten it. Next year, she silently promised. Next year she'd have enough money for a down payment.

"Are you in the trauma room tonight?" Larissa asked as they made their way over to the desk. Debra was the charge nurse, and she looked harassed as they approached.

"I don't know," Julie said with a wry smile. "Guess we'll find out."

"I'm glad you're both here," Debra said. "We're short staffed tonight, so I'll need both of you to take a team and help cover the trauma room," she instructed. "Larissa, you're team one, and Julie, you're team two. I have Jessica covering team three, and I'll pitch in as needed."

Larissa exchanged a wince with Julie before nodding. "Okay."

"This is going to be a long night," Julie muttered as they walked away to their

respective teams. “I bet this storm is going to bring a bunch of trauma cases in. We’ll be running for sure.”

“You’re probably right,” Larissa agreed. Too late now to wish she’d gotten a doctor’s excuse. Although to be fair, she was glad she hadn’t called in, otherwise she would have left Debra, Julie, and Jessica to handle the ER alone.

For the next three hours, Larissa dealt with a steady stream of patients, and thankfully, only two trauma patients had come in. She’d taken the first one, and Julie had taken the second.

“Tag, you’re it,” Julie had joked as they passed in the hallway like ships in the night.

“I know, I know,” Larissa muttered. They were to take turns with the traumas unless there were two at the same time, and then Debra would come and assist.

Gabe walked into the ER at quarter to eleven, and she realized he was also assigned the night shift. The doctors worked eight-hour shifts instead of twelve, and she hadn’t really thought about Gabe at all until now.

Memories of their heated kiss made her blush, and she kept her gaze focused on the computer screen as he went over to the main census board.

“Okay, Mr. Harris, you’re all set for discharge,” she said, walking into her patient’s room. “Remember you have to follow up with your doctor first thing tomorrow morning, okay?”

“I’ll remember,” the elderly patient said as he stood. Mr. Clarence Harris had congestive heart failure and often forgot to take his medications, which then caused him to become short of breath. In reading his chart, it sounded like his son wanted him to go to a nursing home, but the older man kept refusing.

“All right, take care, then.” She helped him out to a wheelchair. Rick, one of their techs, came over to escort the patient outside.

“Hi, Larissa, I’m surprised to see you here.” Gabe’s voice broke into her thoughts. “How’s your ankle?”

She took a deep breath before turning to face him. “It’s a lot better, thanks. I have the crutches in my car if you want them back.”

“No rush,” he said with a shrug. The way he stood there with his hands stuffed into the pockets of his lab coat, she sensed there was more he wanted to say, but just then, their trauma pagers went off.

“Car versus pedestrian just off Highway Z,” Gabe said out loud as he read his pager. “Victim is a fifty-year-old woman, and her vitals are bad. It doesn’t sound good.”

Her stomach clenched with dread as she read the same message. Annie was fifty years old and lived near Highway Z. Granted, that didn’t mean she was the victim. Still, she sent up a quick prayer for Annie’s safekeeping.

“We should call a chopper, in case she needs to get to Madison,” she suggested as she followed Gabe into the trauma bay. They were only a level-two trauma center, and if this patient was really bad, they’d need to stabilize her and get her transferred as soon as possible.

“Good idea.”

She’d barely made the call when the ambulance bay burst open revealing a bevy of paramedics surrounding a gurney. The moment she saw the victim, she knew it was Annie despite the massive amount of blood.

“Fifty-year-old woman with serious head injury, unconscious at the scene. Vitals reflect hypovolemic shock. We have fluids running wide open.”

“Is there another victim?” Gabe asked.

“No, apparently this was a hit and run.”

Larissa concentrated on taking care of Annie, but deep down, she felt certain Kurt was the one behind the wheel of the car that had hit his wife.

And she suspected he’d intended to kill Annie.

Larissa and Gabe worked on Annie for a solid hour before they deemed her stable enough to transfer. Larissa watched the flight team wheel Annie away and silently prayed.

Dear Lord, please keep Annie safe in Your care.

“Larissa?” Gabe’s low voice broke into her prayer. “Are you all right?”

Suddenly, she wasn’t. She had to get away, just for a few minutes. “Excuse me,” she murmured, slipping away.

She stepped outside, staying beneath the overhang so that she didn’t get drenched by the rain. What had happened to Annie? Had she tried to escape Kurt on foot? Had she been on the road, helpless as he drove directly at her?

Squeezing her eyes shut didn’t help erase the image she could see so clearly in her mind. Maybe it wasn’t Kurt, she tried to tell herself. Maybe Annie had been running from her husband and dashed onto the road, directly in the path of an on-coming car.

She took several deep breaths, trying to calm her ragged nerves. There wasn’t anything she could do to help Annie right now. She and Gabe had done their best, placing a breathing tube and a central venous catheter before pumping several units of blood into her system.

The rest was up to the trauma team in Madison and God.

Feeling calmer, she turned to go back inside, shivering when a blast of cold rain hit her back, soaking through the thin fabric of her scrubs. The trauma bay was empty now and had already been cleaned up, which made her feel guilty. It

was almost four in the morning, the most difficult part of the night shift, and she realized she must have stayed outside longer than she intended.

Time to stop worrying about Annie and to focus her attention on the handful of patients who still needed care on her team.

She was about to head through the trauma bay when suddenly the ambulance bay doors opened behind her, letting in a blast of cool air. She jumped around in surprise and nearly tripped over her feet when she saw a disheveled man standing there holding a gun.

“This is all your fault,” he said in a harsh tone, waving the gun in her general direction. “Annie’s gone, and it’s all your fault!”

Kurt Hinkle. Was he intoxicated? He certainly acted like it; his eyes were bloodshot and his gait unsteady. She swallowed hard and tried to edge behind one of the metal bedside tables, not much protection against a bullet. When Kurt came farther in the room, she fought a rising panic.

Where was everyone? Couldn’t they hear Kurt?

“Don’t move!” he threatened. He took a step toward her, and she couldn’t help shrinking backward, dragging the metal bedside table with her.

And this time when he raised the gun and pointed it directly at her, his hand was far too steady.

