



For the Rest of My Life
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Chapter One

It was well past closing time at Stoney Creek Family Medical Center when Claire McCall, M.D., saw her through the front window. Bruised, her blond hair caked with sticky blood, and her bare arms draped around the neck of the man who carried her, the young woman's face reflected sheer terror.

Claire leaned against the front door of the clinic and sighed. She had her hand on the lock she was ready to twist, bringing a ceremonial end to another day in the clinic. It was a private ritual, a small celebration of survival in the rural clinic where she was as likely to see a life-threatening cardiac arrest or a chain-saw accident as she was a benign case of the common cold. She desperately wanted to secure the bolt, to hear the click as it slid into place, signaling the end of office hours and the promise of a quiet night ahead. Or even better, a chance to spend some time with John Cerelli, the man who graced her life with laughter, friendship, and the hope of a lost love rekindled.

She glanced again through the front window. She knew she would open the door. She was the only physician in the town. Turning the patient away would mean, for the young woman, a long trip to the hospital in Carlisle, a trip that many of the locals would forsake for a patch-up on the kitchen table. "Set up a laceration tray, Lucy. And keep the light on in the X-ray room."

"What? Not another one." The gray-haired nurse shook her head. "Lee and I were going to the Ruritan Hall for a pancake supper."

Claire opened the door. "Tell him you'll meet him in an hour."

Her patient clutched the neck of a muscular man wearing a white T-shirt soiled with the day's work. Black grease and dirt mixed with a bib of sweat below an unshaven face and dark, curly chest hair. He entered as

Claire held the door, his back to her, stepping around the empty chairs, looking toward the empty reception desk.

“Is the doctor here?”

“Yes. You can take her in there,” Claire answered, pointing to a hallway leading to the back. “The first room on the left. The nurse will help you.”

Claire followed the couple, catching the unmistakable scent of stale sweat and whiskey, an odor she knew only too well from her father, Wally.

“She fell down the stairs,” the man offered, setting the patient down on the old examining table covered with white paper.

Lucy didn’t bat an eye. “Leave her with me,” she said softly. “I need you to give some information to the receptionist.”

He shook his head. “She wants me to stay with her. She’s afraid.”

The woman, appearing no older than a teenager, had her right eye wide open, darting between the nurse and the man who towered over her. Her left eye was closed, swollen shut by a lid the color of grape jelly. A jagged laceration crossed her eyebrow, gaping open, split by the force of whatever had contacted her face, pinching the skin against her supra-orbital ridge, the boney rim of skull above her eye.

Claire watched as she made eye contact with the man, who appeared older, perhaps thirty-five. “I’m so clumsy,” the girl said. “I should have been more careful.”

The man nodded. “It’s okay, baby. We’ll get a doctor to help.”

Claire put on a sterile glove and stepped in front of the man. “Excuse me.” She touched the patient’s fair face, gently feeling the cheeks and forehead for step-off deformities or crepitation, signs of a facial fracture. She looked at Lucy. “She’ll need an X ray.” Then, to the girl, she asked, “How long’s it been since you had a tetanus shot?”

The patient shrugged. “Don’t know. I think I had one last year.”

“You got one when you wrecked your bike, honey,” the man said. “You split your lip on the handlebar trying to carry in the mail.”

Claire nodded silently. “We can close the wound here. If she has a fracture, I’ll have to call a maxillo-facial surgeon in Carlisle.”

“I want the doctor to see her. She needs a doctor.”

Claire offered a plastic smile.

“Where’s old Doc Jenkins?”

“He retired. I’m his replacement. Doctor Claire McCall,” she added, without extending her hand.

The man shook his head. “You’re a real doctor?”

It was a reaction Claire had come to expect. Overcoming gender bias was a daily part of life in Stoney Creek, the town that women’s liberation forgot.

The girl reached over her short cut-off jeans, which were purple with blood. “I twisted my ankle.”

Claire checked the patient’s right ankle, which was swelled with fluid, obscuring the normal bony landmarks. “We’ll X-ray this, too.” Claire examined her legs, dotted with bruises. She touched the girl’s thigh. “You fall often?”

The girl shrugged and looked at her escort. “I’m so clumsy.”

The standard answer. Claire had heard it before. She touched the girl’s chin. “What’s your name?”

“Lena.”

“Smile for me, Lena.”

She did, parting her fattened upper lip to reveal a chipped front incisor.

“Are you hurt anywhere else?” She slid her fingers along the girl’s neck. “Any tenderness here?”

The girl shook her head silently.

Claire studied the man for a moment. He stood by the girl’s side, too close for Claire’s comfort. “You’ll need to fill out some paperwork. We need her insurance information. If you’ll follow Lucy here, I’ll make sure Lena gets taken care of.”

He stepped even closer to Claire. “I want to stay with her. Bring the papers to me. I’ll fill them out.”

Claire didn’t want to challenge the man. If her suspicions were right, he wasn’t a man to tangle with after he’d been drinking. “Bring me a wheelchair. Let’s get her X rays.”

They transferred Lena to a wheelchair and rolled her across the hall to the X-ray unit.

“You’ll have to wait out in the hall, sir,” Claire insisted. “We’re going to be x-raying. It’s not safe.”

“I’m stayin’ with her. I’m not afraid.”