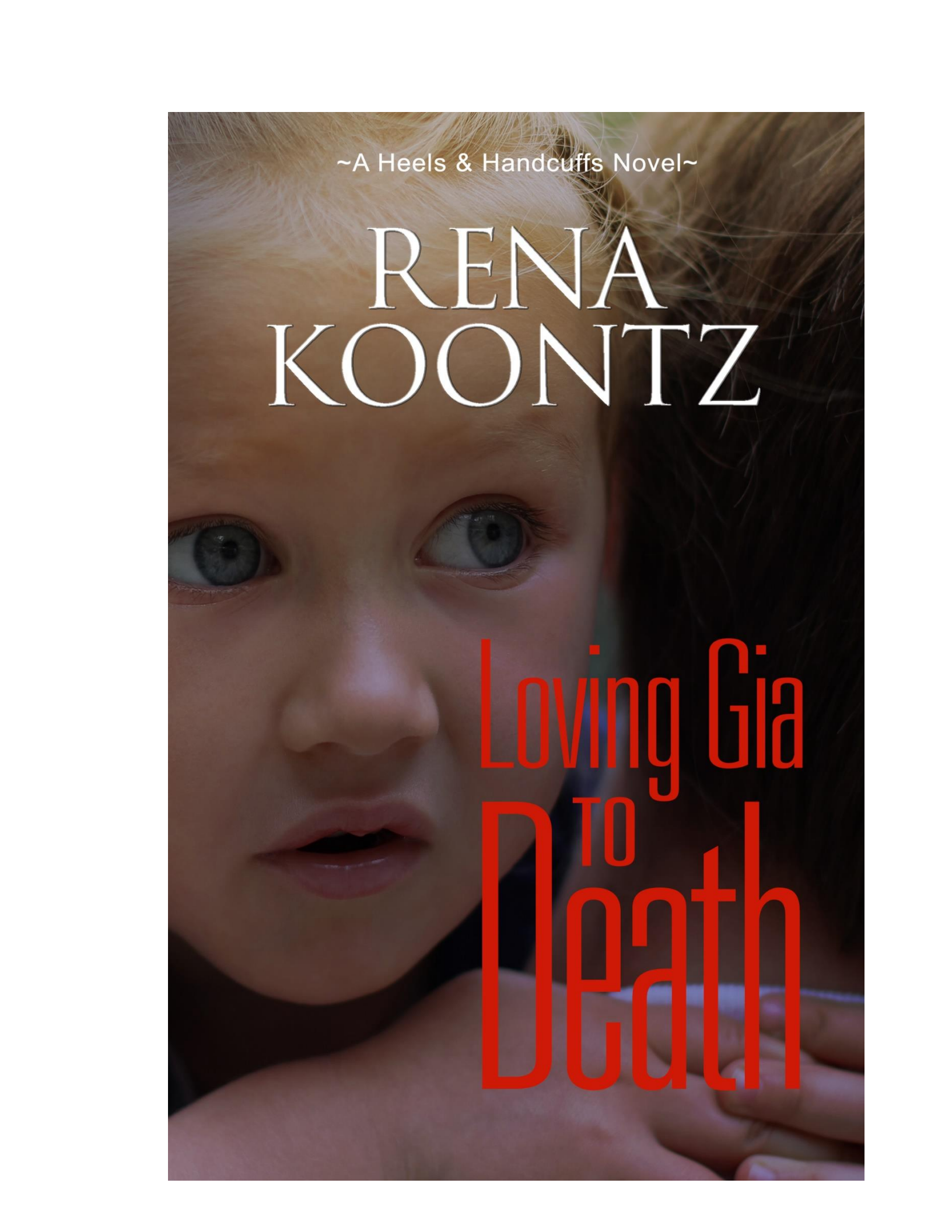




~A Heels & Handcuffs Novel~

RENA
KOONTZ

Loving Gia
TO
Death

Chapter One

The 9-1-1 emergency call from his home address sent chills down his back like nails scraping against a chalkboard. Lieutenant Blake Matthews jerked out of his chair so forcefully, it crashed backward with a loud bang.