Chapter Six

Gabe glanced impatiently at the clock on the wall. Where was Larissa? It wasn't like her to take such a long break in the middle of her shift like this. He'd always been impressed by what a hard worker she was.

But he also knew just how upset she was at seeing the extent of Annie's injuries. The burn from two nights ago had been weeping and was covered in dirt and grime from the highway. Annie had also sustained several broken bones, a head injury, and a potential ruptured spleen. It had been a long time since he'd seen anyone so badly hurt. And knowing Larissa, she was likely blaming herself even though there was absolutely nothing she could have done to prevent what had happened.

Still, he couldn't help sending up a quick prayer for Annie's recovery. And then shook his head in mild disbelief when he realized he'd prayed more since attending church with Larissa than he had in the year his sister had hounded him to go.

Not that he planned on telling Kimberly that.

Julie came abruptly around the corner and barreled right into him. He steadied her with his hands on her shoulders. "Whoa, take it easy."

"Sorry," she said with a sigh, taking a step back. "It's been so crazy busy." She frowned. "Have you seen Larissa? One of her patients needs something for pain."

"I'll find her," he promised. "Just get her patient the pain meds for now, okay?"

"Okay." Julie disappeared, and he swung around to head back to the trauma bay.

He slowed to a stop when he heard a familiar voice.

"Annie's not here, Kurt. Why don't you put the gun down and have a seat so I can arrange for you to go and see her?"

Kurt? Gun? Ice crawled down his spine, and he sprinted toward the nearest phone and punched in 911. "Kurt Hinkle is armed with a gun and is in the trauma bay with Larissa," he said in a low, terse tone to Grace, the sheriff's department dispatcher. "Hurry."

He hung up the phone, swung around, and quickly flagged down Debra, the charge nurse. "Keep everyone out of the trauma bay, do you understand?" he said as quietly as possible.

"What's going on?"

“Kurt Hinkle is in there with a gun, but the police are on their way. Keep everyone out and far away from this area,” he repeated, moving toward the door.

“You can’t go in there,” Debra protested, grabbing his arm.

“Yes, I can. Just keep everyone out here, okay?” He shook off her hand and edged toward the door leading to the trauma bay. He didn’t want to barge in there in case he startled Kurt into shooting.

But he couldn’t bear the thought of Larissa facing someone as unstable as Kurt alone, either.

Dear Lord, please give me strength.

He cracked the door open and peered inside. The ice on his spine turned glacier when he saw how close Kurt was to Larissa, just six feet away, with his gun leveled directly at the center of her chest. Larissa stared up at Kurt with wide, frightened eyes with nothing but a small metal bedside table between them.

There was no way he was waiting for the sheriff’s deputies. He shoved open the door and stepped into the room. “Put down the gun, Kurt.”

The older man swung around to face him, the gun bobbing up and down in his hand. “Stay out of this, doc. This is between her and me.”

“Put the gun away,” he repeated, projecting a calmness he didn’t feel. “Don’t make this worse than it already is.”

“Get outta here!” Kurt shouted, his face turning red.

From the corner of his eye, he noticed Larissa was edging farther away from Kurt, exactly the way he’d hoped. The trauma bay was big and open; there weren’t any places to hide or much to use as a barrier against a gun.

“Why are you threatening Larissa?” he asked, striving for a conversational tone. “She hasn’t done anything to you.”

Mentioning Larissa was a mistake as Kurt immediately swung back toward her. “You should have stayed away from Annie,” he accused. “You shouldn’t have filled her head with ideas of leaving me. It’s your fault she got hurt. If she wouldn’t have left, she’d be fine right now.”

Gabe couldn’t believe Kurt’s twisted logic, but then again, he didn’t understand why any man would physically abuse his wife, either. Kurt was so far beyond rational that Gabe didn’t have a clue how to get through to him.

“I was trying to help Annie,” Larissa said with a note of defiance. “You’re the one who keeps hurting her, not me.”

Gabe silently urged Larissa to be quiet. There was no sense in making the guy mad.

“What do you want, Kurt?” Gabe asked, desperate to get the man’s attention focused back on him instead of on Larissa. “I can’t help you if I don’t know

what you want.”

“I want you to get out of here,” Kurt shouted. “If you don’t, I’ll start shooting!”

Gabe glanced helplessly at Larissa, trying to think of a way to stall. Kurt might be drunk, but considering his hunting background he didn’t dare bank on the fact that Kurt might not hit his target. Especially considering Larissa was in close range.

Where were the sheriff’s deputies? Shouldn’t they have been here by now? What was taking them so long?

“Now!” Kurt said, firing the gun for emphasis, the sound echoing through the trauma bay.

“Get down,” Gabe shouted to Larissa as he dropped to the floor. He rolled and then came up in a small crouch, ready for the next gunshot.

Larissa must have sensed what was about to happen, because when he glanced over, she was hunkered down in the corner of the room holding the small metal bedside table turned sideways so that the tray protected her chest. He didn’t see any blood, so he hoped and prayed that meant she wasn’t hit. Thankfully, she had some cover.

“Kurtis Hinkle! Drop your gun and come out with your hands up!”

Kurt spun around toward the doors leading in from the ambulance bay, where the sheriff’s deputies were located. Gabe took advantage of Kurt’s momentary distraction to dive toward Larissa. She clutched at him, and he held her tight for a fraction of a second before he shoved her behind him.

“Stay down,” he whispered. A bullet could still go through him to get to her, so he used the metal bedside table as a shield while hoping for the best. He took heart in the fact that he could see a deputy standing just outside the door he’d come through earlier.

The cops had Kurt and the trauma bay surrounded. But the danger was far from over.

“Go away or I’ll kill them both!” Kurt shouted.

“What do you want, Kurt?” one of the deputies shouted. “Do you want to see Annie?”

“Annie’s dead!” Kurt screamed, his face mottled with anger.

“Annie’s not dead,” Gabe said and hoped he wasn’t lying. “She’s at a hospital in Madison. The deputies can arrange for you to see her.”

“You’re lying!”

Gabe probably was lying since he doubted the deputies would take him anywhere near Annie. It was clear they believed Kurt was the one who’d run Annie down. But they needed to get Kurt to surrender his gun before anyone got

hurt.

