



*All I'll Ever Need*

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Requests for information should be addressed to:

Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530

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## Chapter One

Claire McCall closed her hand around the pistol's grip, snapped off the safety, and stared into the darkness. The room was midnight black except for the digital alarm clock that cast an eerie green glow across her pillow: 3:00. The numbers mocked her inability to sleep. Her heart pounded as she tightened her grip and waited for another sound to break the silence.

She mouthed his name. "Tyler." It had been six weeks since the assault, six weeks since the violent intrusion into her bedroom by Tyler Crutchfield, a former employee who had gone by the name of Cyrus Hensley. She stared at a dim slit of light beneath her door.

A creak from the old floorboards whispered a different message. She sat and listened, nodding her head in quiet resolution. She weighed the pistol in her hand and thought about the last time she'd used it. Right there, at the foot of her bed, she'd defended herself against him. Claire steadied the handgun, lifting it up and steeling herself for a shot toward the door. *I won't just wound him this time.*

Outside, a peaceful blanket of night cuddled Stoney Creek and the surrounding Apple Valley. Beyond her home sang the comforting noises of the country. The barking of the neighbor's dog. The wind rustling pine branches against the roof of the small ranch house. A summer locust. The soprano chorus of the frogs seeking food or love or both.

But she'd heard something else. Inside. A noise in the hall and then in the kitchen. Footsteps. Willing the old box springs not to squeak, she rose and crossed to the door. She twisted off the dead bolt, lifted the locking chain, and turned the doorknob to unsnap the lock. Opening the door, she slipped into the hall with the gun lifted at arm's length in front of her.

She paused at the end of the hallway and listened. A glass clinked against the counter. She stepped quickly into the kitchen with her arms extended, pointing the gun in the direction of the sink.

After a few seconds, her eyes adjusted to the dim light and she could see a woman, facing away, looking through a window into the night. Claire lowered the pistol to her side and took a deep breath. Her mother turned around. "Oh," she gasped, sloshing a glass of water on her nightgown. "Claire, you startled me."

"Mom." She followed her mother's gaze to the gun. "I—" She halted. "I thought you were an intruder."

"Put that thing down before you kill someone."

Claire slowly uncurled her blanched fingers and laid the weapon on the counter.

"This isn't rational."

Claire knew that. She couldn't dispute it. She shrugged. "Fear is irrational."

"Tyler is in prison, honey. He can't get you anymore."

"I hear you. Just tell that to my gut."

Della stepped toward her daughter and enveloped her in a hug. "Don't you think you should talk to someone?"

"We've been through this." Claire broke away, and touched the pistol again. "I just feel safer if it's near me, that's all."

Della lifted gray-streaked blonde hair behind her ear. "How did someone so stubborn come out of me?"

Claire squinted back at her mother, feeling the sting of her accusation.

Della laughed. "Don't look so hurt," she said, turning back to the sink. "Want some coffee?"

"I want some sleep."

"It won't kill you to get some help."

"I just need some time."

"Want to know what I think?"

Claire shook her head and sat at the kitchen table. "When have my desires ever stopped you from giving an opinion?"

"You're not afraid of Tyler anymore." Della snapped on a fluorescent light over the sink. "How many locks do you have on the bedroom door?"

Claire didn't answer. They both knew the answer.

"Tyler is locked away. This is Stoney Creek, one of the safest towns around. It makes no sense for you to have to protect yourself this way."

Claire sighed. "I told you fear wasn't rational."

"You're trying to protect yourself against the future. Ever since you got the results of your Huntington's disease gene status, you've grown more

and more withdrawn. You've had locks installed on the doors, alarmed the house, have Mace under your pillow, and a gun on the nightstand."

"He tried to rape me, Mom. Forgive a girl for being afraid."

"I know you. You've been through similar trouble before." Della threw up her hands. "Brett Daniels," she said, speaking the name of a troubled resident who stalked Claire during her internship. "He spray-painted threats on your door and tried to run you off the road."