When on duty, he listened but didn't actually hear the near constant sounds that reverberated through the fire station every day. The radio transmissions faded into the background as white noise until Station Twelve's distinctive two-level tones sounded. Then, just like every man's in the fire station, his ears perked up.

He sat elbow deep in training manuals and spreadsheets, designing a new special ops rescue program for the team when the tones cut through his concentration, and crimped his heart. Before he reached the door to exit the training room, a younger firefighter wrenched it open.

"Go!" he ordered. "I'll call someone in to cover for you ASAP."

Technically, leaving his post without being summoned to the emergency on board the back-up ladder truck or other supplemental fire equipment was a violation of protocol and grounds for suspension. But he wasn't worried. The unwritten

rule in Station Twelve, and he presumed any fire department in the country, was that when it involved family, you dropped everything and took off. Your team would have your back, no questions asked.

He lived with these men twenty-four hours a day, every third day, and they were his family too, as much as the daughter he'd created. No one ate, slept, and risked their lives for strangers without forming an impenetrable bond with the man on his right and left side and the squad watching his six. What affected one of them touched all of them.

He raced to his personal truck, barely hearing someone yell from the building to keep them apprised. By now, the ambulance had reached his daughter so he listened to the radio transmissions to decide if he should rush to the house or head to the hospital.

Uncontrolled nausea? How could that be? He'd spent the day with Gia yesterday and she was fine. Laughing that little girl laugh that melted his heart. Sitting on his lap playing a game on his phone. Turning that angel face up to him to cajole him into buying three new frilly headbands instead of two, which was his quantity rule. Hell, she could convince him to buy out the whole store if she tried hard enough. Nothing was too good for his baby girl. And today she was sick enough to require an ambulance? He couldn't fathom it.

He picked up on the paramedics' transmission. They were transporting Gia to Children's Hospital. He'd be waiting.

Paramedic Joe Lystle jumped to his feet when the shrill emergency tone sounded, instinctively listening for the medical details bouncing off every corner of the firehouse. He ran to the ambulance, his half-eaten sandwich forgotten.

"Not again," he snapped. "When is he going to see it? And stop it, for crissake?"

A five-year-old reportedly convulsing, throwing up non-stop when her panicked mother dialed 9-1-1, the dispatcher relayed. But this wasn't merely any five-year old. This was Argia, the lieutenant's daughter.

Joe and his partner, Rob Yarnell, strapped on their gear with lightning speed while the dispatcher disclosed more specifics about the child's emergency. Uncontrolled nausea. Dehydration. Transport to the hospital STAT.

He cursed and activated the siren.

Rob stomped the gas pedal so hard, the ambulance jerked into motion. "This could be the real thing, Joe. We don't know."

"Dammit, Rob. We know."

Any emergency call automatically spikes a first responder's adrenaline, but when the victim is family, as all members of Deep Creek Fire Station Twelve were to each other, the need to

arrive sooner becomes imperative. He mimicked the action when Rob floored the gas.

"We need a sit-down, Joe, that's what I say. It's gonna have to be me. He's gonna be pissed and argue with us. It'll be hard for him to hear but I don't think he'll be mad enough to take a swing at me. If he does, I hope I duck in time. I've seen what he lifts in the weight room."

He nodded and leaned forward in his seat, as if that helped shove the traffic in front of the ambulance out of their way. "Yeah, he'll be mad. He's the classic example of love being blind. But he knows we care about Argia like she was our own. Still, we'll be stepping out of bounds if we tell him what we think."

The ambulance screeched to a halt in front of Blake Matthews' driveway, automatically attracting a crowd of onlookers who spilled out onto their front porches. Joe looked around while he yanked the emergency equipment from the rear ambulance compartment. Why were so many people at home in the middle of the day?