“Do you want to see your son, Tommy?” the deputy asked from outside the ambulance bay doors.

“Leave my son out of this!” Kurt grew even more agitated, pacing back and forth in front of the ambulance bay doors. “Stay away from him, do you hear me?”

Gabe realized that Tommy was a lever they could use, and hopefully the deputies knew that, too. Because right now there wasn’t much between him and Larissa and the madman with a gun.

And Kurt could easily shoot them both before the deputies would have a chance to stop him.

Larissa had prayed almost non-stop since Kurt had cornered her in the trauma bay. And the fact that Gabe was here, too, made her feel even worse.

She didn’t doubt for a minute that Kurt had been driving the car that slammed into his wife. Annie had clearly been trying to get away from him. Hadn’t Kurt admitted that much already?

This was her fault, Kurt was right about that. She should have spent more time with Annie the night she’d come in for her broken wrist. She should have convinced Annie to get away from Kurt right then and there. She could have taken Annie to a safe house, at least for the night.

But she hadn’t. And now she and Gabe were both in danger. Trapped in a corner where Kurt could easily kill them. The fact that Kurt hadn’t shot either of them yet was nothing short of a miracle. Maybe his being intoxicated was actually working in their favor. He didn’t seem to be thinking too clearly.

The door leading in from the trauma bay was slowly opening about an inch or so, and she realized one of the sheriff’s deputies was standing there. From the angle of the door, he wouldn’t have a good shot at Kurt, but just knowing the deputy was there helped steady her nerves.

“It’s not too late, Kurt. Put down your gun and come outside. We understand this is all just a big understanding.” The voice outside sounded like Deputy Armbruster. “Come out while you still can.”

“No! If you come in here, I’ll kill them both!”

The door from the main part of the ER opened even wider, and Larissa tensed as she saw Deputy Thomas kneeling there, wearing full SWAT gear. Despite the awkward position, he pointed his handgun at Kurt. She thought she was prepared for the sound of gunfire, but the blast made her jump.

Kurt screamed and swung around, shooting wildly before he went down hard.

The next few seconds passed in a blur, but suddenly the gunfire stopped and the nightmare was over.

"I have him," Deputy Thomas said as he stood over Kurt, who was bleeding profusely onto the floor. Kurt's gun was on the other side of the room far out of reach.

"Get him up on a gurney," Gabe said. He shoved the metal tray aside and rose to his feet, pulling her up, too. "Are you all right?" he asked in a low tone, his warm, brown eyes gazing down at her.

"I think so." Her hands were still trembling, so she clutched them together.

Thank you for saving us, Lord!

"Run and get Julie to come and help me with Kurt," he said, moving away. "He needs medical attention. You can cover the patients on the teams until we've finished."

She could barely wrap her mind around the fact that Gabe was going to help fix Kurt's gunshot wound. But then she realized they simply couldn't let him die, no matter how much he might have deserved it. So if Gabe could do it, so could she. "I'll help you."

"You don't need this, get Julie," Gabe repeated, heading over to where the sheriff's deputies were handcuffing Kurt Hinkle to a gurney. There was so much blood that she knew there wasn't time to waste.

She went over and grabbed IV supplies, knowing that they'd need access in order to give badly needed blood and fluids. The rest of the ER staff poured in to assist once the deputies had given the all clear. Soon she and Julie were working as a team, pumping four units of O-neg blood in at a time through a rapid infuser.

"Call the trauma surgeon on call," Gabe ordered. He stared down with obvious concern at the open wound on Kurt's lower abdomen where Deputy Thomas's bullet had penetrated deeply into his flesh. "I can't stop the bleeding, and he needs to get to the OR stat!"

A nicked artery certainly explained the massive blood loss. Larissa didn't allow herself to think about anything that happened before, focusing solely on saving Kurt's life. Even though she knew he'd end up in jail if they managed to succeed.

She heard Julie making the call to the surgeon. "Dr. Rausch is on his way in."

Gabe grimaced and began packing the wound. "I hope he gets here in time."

"Do you need a suture tray?" Larissa asked after she finished hanging four more units of blood. Kurt's vitals were low but stable, at least for now.

Gabe gave her a grim nod. "I'll try my best to patch him up at least until he can get to the OR."

She pulled a sterile vascular tray off the shelf on the back wall and quickly opened it up as Gabe pulled on a new set of sterile gloves. The vascular tray wasn't really equipped for a large-vascular injury, but it was better than nothing.

Larissa handed Gabe instruments and lap sponges as he worked to stem the bleeding enough to see what he was doing. He placed a few sutures, and the blood gushing out slowed to a trickle. He put more sutures in and then stepped back. "That's all I can do for now."

Fifteen minutes later, Dr. Rausch strode in and took command of the situation. Within moments, she and the transporter wheeled Kurt over to the OR. Deputy Armbruster followed alongside, unwilling to let his prisoner out of sight.

"I'm afraid you can't go in there," she warned, putting a hand on the deputy's arm. She wasn't sterile, either, and neither one of them would be allowed any farther. "You'll have to stay out here if you really want to wait."

"You can be sure I'll wait for him," Deputy Armbruster muttered. "Although, frankly, it's a waste of time patching him up since he'll be spending the rest of his life in jail."

She didn't have an answer for that and was ashamed to admit she'd had the same thought earlier. But the source of the injuries didn't matter; as health care professionals, they were obligated to save lives to the best of their ability. Even Kurt's. "There's a coffee machine over there. Help yourself," she murmured.

"Thanks. I'll have to take your statement later, okay?"

"I'll hang around after my shift is over," she promised.

"Tell the doc I'll need to talk to him, too."

She nodded to indicate she'd pass the message. "Take care." She turned and made her way back to the ER. She felt bad that Julie and Debra had been covering her patients all this time. But when she glanced up at the clock, she stared for a moment, unable to believe that only an hour had passed since Kurt had trapped her in the trauma bay.

The rest of her shift passed by in a blur. After she gave report to the oncoming nurse, she headed outside, surprised to see the bright sun. The rain from the night before had passed, giving way to a new day.