"So?"

"So?" Della shook her head. "You didn't react this way then."

"Maybe this is different. It was here. In my own bed. Maybe I should move."

"Maybe you should admit that you're trying to defend yourself against the future."

"So now you're a psychologist."

"I'm your mother. That qualifies me to make a judgment."

Claire huffed.

"Tyler is only an excuse. There is only one thing stalking you now."

She looked at Della, silhouetted by the light behind her. "Huntington's disease." She spoke the name of the disease she'd inherited from Wally, her father. She couldn't keep the sarcasm out of her voice. "And you think that I think that this gun is going to keep HD at bay?"

"Of course not. But your fear that HD will strike and spoil your future is manifested in your need for that gun."

Claire felt like cursing. Was it anger over her mother's insight? *Or has Huntington's already started to affect me, altering my personality so that I'll be less inhibited and more likely to . . .* She closed her fist and counted. *One, two, three, four, ten!* "And where did you get your psychiatry degree?"

Della stared at her daughter. To Claire, it was the look you give a stranger who has mayonnaise on his cheek and doesn't know. Pity. Embarrassment.

"I need some sleep," Claire muttered. She stood and walked toward the hallway, but not before picking up the pistol from the counter.

"Claire," her mother said softly.

Claire looked back at Della without speaking.

"I saw a beautiful wedding dress in Brighton last week. I want to show you."

She smiled. That was Della. Always trying to get Claire to look at the bright side, reminding her that John had only recently popped the question after learning that Claire carried the HD gene. "Okay, Mom," she whispered. She paused. "I'm supposed to see my genetics counselor today. Maybe I'll see what she thinks of your theory."

Claire walked back down the hall to her room, locked, dead-bolted, and chained her door, and set the pistol on her nightstand. She reached her hand beneath her pillow and closed it around a small canister of pepper spray.

She lay awake wondering about whether she'd ever be able to follow through and marry the man she loved. *Mom wants me to look at wedding dresses.* Her eyes flooded with tears. *Is it fair to doom his future just because mine is ruined?*



By 9:00 a.m., business at Medical Records Solutions raced forward at a hectic pace. Ami Grandle sipped her second cup of coffee and looked up as Bob Estes walked past her desk. “Valley Orthopedics called,” she said. “They want you to give a demo on our e-patient software.”

Bob poured himself a cup of coffee and slapped a newspaper on her desk. “Check this out. Give Cerelli time off for sick leave and look what he does.”

“Are you listening to me?” she said. “Dr. Smith said he—”

“I know, I know,” he groaned. “Look at this,” he said, pointing to the paper. “Cerelli must have really injured his head in that accident.”

Carol Dawson walked in, clicking her high heels against the floor. “That’s old news. Cerelli’s been dating that girl for years.”

Ami studied the small engagement announcement in the *Brighton Daily*. She felt her stomach tighten. She’d known of John’s on-again, off-again relationship with the Stoney Creek physician, but the last time John had talked with her before his accident, he’d said he’d given up hope on a future with Claire. “This can’t be right,” she muttered.

Carol tugged on the upper edge of the paper. “You’re blushing.”

Ami threw the paper in the trash.

Bob hooked a finger in his belt and leaned against her desk. “Another one bites the dust.”

Carol moved closer. Ami looked away, wishing the duo would leave her alone.

“What’s wrong, Ami?” Carol asked.

“John’s too sweet to be treated the way that woman jerks him around.”

Ami watched as Carol and Bob exchanged glances. She felt heat rise in her face. John had been so friendly since she’d started working in his office. She’d allowed her hopes to rise too high. She pretended to busy herself with a stack of files on her desk, avoiding the examining eyes of her coworkers.

Carol took Bob by the arm, nudging him from his perch on the desk. “Come on, big boy. Give a woman space to work.”