Lynne Matthews burst out of her front door screaming for them to hurry. He braced himself for another irate interaction with the woman. They'd had them before. Just looking at her nauseated him. She splayed her hands against the sides of her face.

"What the hell took you so long?" Her right arm extended toward the house, her finger pointing inside. "My baby's in there choking to death. Can't you move any faster?"

Then she straightened and surveyed the street, assessing which neighbors watched and appeared concerned about her emergency. He rolled his eyes when she tugged on the deep V-neck midriff shirt she wore, purposefully offering an ample display of her assets. She was proud of her gifts. Considering her flare for drama, the woman should've been an actress. Especially since she now spoke as if she were center stage.

"I've never seen a child so sick before. It was all I could do to keep her hydrated. And she just kept clutching to me for dear life." She made this announcement to no one in particular. "If something happens to my darling baby, I don't think I could deal with it."

"Oh, brother," he whispered under his breath as they bypassed her and rushed into the house.

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After eight years on the job, Blake knew the staff in the emergency room by their first names and he nodded a silent greeting to each one he passed. Likely they'd been informed already of the incoming transport. He snagged a cup of coffee from the EMT hospitality room and paced at the emergency

entrance, barely sipping the brew. In minutes, the ambulance arrived. He ran to the rear and waited for Rob and Joe to open the doors.

Gia sat upright on the cot, an oxygen hose clipped to her nose. Nevertheless, her face erupted into a wide smile. "Daddy!"

Perched beside her, his ex-wife scowled. He stepped out of the way while Rob and Joe rolled the cot out of the ambulance, his anxiety allayed by Gia's pink cheeks and cheerful greeting. They whisked her toward the emergency doors and he turned to follow when Lynne called out to him.

"Really, Blake. Would you at least help me out of this box?"

Her hand stretched toward him in anticipation of his assistance. He fleetingly entertained the urge to leave it hanging there and walk away but his mother raised him better. He respected women and treated them accordingly. Even though his mother wasn't a fan of The Captain, Lynne's self-created position in their life, his mom would expect him to be courteous. He reached for Lynne's hand, eyeing the red high heels and mini skirt. There was a time when an outfit like that would motivate him to crawl into the ambulance with her and lock the doors behind him. But not anymore.

Seductively, she placed both hands on his shoulders and shoved her breasts in his face when she jumped out of the

ambulance. Before she could speak, he released himself from her grip and ran double-time toward the emergency doors.

Rob and Joe stood at the counter completing intake paperwork. Joe directed him to the cubicle where they'd rolled Gia's gurney.

The minute he threw back the curtain and reached her bed, Gia jumped to her feet and launched herself into his arms, causing the oxygen line to snap out of her nose and an intravenous pole to roll forward when the line tugged.

"Daddy!" Her arms wrapped around his neck, a feeling he long ago decided he'd never tire of.

Blake hugged her and then, with his hands on her arms, eased her backward. "Hey, peanut. What's up? Are you sick?"

Behind him, Lynne's high-pitched response pierced the air and immediately, Gia's smile disappeared. "Of course she's sick. Why else would I summon an ambulance? She's been puking all over the house. It's been a helluva mess for me to clean up, I'll tell you that. By myself no less."

He ignored her and gazed into his little girl's eyes. "Honey, tell me where it hurts."

Wide-eyed, Gia plopped to the bed, crossing her legs Indian style. Her gaze dropped to a spot on the blanket. "I'm all better now, Daddy. It's okay."

Blake cupped his daughter's chin, the skin beneath his hand  
as soft as flannel. Was it?

## Chapter Two

**H**e'd just dozed off when the baby's mournful cry echoed from a room down the hospital corridor. Blake's eyes shot open in fear that the child's yowl was his daughter's. He rose on his hands and knees off the linoleum floor to peer into the hospital crib. But his sweet Gia slept peacefully, her rosy lips puckered and moving ever so slightly with her measured breaths.