As much as she wanted to go home, she knew the police still wanted to talk to her and to Gabe.

Just then, Gabe joined her outside. Wordlessly, he crossed over and pulled her into his embrace. She leaned against him, relieved and glad to be alive.

"I've never been so afraid in my whole life," he murmured in her ear. "I'm thankful you weren't hurt."

"Me, too," she said, her voice muffled by his shirt. "I mean, I was terrified he was going to shoot you."

“Deputy Thomas saved the day.”

She couldn’t argue that one.

The parking lot began filling with cars, members of the hospital leadership team and the public relations department arriving to take charge of the situation. As they streamed past, she felt distinctly self-conscious and tried to pull away, knowing Gabe wouldn’t want to be seen hugging her like this in public.

But he refused to let her go. His arms tightened around her, and when she glanced up at him questioningly, he simply smiled, lowered his head, and kissed her in full view of anyone who cared to watch.

And she reveled in the sweetness of his kiss.

Chapter Seven

Gabe barely noticed the various pairs of eyes boring into him as he kissed Larissa. Only when he needed to breathe did he break away and lower his forehead to rest on hers. His pulse thundered in his ear, and he realized he didn't want to let her go.

"I prayed for your safety," he confessed in a low voice. "And God answered my prayers."

"Me, too," she admitted. "I prayed for us and for Annie."

"At least Annie is safe from Kurt now," he said. "Kurt will be stuck behind bars for a long time."

"I know." Larissa ducked her head and leaned back as if trying to put more distance between them. "Gabe, we're attracting too much attention."

"I don't care." And he was surprised to realize he truly didn't care. Larissa wasn't Rebecca, and no matter what happened, he knew Larissa would never spread lies about him. It was ridiculous it took him this long to realize that. Or maybe he was just hiding behind the idea because it was a good excuse. "I care about you, and I don't mind if the whole world knows it."

Her green eyes widened in surprise. "But Gabe, you never date any of the ER nurses. Ever."

He couldn't help but smile. "Until you."

She looked flabbergasted by his response, but Deputy Thomas interrupted them. "Dr. Allen? Larissa? Do you have time to give your statements?"

"Of course," Larissa said.

He didn't want to let her go but had to be content with holding her hand. "Could we sit down somewhere? It was a long night, and I'm sure Larissa is exhausted."

"No problem. Let's head over to the patio outside the dining room."

Once they were seated at the picnic table, Deputy Thomas took out his notebook and pen. "Larissa, why don't you start at the beginning?"

"After we transferred Annie to Madison, I needed a moment alone, so I went outside and stood beneath the overhang just outside the ambulance doors. I guess I must have been out there longer than I thought, because when I came back in, the trauma bay was already clean, and everyone was gone. I was about to head back to my team of patients when Kurt came in."

"Did you see him outside?" Deputy Thomas asked.

"No, but I probably wasn't paying attention. I will admit I thought he was the

one who drove into his wife, but I never expected that he'd come looking for me armed with a gun."

Gabe couldn't bear the fear underlying her tone, and he gave her hand a reassuring squeeze.

"Then what happened?"

"I tried to talk him into putting the gun down, but he just kept coming closer and closer. I didn't have a way to call for help, but then the door leading from the arena opened, and I saw Gabe standing there."

"And you went inside?" Deputy Thomas asked, a deep frown furrowing his brow. "You're lucky he didn't kill you."

"I couldn't just stand there while he took a shot at her," Gabe said. "Besides, I figured I could get him to talk. I needed to try and stall long enough for you and your guys to get there."

Deputy Thomas didn't look happy, but he spared Gabe a lecture, asking a few more questions before he closed his notebook. "I appreciate your time. Thanks."

"That's all you need?" Larissa brightened. "We can go home?"

"Yes, you're free to go home."

Deputy Thomas walked away, and Gabe glanced at Larissa. "How about I drive you home?" he suggested. "We'll pick up your car later."

"I'd rather just drive my car home now, if you don't mind." Larissa tucked her hair behind her ear and avoided his direct gaze. "But thanks again, Gabe. For everything."

He didn't want to let her go, but he couldn't very well force her to allow him to stay, either. He frowned as she walked to the parking lot alone.

Why was she was pushing him away?

Maybe after everything that had happened, she needed some time alone. So he'd give her a few hours to sleep and to recharge.

Then he was going to make his feelings known by asking her out on a proper date. And he could only hope and pray she wouldn't say no.

Larissa dragged herself out of bed after five hours of sleep, determined to get back on a regular schedule since she had day shifts scheduled after her day off. Her ankle was a little sore, so running was out of the question.

A boat ride would have been great, but she quickly veered away from thoughts of Gabe. She was still struggling with everything that had happened with Kurt. The way he'd accused and threatened her brought back terrible memories of life with George.

She hadn't told anyone about the abuse her mother had suffered. Larissa

hadn’t mentioned the time George had broken her arm, either, since that one injury had been nothing compared to everything George had put her mother through.

She’d prayed for the strength to forgive George, but seeing Kurt in the trauma bay made her realize she really hadn’t forgiven George. Or Kurt. Or Rolland, who hadn’t hurt her physically but who’d tried to control her just the same.

And she needed to forgive all of them.

Or she’d never be able to move on from her past.

When her buzzer went off, she dragged herself over to the intercom. “Yes?”

“Larissa? It’s Gabe. Can I come up?”

She hesitated but then acquiesced. “Sure.”

The apartment wasn’t too messy, and she smoothed her hair back, wishing she’d put on a touch of make-up. When Gabe knocked at her door, she took a deep breath and opened it.

“Hi.” Did he look nervous or was she just imagining it? “I wasn’t sure if you’d be up yet.”

“I like to try and get back on a day schedule if I can.” She closed the door and followed him into the living room. “Can I get you a soft drink?”

“No, thanks.” Yep, he definitely looked nervous. “Larissa, would you go out to dinner with me tonight?”

His abrupt question caught her by surprise. “What made you change your mind about dating colleagues?” she asked.

Gabe nodded. “You’re right, you deserve an explanation.” He paused for a minute. “I dated Rebecca, one of the nurses I worked with in Madison. I quickly figured out that we didn’t have anything in common; in fact, she made it clear the best thing she liked about me was my title.”