Ami waited until the others disappeared from her office, then turned her attention to the picture of the happy couple in the newspaper. Opening the top drawer, she retrieved her scissors. As she cut out John’s picture, deftly separating him from the smiling blonde on his arm, she whispered, “I know how you feel about me, John.” She placed his photograph in the drawer and crumpled the rest of the page into a wad and tossed it into her waste can. “I’m not giving up that easily. Dr. McCall is no match for me.”



Later that morning, Claire sat in the genetics department at Brighton University across from her counselor, Ginny Byrd.

“Huntington’s disease changes everything.” Ginny’s statement hung in the air like the threat of rain.

“Everything,” Claire repeated.

“Knowing you carry the gene for a deadly disease can empower you or crush you.” The genetics counselor folded her arms across her lap. “In many ways, what happens is up to you.”

Claire nodded. That’s what she loved about Virginia Byrd. She never held back. She cut through the fog straight to what mattered. *You would make a good surgeon.*

Today was to be her last scheduled session with Ginny, a closure encounter to see how Claire was dealing with the new information that she carried the Huntington’s disease gene. Ginny seemed a transplant from the sixties. Gray-streaked blonde hair pulled into a long braid, an African-beaded necklace, and a long denim skirt graced her almost-five-foot frame with a charm that warmed her to Claire from the start. She tapped a legal pad with a pencil before storing it back in her hair at the base of the braid. “How has knowing affected your relationships?”

Claire felt heat rise in her cheeks. “I’m engaged now.”

Ginny leaned forward and took Claire’s hands. “I heard. So it’s no rumor?”

“John didn’t want to ask me until he knew the results of the test. That way I wouldn’t think he’d asked me before, only wanting me if I wasn’t a carrier for HD.”

Ginny beamed. “I like his style.” She pulled her hands away.

Claire thought back to her early morning conversation with Della. “I’m struggling to be upbeat. I want to use my gene status as a reminder to live each day to the full,” she said. “John and I may not have a long

lifetime together, so we have promised to not let a dread of the future spoil today as well.” She looked down, afraid of betraying her feelings. *Okay, so I believe it in my head, but what about my heart?*

“Good for you.” Ginny smiled. “If there is anyone I know that deserves a little taste of happiness, it’s you.”

Claire attempted a smile. “We’re already planning the wedding.” She shook her head. “There is so much to do.” She lifted her hand to count off her fingers. “A florist, photographer, caterer . . .”

“A church, a vocalist,” Ginny added.

“A hairstylist, a manicure . . .”

“A videographer, invitations.” The duo ended their list together and laughed.

They sat together for a moment as comfortable in silence as they were with shared laughter. “That’s good. Everything’s great,” Ginny said.

Claire nodded, wanting to believe it. “Yes.”

“You don’t believe it.”

“Am I that transparent?”

“Let’s call it translucent. You’re pretty good at putting on a happy face.”

“Maybe I’m a little scared of commitment.”

Ginny shook her head. “Maybe you’re afraid of letting someone else take care of you.”

“John doesn’t need to suffer too.”

“Maybe you don’t realize that trusting your life to him may mean humbling yourself to let him care for you.”

Claire frowned. “He loves me like I am. What if he doesn’t love me when I look like my father?”

“Sometimes love finds its sweetest expression in illness.”

It sounded like a platitude. Claire didn’t want to argue, so she forced herself to smile. A happy face. “Sure.”

“So what about Wally?”

Claire’s smile melted. Leave it to Ginny to launch another probe. “Daddy?” She shifted in her seat. “He’s getting so thin.”

“I want to know about your feelings. How has knowing he passed the gene to you changed your relationship?”

Claire took a deep breath. Ginny’s pick-a-scab approach to counseling was effective and painful. “HD seemed to settle a lot of issues for me in terms of relating better to Daddy. Once I knew about HD, I was able to forgive him for his erratic behavior.” She paused. “I was able to put some of the hurt behind us.” She dabbed the corner of her eyes. “He tells me he loves me now.”

“But?”