Two weeks ago, he'd rushed to this same hospital after hearing Lynne's emergency call for an ambulance, fear gripping his heart. Lynne claimed Gia had been sick to her stomach non-stop, yet he'd taken her home that same day with more questions than answers cluttering his brain. After administering routine fluids, the doctors discharged her, as bewildered as he.

And yet another emergency tonight.

The neon pink cast encasing Gia's left arm glowed in the shadows of the flickering lights from the machines surrounding her bed. His eyes followed the vines of tubing that connected the equipment to his baby girl's wrist, and the round white patches that attached to her chest, so tiny he could cover it with his open hand. He longed to lay his face on her delicate rib cage and motorboat his lips against the soft, velvety skin of her belly to elicit the squeal of delight the vibrations

could draw. No song in the world matched the music of his daughter's laughter.

Somewhere down the hall, the baby's woeful cries persisted, a high-pitched wail that sounded more forlorn than painful. To Blake's ears, it was loud enough to awaken the whole floor.

His ex-wife snorted from the corner of the room, repositioned herself on the hospital cot and resumed her trombone-like snores. Far be it for anything to interrupt The Captain's sleep, including a crying baby a few rooms away. Or their daughter's welfare.

He bristled at the title she'd bestowed on herself barely six months into their marriage, informing him matter-of-factly that marriage was like sailing a ship and she was the captain. Christ, she even referred to herself as Captain Lynne. It was embarrassing.

Lynne Matthews believed it was her world and everyone lived in it to serve on her orders. Pity the ordinary sailor who failed to follow The Captain's dictates. Or the man who'd fallen in love and married her.

Well, he was hardly one to accept anyone's pity or to sit around feeling sorry for a disintegrated marriage. He was ready to sail with Gia toward a new horizon. Without The Captain. It was the right journey for all of them.

Down the hall, the baby still moaned, the octave of its cries rising and falling between gasps for breath.

Blake rose slowly, feeling every football injury and wrestling takedown from his high school and college days in his thirty-year old body. His stiffened joints reminded him he was too old to sleep on the floor. As if he needed reminding. He stretched his neck muscles and massaged his cheek, still cold and numb from being pressed against the linoleum for-how long? He had no idea when he finally fell asleep. The antiseptic odor of the floor cleaner lingered in his nostrils.

Stepping to the side of the crib, he reached to brush Gia's hair off her forehead. The fever was gone, thank goodness. He laid the backs of his fingers along her cheek, as velvety as a puppy's ear. A grateful sigh escaped him with the coolness of her skin. Had his baby girl really had such a high fever she became dizzy and tumbled down the stairs? Was she as accident prone as her mother contended?

Odd that Gia never became sick or injured herself when he had her by his side.

Her long eyelashes fluttered at his touch, but she didn't awaken. Instead, the corners of her mouth turned up in a slight smile, as if she knew he was there. Loving her. Protecting her.

Or was the light tricking his weary eyes?

One last glance at the snoring bear hibernating in the corner and he tiptoed out of the room. Normally bursting in bright lights with colorful murals of rainbows and fairy tale creatures, the corridor was darkened so the children could sleep. All but the baby down the row still taxing his lungs with his screams.

Other nurses were on the floor but only one manned the central station, her head bent over a computer keyboard. She looked up at his approach, her face void of recognition or a smile of welcome. He'd had two run-ins with this woman since arriving at the hospital tonight, panicked by Lynne's message informing him of their daughter's accident. He couldn't have been more irritated by his ex-wife's text message. Any normal person makes a phone call when there is an emergency.

Not The Captain. She might never have called if he hadn't reached out to her first. An odd feeling overcame him while he was at the softball field, almost a sense of panic that he couldn't interpret. And so, he texted Lynne between innings to check on their daughter. If he hadn't initiated the text conversation, would she have let him know Gia broke her wrist? Doubtful. The Captain enjoyed the role of martyred ex-wife and single mother too much. And she played the part of the poor woman burdened with a sick child whose husband abandoned them both whenever possible.

That was her version of their relationship, one that she told anyone who would listen. Including this nurse on duty, who watched his approach warily.