“Your title?” She frowned, not quite following.

“Doctor.” He lifted a shoulder in a half-hearted shrug. “You must know the type, the ones who only want to marry a doctor because they think we rake in the big bucks. Rebecca didn’t even like being a nurse; she complained about it all the time. I broke things off, and that’s when everything turned ugly.”

“Oh, Gabe,” she murmured. Unfortunately, she did know there were nurses out there who were only interested in marrying a doctor.

“She alleged I sexually harassed her, that I made unwanted advances toward her. There was a huge investigation, and I thought for sure I’d be vindicated, but a few of her friends lied for her, and pretty soon it was her word against mine. So I left and came here, to Hope County Hospital.”

“I don’t blame you for keeping your distance,” she assured him. “That’s a terrible thing for her to do to you.”

“Thanks, but I think I’ve had it easy compared to others.” Gabe held out his hand, and she couldn’t resist taking it and moving closer to him. “I understand now that the reason you related so well to Annie is because you went through something similar, didn’t you?”

She shouldn’t have been surprised that he’d figured it out. “My mother was married to an abusive man,” she admitted in a low voice. “I saw the vicious cycle first-hand, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t seem to stop it.”

His hand tightened on hers, and when she met his gaze, his concern was obvious. “How did you escape?”

“My mother only cared about the abuse when George started hitting me. The night he broke my arm, she took me to the hospital, and from there, we went to a women’s shelter.”

Gabe groaned and pulled her close, wrapping his arm around her shoulder. “I’m sorry you had to go through that again last night. Thankfully, God was watching over you. Over both of us.”

Her eyes pricked with tears. He was being too nice; she didn’t deserve his kindness. Here she’d convinced Gabe to go to church, and she was the one who was at a crossroad in her faith. “I can’t seem to find a way to forgive him,” she whispered. “I thought I had, but last night after Kurt was shot, I immediately thought he deserved to die.”

“A perfectly natural reaction,” Gabe pointed out. He leaned back, put his finger beneath her chin, and forced her to meet his gaze. “I thought the same thing.”

“But Gabe, don’t you see? God expects us to forgive our enemies.”

“Yes, He does.” Gabe’s gaze was intense. “But He also promises to help us learn how to forgive our enemies. He doesn’t necessarily make us figure it out on our own.”

She wanted to believe him, but really, there was no way of knowing if she’d ever be able to forgive George for what he did to her mother, or forgive Kurt for what he did to Annie. And how could she find peace and love if she didn’t?

“Larissa, I’m falling in love with you.”

Gabe’s declaration stole her breath, and she instinctively shook her head. “I don’t know that I’m ready for that.”

“I’ll give you all the time you need, as long as you give me a chance. Don’t shut me out, Larissa.”

She pulled away and rose to her feet, threading her fingers through her hair. “I’ll try, but I can’t make any promises,” she said finally.

“That’s all I can ask,” he said. “So will you have dinner with me tonight? I’ll pick you up at six.”

A reluctant smile tugged at her mouth. “All right, dinner at six.”

“Great. See you soon.” Gabe left, and within minutes, she was second-guessing her decision.

Restless, she paced the apartment. Remembering the news vans that had been parked outside the hospital, she called her mother, who answered on the first ring. “Larissa? I heard about what happened at the hospital on the news. Are you all right?”

“I’m fine, Mom. Perfectly fine.” She winced, realizing she should have called her mother sooner. “How are you doing? How are things with Ed?”

“Ed’s fine, he’s always good to me, Larissa. You’re the one I’m worried about.”

She stared out the front window for a long moment. “Mom, I have a question for you. Have you forgiven George for everything he’s done?”

“Of course I have,” her mother responded. “In fact, I feel sorry for him.”

She nearly choked at that. “Feel sorry for him? Why?”

“Because he’ll never have true love the way you and I will. He’ll never know God’s love either. I pray for his soul every day.”

Humbled, Larissa thought her mother was far smarter than she’d ever given her credit for. “You’re right, Mom,” she said. “George deserves our prayers.”

And so did Kurt. Maybe if she kept thinking about it from her mother’s perspective, she could really find a way to forgive them both.

Larissa was dressed and ready to go well before six, so she didn’t mind when Gabe showed up ten minutes early.

“Larissa, you look absolutely beautiful.”

She reached up to give him a quick hug. “You don’t look half bad, yourself.”

He looked surprised yet pleased at her warm embrace. He gave her a quick kiss on the cheek and then held the door open for her. “After you.”

He drove to a very nice restaurant that was perched high on a hill overlooking the lake. As fancy as the place was, she decided she preferred the meal they’d shared on his deck.

“I bet their steaks aren’t nearly as good as yours,” she said in a low tone.

He grinned. “But their lobster is amazing.”

“I still like dining on your deck better,” she insisted, leaning back to peruse the menu. The lobster was listed as market value so she skipped that one, looking for something more reasonable.

“Have whatever you like,” he said as if reading her mind. “After last night, we deserve to splurge.”

She didn’t want him to think she was anything like Rebecca, so she settled on a more reasonable shrimp dish.

After the server took their order, Gabe reached across the table to take her hand. “You look happier tonight than you did this afternoon.”

She couldn’t deny the truth. “I am happy.”

“So you must have heard that Annie is still in the ICU but her vitals are stable.”

“No, I hadn’t heard, but I’m glad to hear she’s hanging on.” She took a sip of water. “And how’s Kurt doing?”

“He survived, too, and is listed as critical but stable in the ICU.”

She was surprised by the lack of resentment she felt about that news. “Actually, I talked to my mother, and she made me look at men like Kurt and George differently.”

“Oh yeah? How?”

She repeated what her mother had told her. “I think I can see now why God asks us to forgive our enemies. Because He knows that we have His love and they don’t. And really, what more could we ask for?”

“You’re a very special lady, Larissa,” Gabe said, his hand tightening around hers. “I’m lucky to have found you.”

She couldn’t deny what was in her heart. “I think you’re pretty great yourself, Gabe.”