Claire didn't want to uncover this scab. She pressed her eyelids with the fingers of her right hand. She opened her eyes and raised her head. “How do you know there is a *but*?”

“There always is with HD.”

A tear escaped the corner of her eyes. Her voice cracked as she spoke. “For the longest time, I was able to be so positive, even around Daddy. I suppose down inside I always held out the hope that I'd be negative, so I didn't let it get to me.”

“And now?”

Claire paused. There was no polite pretending with Ginny. “I hate seeing him now. As long as I am at work, or busy with John, or planning the wedding, I'm okay. HD is in the background somewhere, but I'm not thinking about it.” She shook her head. “But when I'm with Wally, all I see is so horrible. He can hardly speak a clear word anymore. His head, arms, and legs are constantly banging against the padded bed rails. It's like a cruel glimpse into the future.”

“So what do you do?”

“Avoid going very often.”

“Are you angry?”

“At my dad?” Claire thought for a moment. “It's not his fault. He didn't even know he had a disease to pass along.”

“So where's the anger coming from?”

“Who says I'm angry?”

“You're clenching your fist. You started when you mentioned your father.”

Claire looked at her right hand and uncurled her whitened knuckles.

“I'm not judging you for being human, Claire. Anger is often a normal response to finding out about HD.” She shrugged. “You blame the parent who passed it on to you. You blame God.”

Claire nodded. “So what do I do?”

“Do?” She leaned forward. “You're such a doctor. You want to fix everything.”

Claire held up her hands. Surrender.

“This isn't something you fix.”

“I sleep with a loaded gun by my bed.” She decided not to mention the three locks on her bedroom door and the pepper spray. She looked into Ginny's face. “My mom says I'm trying to protect myself against the future.”

Ginny leaned back and crossed her legs. “Is she right?”

*Just like a counselor. Answer a question with a question.* “I have nightmares about the rape attempt,” she said, shrugging.

Ginny nodded and didn't speak.

"Okay, maybe she's right. I know no one's after me, so maybe my fears represent something else."

"You're good at looking strong, Claire. In fact, I think you're a very strong woman."

"But."

"But you're human. Women who've been victims of sexual assault often benefit from talking things out."

"Two against one. No fair."

Ginny looked puzzled.

Claire explained, "My mother said the same thing. I don't suppose you do that kind of counseling too?"

"Outside my league, kiddo. I can make a referral if you'd like."

She sighed. "I'll think about it."

Ginny pulled the yellow pencil from its resting place. From Claire's angle, it looked like she pulled it straight out of her brain. The effect was chilling.

The counselor tapped the pencil against her lap. "Wally is dying." She paused, perhaps to be sure the words had a chance to penetrate. "Now begins the final chapter in your relationship to your father. Avoiding him now is losing something you'll never regain."

"Maybe you don't get it. Wally can't walk anymore. He can barely swallow. His arms and legs swim over the sheets like a drowning man. He can't get to the bathroom, so he pees in his diaper. The constant movements keep him in a stinky sweat. I get nauseated just going in the room." She hesitated, locking her eyes on Ginny's. "And all I can see is me in his place."

"I know, Claire. It must be horrible."

"It's worse than that. I hope somebody puts me out of my misery long before I look like my father."

Ginny nodded with understanding and spent a moment with her hands folded in her lap before speaking. "May I make a suggestion?"

Claire tilted her head. "Find a silver lining."

"Am I that predictable?" Ginny laughed.

She grinned. "Maybe."

"Tap some of that Claire McCall optimism. Make every visit with your father a reminder to live today to the fullest, not an excuse to dread the future."

The thought resonated with her. She wanted to do that, longed to do it, in fact. She and her father had been too far down a healing road to let her own fear spoil her final months with Wally.

She looked up at Ginny. "It's a plan."

Claire hugged her counselor and walked down the hall wondering how all the talk was supposed to equip her for the future.

*I'm engaged to marry John Cerelli. I should be delirious with joy. So why do I doubt I'll ever walk the aisle for him?*