Lynne's argument that she knew he didn't like being interrupted while at his weekly softball games didn't hold water. Gia was the most important person in the world to him. She knew that. Practically everyone did. Common courtesy dictated a phone call. After all, he was her father.

But The Captain rarely went out of her way for him these days, not that she ever did.

So he'd barreled onto this pediatric floor hours ago, hell-bent on seeing Gia and giving Lynne a piece of his mind and ran smack-dab into Nurse Noreen Jensen. She'd stopped him like a Pittsburgh Steeler offensive guard, demanding identification he didn't have on him. When he played softball, he stashed his wallet and ID in the glove box of his truck and in his haste to reach Gia after reading Lynne's text, he abandoned the game, sped to the hospital, and ran to the entrance, leaving his credentials stowed in the car.

The tenacious nurse hadn't wanted to hear his excuse, had looked down her nose at his dirt-stained uniform, and threatened to call security. In hindsight, the walk back to his vehicle to retrieve his license and badge cooled his temper and cleared his head. Gia had to be his priority.

Nurse Jensen seemed unimpressed to learn that he was a lieutenant with the city's Station Twelve Fire Company. He'd wanted to remind her that they were both dedicated to noble professions and served the public but the stick up her ass hinted she wouldn't bend.

He spent the next hours waiting for his daughter to come out of surgery, barely speaking to Lynne from across the room once she explained the details of the accident. Complete with crocodile tears about how traumatic it had been for *her*. Never mind that Gia was the one with the wrist broken in three places. Was Lynne's version of what happened the truth? She regularly leaned toward melodrama. Could he question Gia about the events of the day without upsetting her? She was only five. Would she even remember? Maybe once he had her home and settled, tucked into her toddler's bed with Mr. Fox and Mr. Dog, her favorite stuffed animals by her side, he'd attempt it.

Nurse Jensen obviously detected the iceberg between him and The Captain and, of course, sided with Lynne. She offered her snacks and coffee and sympathy. And then the cot.

Cue confrontation number two. Gia's room wasn't big enough to accommodate two cots and Nurse Jensen informed him he'd have to leave for the night. Like hell he'd leave his daughter fresh out of surgery.

The woman stood tall in her defiance, coming to just under his chin but staring him right in the eye. It was a quality he might admire under other circumstances. But he'd be damned if he was leaving his baby's side. When he loudly informed her of that fact, she spat back that the only place to sleep was on the floor, which suited him fine and deflated her argument. She'd pivoted on her heel like a dismissed soldier and exited Gia's room without another word.

Now, their eyes locked as he approached the counter. He was too tired for Round Three.

He tilted his head in the direction of the howls and whispered, "That baby keeps crying. Why don't they pick him up or something?"

The question either surprised or insulted her, he wasn't sure. Her eyebrows lifted and her mouth puckered into a tight oval, as if she'd sucked a lemon. She sat up straighter. "There's no one in the room to pick him up. I've been in twice already but I can't spend all my time in there. I'll go back in when I can."

Her answer dumbfounded him. Perhaps he was more exhausted than he realized.

"What do you mean there's no one in there? Where are his parents?"

Her chest rose with a deep inhale that she loudly released. "Not everyone has the luxury of staying here with their child, spending the night here. Some parents have jobs to go to or other children to care for."

Did she think sleeping on the hospital floor was a luxury? He let that slide.

"Do you mind if I go in?"

She catapulted out of her seat, her hands fisted as if she prepared to fight him. "For what purpose?"

What the hell was the matter with this woman? What did she think he'd do?

He ran his hands through his hair, aware that he must look like a disheveled lunatic in a sweaty ball uniform. He couldn't stand one more minute of the baby's sobs.

"Maybe I can comfort him. Hold him. Let him know he's not alone."

The nurse's head shot back in surprise. "Why would you want to do that?"