A wide grin split his face, and he stood and came around the table, drawing her up to her feet. “Does this mean we’re officially dating, Ms. Brockman?” he asked in a teasing tone, sliding his arms around her waist.

“I believe it does, Dr. Allen,” she agreed, reaching up to wind her arms around his neck.

The playfulness vanished as he stared deeply into her eyes. “I love you, Larissa.”

Her heart swelled to the point she feared it might burst with joy. “I love you, too.”

When he kissed her, the entire restaurant burst into applause, and she found she didn’t mind one bit.

Thank you, Lord!

THE END

Dear Reader,

When I was a young girl my parents used to take us “up north” to stay in a cabin on Fish Lake. I always remember those trips fondly, learning how to swim and water ski on the lake. So when it came time to write a mini-series I wanted to create a setting that reminded me of the fun times I had as a young girl.

I created this fictional town of Crystal Lake a few years ago and the town and its characters drew me back to tell more stories about it. This Novella is to introduce my new Crystal Lake series. If you enjoyed this story I hope you consider reading A Soldier’s Promise which is Julie Crain’s story. The first chapter is after this letter if you want to give it a try.

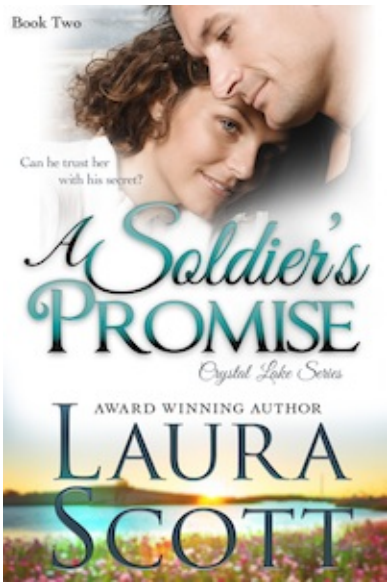
I love to hear from my readers and you can find me on Facebook under LauraScottBooks, on Twitter @laurascottbooks or my website www.laurascottbooks.com.

Yours in faith,

Laura Scott

Excerpt from

A Soldier's Promise



Chapter One

"Hey, Jules—we have two trauma patients on the way, ETA less than five minutes."

ER nurse Julie Crain stifled a groan. She'd just returned from taking her previous patient down to the morgue, and she was emotionally drained from dealing with his grieving family. She forced her exhaustion aside. "Okay, what's the story?" she asked, glancing up at Merry Haines, the ER charge nurse at Hope County Hospital.

"A two-vehicle crash, T-bone on the driver side. From what I hear, the drunk driver who ran a red light and caused the crash wasn't hurt-but the guy in the SUV and his young daughter are being brought in."

Julie caught her breath as her heart thumped painfully in her chest. Oh, no. Not a young child. She couldn't handle an injured child. She closed her eyes and prayed.

Please God, keep the little girl safe. And her father, too.

"I hope they lock up the drunk driver and throw away the key," Merry muttered.

She understood where Merry was coming from. Working in the ER, they'd both seen more than their fair share of alcohol- or drug-related injuries and

deaths.

Dr. Gabe Allen came into the room in time to catch the last part of their conversation. “The driver was Tommy Hinkle,” he said with a dark scowl. “So yeah, I think that scenario is highly likely.”

Not a tourist then, but one of their own. Tommy Hinkle was the Crystal Lake troublemaker, picking up where his father had left off. At nineteen, he wasn’t even legal to drink at all, much less drink and drive.

Tommy would end up in jail this time, for sure. Just like his father. The only good thing was that his mother, Annie Hinkle was still recovering in a Madison rehab center from a terrible car crash and wasn’t here to see her son behind bars.

Before she could check over their supplies, the doors from the ambulance bay burst open, and a bevy of paramedics wheeled in two gurneys.

Julie was relieved to be in position to take the first patient, which happened to be the father.

“Thirty-year-old Derek Ryerson, suffered loss of consciousness at the scene,” the paramedic announced. “We placed two eighteen-gauge PIV’s and gave a liter of fluid so far. His vitals remained stable throughout transfer.”

She quickly connected the heart monitor leads to his chest, reassured by the steady beat of his heart. She leaned over to perform a neurological assessment, noting an abrasion on the side of Derek Ryerson’s left temple that was easily seen, considering his military-short dark hair. Concerned about a possible head injury, she carefully lifted his eyelids and peered at his pupils. She flashed her penlight, grateful to note they were both equal and reactive.

She continued her assessment, listening to his heart and his lungs. The right side of his lungs didn’t sound as clear as his left side, and there was an angry red band across his chest from where the seatbelt had held him in place, likely preventing additional and more serious injuries. When she brushed a hand over the right side of his ribcage, he let out a low groan.

Bruised or broken ribs? Or something worse? She glanced up again at the heart monitor, but his vitals continued to be stable.

Before she could call over to Dr. Allen, a large hand reached out to grab her wrist. She gasped, her gaze clashing with his as he stared at her intently. His hard, blue, uncompromising gaze caused a spurt of fear.

“My daughter. Lexi,” he said hoarsely. His pain-glazed eyes bored into hers, and his grip on her wrist tightened painfully. “Where’s Lexi?”

The flash of fear faded when she realized he was concerned about his daughter. She glanced over to where Merry and Gabe were examining the young girl. “Don’t worry. Lexi is right here in the gurney beside you. My name is Julie and I’m your nurse. Merry and Dr. Allen are taking good care of your daughter.”

Lexi must have heard her father's voice, because up until now, the silent child created a sudden commotion from the gurney next door as she struggled to get away from where Merry was trying to hold her down. "Daddy! Let me up! I wanna see my daddy!"

"Lexi." Derek dropped Julie's wrist and struggled to push himself upright as if intending to go to his daughter. He didn't get far before he let out a harsh sound and grabbed the right side of his chest, swaying dangerously. His face went pale, beads of sweat popping out on his forehead.

"Take it easy. You're going to hurt yourself more," Julie told him, trying to keep calm, knowing she didn't have the strength to hold him down if he chose to get up. Derek Ryerson was a big man, at least six feet tall and broad shouldered —his entire body was solid muscle. Whatever he did for a living, he kept in shape. "You have a couple of bruised or broken ribs, and we haven't cleared your spine yet, either. We also need to make sure you don't have a head injury."

For a moment, he stared into her eyes, as if trying to decide whether or not to believe her. Considering the strength with which he'd grabbed her wrist, she thought he couldn't be too badly injured. She waited, simply looking back at him, secretly amazed at how brilliant his blue eyes were.

Good thing she was immune to good-looking men.

After what seemed like a long time, he dragged his gaze from hers. "Lexi, listen to what the doctors and nurses are telling you to do, okay, honey? They're only trying to help. I'm right here next to you. I promise I won't leave without you."

"Daddy, I want my daddy," the girl cried out between heartbreaking sobs, repeating herself over and over again, seemingly inconsolable. The poor child must be traumatized from the accident.

"Gabe? I might need a chest X-ray here," she called out, doing her best not to be distracted by Lexi's sobbing mantra, even though she wanted nothing more than to cross over to offer comfort.

Gabe walked to her side. "His vitals, along with his oxygen saturation, are stable, so let's do a CT scan of his head, neck, chest, and abdomen. That way we'll have the big picture."

"Sounds good." She picked up the phone and called over to radiology to put in the request for the CT scan. When she finished, she turned back to Derek. "How does your head feel?"

"Fine," he said through gritted teeth. The lines bracketing his mouth indicated suppressed pain, but whether from just his ribs or his head, too, she couldn't say for sure. He closed his eyes, as if he couldn't stand the bright lights. "I'm fine, just take care of my daughter."

She frowned. Was his head injury worse than she thought? Hadn't she already told him that his daughter was being cared for? "Merry and Dr. Allen are taking good care of Lexi, remember? Does your back hurt anywhere? I need you to be honest with me, because if you have a cracked spine that goes undiagnosed, you could become paralyzed."

He opened his eyes and glared at her, but she refused to back down. She couldn't understand why he was downplaying his injuries. "No, my back doesn't hurt. My neck is sore, and my head hurts a bit, too. The right side of my chest feels like it's on fire, but nothing hurts as much as listening to Lexi cry."

She smiled gently, feeling bad for him. She could only imagine how difficult it would be to stay on a gurney if her niece had been injured. "I know, and I'm sorry. But the best thing you can do for your daughter is to make sure you're all right. She needs you."

"I'm fine, nothing a little aspirin won't cure. Bruised and battered from the airbag and the crash, but fine."

There was no point in arguing. She glanced over at the next gurney, where Gabe and Merry where in deep conversation.

"I don't see any sign of serious injury," she heard Merry saying to Gabe. "The paramedics believe she was likely in a proper booster seat in the back on the passenger side, opposite from the point of impact. When they arrived, they found her out of the seat and clinging to her father. Apparently, they had a heck of a time getting her away from him, and they had to give her a mild dose of Versed to get her onto the gurney. She's probably fine, but we should get a chest and abdominal CT scan, just to be sure there is no internal bleeding from the straps of her car seat."

Julie waited until Merry finished. "Since they both need CT scans, I should take them down the hall to radiology together. I think Lexi will be calmer if she can be with her father."

"She can't go into the scanner with him," Gabe pointed out with a frown.

"No, but I could sit with her in the viewing room, behind the lead glass," she argued. "And once Lexi sees her father going through the scanner, maybe she'll cooperate when it's her turn."

Gabe and Merry looked at each other and shrugged. "Fine with me," Gabe finally agreed.

Satisfied, Julie waited for Gabe to finish his exam of Derek and then entered the necessary radiology orders for both patients into their respective charts.

She made the arrangements and then quietly told Derek the plan. "I'm going to put Lexi in a wheelchair and have her sit with me in the viewing room to watch you go through the scanner first. The machine makes some loud noises,

which can be scary. I want to reassure her it doesn't hurt."

His expression was guarded. "Are you sure she's well enough to sit in a wheelchair?"

His protectiveness for his daughter made her smile. "Amazingly, Lexi doesn't seem to have any injuries at all," she assured him. "But we'd like to get a body scan just in case there's some internal bleeding. Kids aren't always good about being specific with their aches and pains. Or maybe she gets that streak of stubbornness from you."

For a moment, a flicker of grim amusement flashed in his eyes in response to her gentle teasing, and he subtly relaxed. "All right," he agreed. "If you think it will help. Can I talk to her while I'm in there?"

"Not while they're scanning. You'll need to stay still and hold your breath when they tell you to. You can talk to her before and after, though."

"Okay." He lifted his hand and gingerly rubbed the right side of his chest.

"Show me exactly where it hurts," she said, noticing the gesture.

The stubborn look came back into his eyes, and she feared he was going to deny any pain at all, but he gently fingered the area where his lowest ribs were. "Right here, mostly. You were probably right about the cracked ribs."

"Maybe. Or you could have some damage to the lower lobe of your lung or damage to your spleen." She figured blunt honesty was best, so he would understand the seriousness of his situation. "Your breath sounds were a bit diminished on the right side, but the CT scan will tell us everything we need to know."

He reached out to grasp her wrist again. "If they have to take me to surgery, I need you to promise you'll look after Lexi."

Stunned, she gaped at him. Look after Lexi? What on earth did he mean? "Is there someone I can call for you? Her mother? Grandparents? Friends?"

"There's no one to call," he said flatly. "Lexi and I are on our own."

She swallowed hard and nodded, desperate to reassure him. "All right, but try not to worry. I'm sure you'll be fine."

He didn't let it go. "Promise me. If something happens, I want you to look after her. Don't let strangers take her away. Promise!"

Derek knew he probably sounded like a lunatic, but he didn't care. The pain along the right side of his chest was bad, far worse than he'd let on, and after what the petite brunette nurse had said about the possible damage to his lung, he was very much afraid that, once they'd completed the scan, they'd whisk him off to surgery.

He'd downplayed his injuries because he didn't want to stay overnight in the hospital, unless, of course, Lexi needed to be observed. No matter what, he was not going to leave his daughter. Lexi had already been through so much, more than any six-year-old should have to handle. With her mother dead and buried, she needed him now, more than ever.