Poor woman. Her heart must've frosted over years ago. It was the only explanation for such a frigid human being. Didn't she understand the love for a child? Any child? Until he became a parent, he hadn't fully understood the depth of a father's love. Certainly, his parents loved him, he'd known that growing up.

But when the baby was a part of you, like Gia was his own flesh and blood, the love was different. Deeper. Unconditional. Limitless. He'd die for his daughter. Or kill for her.

The baby crying in the other room wasn't his but he understood how to love a child. The day Gia was born was the day his heart blossomed. And like a wild shrub that's never been pruned, that love knew no constraints.

Hearing this crying baby gutted him. He had to do something. The nurse glared at him, waiting for an answer.

"Listening to him breaks my heart." He threw his thumb over his shoulder to indicate Gia's room. "My daughter's sleeping soundly. She doesn't need me right now." And then he shrugged. "I'd like to try to reassure him he's okay."

Slowly, she nodded and stepped around her chair to leave the horseshoe-shaped station. She motioned for him to follow her into the darkened room identical to his daughter's. Similar machines cast a dim light over the bed. The baby's fisted hands flailed in the air, his feet kicked and his perfectly round face shone beet red. He couldn't have been more than one-year old.

Blake began a soft conversation as he reached for the baby, mindful of the wires and tubes that monitored this child's progress. He touched the baby's hand and he grasped it immediately, five fragile bones wrapping around his index finger.

"Hey buddy, shh, you're okay." He rubbed the silky top side of the baby's hand. It was no bigger than a quarter and his thumb dwarfed it.

The crying lowered a decibel, but he still whispered. "It's all right, little guy. I know you're scared but the folks who work here will take good care of you."

The shuffling sound behind alerted him that Nurse Jensen stood sentry in the doorway monitoring him. Without letting go of the fragile hand, he asked over his shoulder. "What's his name?"

"William."

"What's wrong with him?"

"By law, I'm not permitted to divulge that information."

Of course not. That would be an empathetic thing to do and Nurse Noreen Jensen was anything but warm and fuzzy.

Figuring it was better to suffer the consequences rather than ask for permission, he lowered the safety rail on the bed and eased his hands beneath the baby, intent on cradling him.

The nurse was by his side in an instant. She reminded him of a mother bear protecting every baby cub on this hospital floor. He admired that. Sort of.

"What are you doing?" she snapped.

Once in his arms, William's cries softened to a whimper. With the baby tucked safely in one arm, Blake rolled the

intravenous stand and second monitor away from the bed and moved to the rocking chair in the room. Gia's room had a rocker too but Lynne had loaded it up with her purse, sweater and designer shoulder bag that likely brimmed with cosmetics. He'd never understood the need for all the stuff she hauled around. She was a beautiful woman.

"I'm going to rock him for a while. Maybe he'll go to sleep."

William already was quiet, his blue eyes wide and focused on Blake. He started to rock the chair in slow movements, all the while speaking to the baby. "Relax, Willy, you'll be fine. I know you're frightened. My little girl is scared too. But there's nothing to worry about. It's gonna be okay."

Nurse Jensen watched with her hand pressed to her chest. He'd wager there was a rock beneath the fabric of her shirt instead of a beating heart. And then miracle of miracles, she smiled.

"You're a natural," she whispered. "Look."

Willy slept soundly in his arms. Still, he rocked the baby, using his free hand to caress the boy's cheek and pudgy body. "Gia likes to be rocked. I try to read to her every night before bedtime and she always crawls into the rocker."

Well, that every night ritual had been suspended when he moved out but this nurse didn't need to know that.

The brief smile disappeared while she studied him. "I thought you didn't live with your wife and daughter."

His stomach knotted. Lynne hadn't wasted any time sharing her tale of abandonment. No wonder Nurse Jensen didn't trust him. Lynne had already brainwashed her. He'd never make this nurse understand that leaving his daughter was the only way he could save her. It'd been the hardest decision he ever made and yet, the clearest. But this stranger in giraffe-printed hospital scrubs didn't need to know any of that.

Willy released an audible sigh, his pint-sized chest rising and falling against Blake's stomach, prompting them both to refocus on the baby.

He eased out of the rocker and returned Willy to his crib. "Poor little thing must've exhausted himself with his tantrum. Maybe he'll sleep through the night now."

He'd no sooner raised the side rail and clicked it into place when an alarm sounded from the nurse's station. The intermittent beep increased in volume and repetition the longer it rang, emphasizing its urgency. Nurse Jensen ran to the counter and peered over the edge, then shot a wild-eyed look at him.

In that second, he understood the alert came from Gia's monitors. Nurse Jensen broke into a run down the hallway but his legs were longer and he beat her to the doorway. Lynne leaned

over the guardrail, blocking the view of his daughter. He shot to the bed, grabbed her shoulders, and shoved her aside. The nurse was right behind him.

"What happened?" she asked, rushing to the machines.

Gia lay motionless, all color drained from her apple cheeks.

Lynne screamed. "I think it was a seizure. Her systolic BP soared." She fell to her knees, clinging to the bedrail. "Oh, my poor girl. A thrombosis might have caused it, I'm not sure. She'll be brain damaged, I know it."

He whirled on her. "Shut the fuck up. You don't know what you're talking about. You're not a goddamn doctor." And then he returned his attention to his baby girl.

"Gia? Honey, it's Daddy. Gia, wake up."

Her petite puckered lips parted, slowly spreading into a smile that lifted the weight of the world off his shoulders. Her eyes fluttered open, deep brown and focused. They were his very own Hershey's kisses on his darling daughter's buttercream face.

"Daddy, I'm still sleepy."

He choked on his tears as he reached for her, scooping her into an embrace so tight, she squirmed. "Daddy, ouchy."

"I'm sorry, sweetheart. Daddy doesn't mean to crush you." She wound her free arm around his neck, the casted one falling

with a thud onto his chest and dropped her head onto his shoulder. "Still sleepy, Daddy."

Cradling her, he began a slow swing from side to side, rocking her in his arms while he turned to see the women behind him. "Daddy's got you now, Gia. Go back to sleep."

Lynne still squatted on the floor, glowering at them. For all the hysterics she'd displayed minutes earlier, her cheeks were dry of tears. And the glare she leveled on him wasn't one of fear for her child. It felt more like hatred for his interference.

Standing beside the now-silent hospital equipment, Noreen Jensen stared at Lynne, raised her eyes to him and then reached to lift Lynne off the floor. "Get up, hon, the floor is no place for you."

He stifled his retort. Nurse Noreen didn't seem to mind him sleeping on the floor but it wasn't good enough for Captain Lynne. These women were two of a kind.

"Lynne, can you tell me what happened? There's no indication that the machines malfunctioned yet something set off the alarms. By all appearances, your daughter seems fine. I don't understand."

Neither did he. What set off the emergency alert signal?

Lynne raised a trembling hand to her brow. He scowled, recognizing the gesture. She was about to perform a one-woman show for her captive audience.

"I-I don't know. Her vitals were all within the normal range. And then suddenly—" She clutched her chest and fell back against the bed as if she might faint. Noreen took the bait and grabbed for her.

"Here, here. Lie down on the cot. I'll pour you some water." Lynne stepped toward the bed as if she were feeble, unable to move without Noreen's assistance. He backed out of their way.

"You can return her to her bed, Mr. Matthews. She seems to have fallen back to sleep."

Armed Marines with orders to shoot on sight couldn't pry Gia out of his arms. "We're fine, thanks."

Noreen eyed him as she settled Lynne onto the rollaway bed and filled a glass with ice water from the pitcher on Gia's night table. He rolled his eyes after Lynne breathlessly thanked her, reached for the glass with two trembling hands, and whispered, "I'll be all right in a minute. I was just so frightened."

So typical. It always had to be about *her*.

Noreen straightened and focused on the rocker loaded with Lynne's paraphernalia. "You can't stand all night while your daughter sleeps."

If that's what it took to keep her safe he could.