If only he'd stopped for something to eat earlier, he wouldn't have been driving through the intersection at the same moment as the idiot who'd run a red light, slamming into them.

"Daddy?"

He turned his head, hiding a wince, to look at his daughter. True to her word, the pretty nurse—what in the world was her name?—had gotten Lexi into a wheelchair and brought her over to the side of his gurney. He forced a broad, reassuring smile. "Hey Lexi, how are you feeling?"

Her solemn gaze didn't waver from his. "Fine," she whispered. "Can we leave now?"

If only they could. He'd been all set to leave without the scans until the nurse had mentioned the possibility of a cracked spine. At this point, he needed to know exactly what he was dealing with. Besides, he needed to be sure Lexi was all right, and if that meant getting a scan first, so his daughter could see it wouldn't hurt, then that's exactly what he'd do. He held his daughter's gaze, holding his smile in place. "Afraid not, baby-doll, first we have to get checked out by the kitty-cat machine." Lexi wasn't easily distracted, especially when she wanted something. But that didn't stop him from trying.

"I don't want to stay here." Lexi's eyes, blue like his, revealed a hint of fear. "It's scary."

The pretty nurse, he couldn't read her name on her ID badge because his vision was blurry, another tidbit he hadn't fessed up to, came over. "Lexi, we need to make sure your daddy's not seriously hurt. So we're going to take him for a CT scan, but you can watch from behind the glass the whole time, all right?"

Lexi barely spared the nurse a glance. He wanted to apologize for his daughter's behavior, but there was no point, since Lexi had no idea she was being rude.

"Okay, let's go," the woman said in a cheerful voice. She went behind Lexi's wheelchair to push her forward, while his gurney was maneuvered by a tall guy who was likely some sort of orderly. When the gurney went over a bump, he had to clench his teeth against a surge of pain. He focused on the nurse, who was talking to Lexi.

"We'll be finished with these scans in a half hour, Lexi," she was saying in

that same cheery tone. “See the clock on the wall up there? It’s seven o’clock in the evening. Do you know how to tell time?”

Derek was surprised when Lexi’s head moved in a barely discernible nod. His daughter was listening, even if she didn’t appear to be paying attention.

“The big hand is on the twelve, and we’ll be all finished before the big hand gets down to the six.”

Lexi glanced at the clock but said nothing more. The lack of response didn’t stop the nurse’s rather one-sided conversation, and he was grateful she didn’t pass judgment on his daughter the way so many others had.

The way Lexi’s grandparents had.

The CT scan didn’t take long, and as soon as they were finished looking into his head, he talked briefly to Lexi, reassuring her. Then he had to stay quiet until the rest of the scan was completed. When the scan was complete, he heard the nurse encouraging Lexi to take her turn.

His daughter, bless her stubborn heart, wasn’t too keen on the idea. When he saw Lexi’s wheelchair come closer, he turned his head toward her. “Lexi, we can’t leave until I know you’re safe and healthy. The kitty-cat machine doesn’t hurt. All you have to do is to close your eyes and let them take pictures. Once I know you’re fine, we’ll leave.”

He could see the instant flare of protest in the nurse’s eyes at his rash promise, but he glared at her, silently threatening her not to contradict him. She pressed her lips together firmly but didn’t say anything.

Lexi finally agreed to the scan, and he watched protectively as the nurse allowed his daughter to climb down from the wheelchair and up onto the CT table by herself. He had to give the woman points for being astute—she seemed to instinctively know that Lexi wouldn’t tolerate being touched or carried by a stranger.

After the orderly came back to push his gurney out of the way, his nurse crossed over. She locked her gaze on his and spoke in a low tone. “Derek, the lower lobe of your right lung has collapsed. Dr. Allen needs to put a small catheter in between your ribs to re-inflate your lung.”

“Can he do that right here? Or do I have to go to the operating room?” he asked, dreading the answer.

“He can do that right here, but it’s going to hurt.” Her large chocolate-brown eyes held sympathy.

“Let’s get it done fast, then, before Lexi is out of the scanner.”

“That’s what I thought, too,” she confessed. When she leaned closer, her nametag came into focus. Julie. He remembered now, her name was Julie. The pretty name somehow fit her dainty frame and cheerful personality. “I need to

prep the side of your chest, first, okay?”

“Go for it,” he said. “Just hurry.”

She hadn’t been kidding about the pain, but surprisingly, once the procedure was over, the fire in his chest felt better. The pain wasn’t gone, not by a long shot, but breathing was certainly was easier.

“Now just a quick X-ray of your arm and your chest to make sure your lung has re-inflated, and you’ll be set for a while,” Julie informed him.

“No other internal bleeding?” he asked. Even though he had no plans of staying, he wanted to know exactly what he was dealing with.

“You have a hard head, but luckily, no sign of intracranial bleeding, although you do have a small concussion. You also have two cracked ribs and a bruised spleen, but no other internal bleeding was found. And Lexi’s scan is complete too. Rick, our orderly, is bringing her back here momentarily. Her scan was completely clear. You and your daughter are very lucky to have escaped serious injury.”

“Great.” The relief was nearly overwhelming. Once he would have thanked God, but not anymore. Not that he thought God would listen to him anyway, considering the way he’d taken Lexi and bolted out of St. Louis in the dead of night. But no matter what, he wasn’t going to take Lexi back.

The urge to keep moving was strong. They couldn’t afford to stay in one place for too long.

He focused his gaze on Julie. “We are lucky, but we’re finished here. I suggest you get our discharge paperwork started, because we’re leaving as soon as possible.

THE END

Other Books by Laura Scott

Crystal Lake Series (listed in order)
Healing Her Heart
A Soldier's Promise
Coming Home
Worth The Wait
Christmas Reunion

Other Love Inspired Suspense Books
The Thanksgiving Target
Secret Agent Father
The Christmas Rescue
Lawman-In-Charge
Proof Of Life
Identity Crisis*
Twin Peril*
Undercover Cowboy*
Her Mistletoe Protector*
Wrongly Accused (SWAT Series)
Down To The Wire (SWAT Series)
Under The Lawman's Protection (SWAT Series)

*Stories with Linked Characters