She began uncluttering the rocking chair. "At least sit here." In a matter of seconds, she'd relocated Lynne's junk to the foot of Gia's bed despite Lynne's protests that her designer tote contained breakables. Noreen moved to the IV stand next to him. "I'll follow you with this."

Odd that the other monitor connections were no longer attached to Gia. He hadn't noticed the nurse disconnecting them but he didn't pay attention to either woman in his haste to reach her. Noreen didn't seem bothered by it so maybe she detached them.

Lynne sprang off the cot, her finger pointing in the air. "Shouldn't you check her out? She had an attack. You can't simply let him sit there and rock her. Aren't there tests you can run to make sure there's not internal trauma?"

Jesus. She always wanted tests run on Gia. In her short five years of life, his baby girl had endured more medical tests than any child he knew. Tests for seizures. Tests for muscular dystrophy and multiple sclerosis and conditions with initials he'd never heard of. The results always came back negative. And The Captain always discovered something else wrong.

Noreen shook her head. "She seems fine. I'll get her settled and check her vitals. At this time of night, there isn't anyone in the labs to run tests anyway."

Thank God at least one of them was sensible. Just as he'd done with Willy, he cradled his daughter and began to rock slowly, whispering his love to her. To his surprise, Nurse Noreen displayed smile number two.

"You're crimping her neck," Lynne barked. "You should return her to the bed. She's going to wake with a headache if you keep her in that position."

Hers was the neck he wanted to bend. More like break.

The Captain wasn't giving up. "Argia suffers from migraines, Noreen. He's going to increase the probability of her suffering a debilitating headache."

Endearing herself to the medical staff had always been important to Lynne. He was convinced she fantasized she was one of them. Too bad she wasn't smart enough. It didn't surprise him that Lynne was on a first-name basis with the nurse.

However, the instant change in Noreen's manner did astonish him. Any warmth he thought he detected disappeared and her stare turned cold, literally sending a chill down his spine.

Once again, he locked eyes with his current nemesis. His temper was frayed and his words, low and guttural, hinted he'd had enough of both women for tonight. "Gia doesn't have

migraines. She's never had a headache. She's resting now and you're not going to move her." He glared first at Noreen and then Lynne.

"You're not home to see it. You're gallivanting who knows where every other day."

He studied Lynne's face, barely recognizing her. He'd loved her once with his whole being. Wanted her by his side for their lifetime. He'd been thrilled that they were having a child together. And now, being with her was tiresome. Draining. Slowly killing every heartfelt emotion he'd ever felt for her like an invasive weed takes over healthy grass and suffocates the life out of it.

"I'm at work, Lynne. Twenty-four hours on and forty-eight off. You know that." Twenty-four hours that he lived in fear for his daughter's safety.

Nurse Noreen stepped forward, her arms outstretched. "Mr. Matthews, perhaps—"

"No!" He snapped at her louder than he intended but Gia only snuggled closer to his chest.

Lynne snatched her cell phone from beneath the pillow on the cot. "Should I call hospital security? Or dial 9-1-1? See, I told you. He's becoming belligerent."

He shook his head in disbelief and stared at his ex-wife. It wouldn't be the first time she filed a false police report

against him. But Noreen was a witness this time and she could attest he'd done nothing wrong. Refusing to return your daughter to a hospital bed wasn't illegal.

Noreen raised her hand to run interference. "There's no need to call anyone, Lynne. Mr. Matthews, if you'll--"

"Gia is fine, nurse. She's in my arms and nothing more is going to happen to her tonight. I suggest you return to your station and do whatever it is you're tasked with in the middle of the night. We'll just be one big happy family here in this room until morning."

Lynne caught her breath in dramatic fashion. "Don't leave us here with him. I'm in fear of my life. Of the welfare of my child."

The rocking halted and he leaned as far forward as he could without crushing Gia. His words dripped with the venom that flowed through his veins. "She's my child too, Lynne. And you're the one she's afraid of. Not me."