

# DOCTOR, DOCTOR

**Lori Handeland**

© Lori Handeland

First published in 2001 by Harlequin Enterprises  
**TORONTO**

## PROLOGUE

IN THE FIRST six years of his life, Elijah Drycinski moved a hundred times. Well, maybe not a hundred, but it seemed that many. People called him an army brat. He understood the *army* part – his daddy was “the Colonel.” But *brat* was kind of mean. His mama said so.

He tried to be a good boy, but sometimes bein’ good was hard. Especially when you were lonely, and no one wanted to be your friend but the animals.

Eli liked animals a whole lot. They didn’t care that he was new in town. They didn’t care that he didn’t know any of the kid games everyone else played, on account of he never stayed in one place long enough to learn ‘em, and his mama and the Colonel were sort of old and didn’t play much.

Eli’s parents loved him; they just weren’t quite sure what to make of him. Eli never brought kids home to play; he always brought animals home to live – which made his mama kind of nuts. But animal friends were better than no friends.

Which was what Eli had one bright summer morning, two days after the Colonel had left the army for good and moved them to Pine River, Wisconsin – forever, he promised. No friends but Mr. Squirrel.

“So what do you do here in Pine River?” Eli asked of the gray squirrel in the tree.

Eli knew squirrels didn’t talk to people, but what could it hurt for him to talk to a squirrel? He’d discovered

that the more an animal heard his voice, the better the animal behaved around him.

“Are you talking to that squirrel?”

Eli clamped his mouth shut, turned around and shook his head at the little girl who eyed him from the next yard. He’d been caught by other kids talkie’ to animals, and while *Dr. Dolittle* might be a nice movie, when kids shouted the name at you that wasn’t very nice at all.

“Sure were.”

She marched into his yard as if she owned it. She was definitely a girl, ‘cause her yellow hair was in pigtails, but she wore pants and a T-shirt, and she was as dirty as any little boy. He liked her right away.

“Squirrels can’t talk,” he sneered, and kicked the dirt with his sneaker.

The girl came over and kicked the dirt right back at him. “Can, too. Only, they talk squirrel, not people. But I figure if people can learn to talk Spanish and French they can learn to talk squirrel.”

Eli stared at her in amazement. He’d often thought that himself. But no matter how hard he tried, he never could understand squirrel or dog or cat or any language but people.

“So can ya, huh? Can ya talk squirrel?”

“Nah,” he said. “I was just foolin’ around.”

“Oh, I do that sometimes, too.”

Eli glanced at her to see if she was teasin’. But she wasn’t, or not so’s he could tell. She was smilin’ at him as though she liked him, or at least he thought that was what her smile meant. Eli wanted a friend. He’d never

had one that wasn't an animal. But he was afraid – afraid that if he tried to be her friend she'd laugh, then run away, and he'd be alone again with the animals.

The Colonel always said only cowards didn't take chances. Eli's dad wasn't thrilled with his gentle, animal-loving son, so he often said things like that to make Eli toughen up. But Eli couldn't help it that whenever someone threw a ball his way the ball hit him in the face.

Since Eli had never been a coward, he took a chance – and it was the smartest thing he ever did. “You want to play with me?” he asked.

“Sure.”

As easy as that, they became friends. Gwen Bartelt accepted Eli for who he was – a quiet, shy boy, who was smarter than most and related better to animals than people. She never made Eli feel embarrassed or weird; in fact, she made him feel special.

Not until high school, when hormones raged and love became real, did Eli understand all that he felt for her. Because he knew Gwen better than anyone else, he also knew that he had to let her go if he ever expected her to come back.

So he never told her of his love, and when she left, he smiled, waved and pretended he was happy, even as his heart cried.

Then he waited for Gwen to come back of her own free will – but she didn't.

## CHAPTER ONE

Steven Bartelt requests the honor of your presence at the marriage of his daughter, Guinevere, to Lance Heinrich, M.D., on Saturday, the seventeenth of June –

*SCRITCH!*

Eli ripped the invitation in half. Childish, true, but tough. Gwen was his. She'd been his since... since...

Since the very first day he'd seen her. He'd always believed they belonged together. He figured eventually she'd see it, too.

He hadn't wanted to push; he knew Gwen well enough to understand that speaking of love would be a mistake. Gwen had watched her father turn into a cranky old man at the age of twenty-nine because of love, and she wanted nothing to do with the emotion. Too bad, because Eli loved her with all his heart, and he always would.

Propping his hip along the front porch railing, Eli stared down the quiet side street where he lived. Pine River was always quiet. Maybe that was why she'd left.

An odd thud from the backyard started his dogs yapping inside. Eli might not have a passel of friends, but he had a gaggle of pets. Not much had changed over the years. Every stray in the vicinity still found its way to Eli's house.

His gaze wandered next door. Why hadn't Doc told him about Gwen's engagement? Sure, Gwen's dad was the same workaholic small-town doctor he'd always been and rarely took time for any talk beyond "Hey, Eli, how about them Packers?" But you'd think the man would have mentioned his daughter's wedding.

Unless, of course, Doc hadn't known, either. Gwen could easily have printed the invitations on her own. She and her father had never been close, despite the fact that her mother had died when Gwen was two and Doc had raised her. If you called paying the bills and hiring Eli's mom to take care of her raising a child.

Eli sighed. Who was he to judge? The townsfolk said Doc had never been the same after his wife died, and that was understandable. Doc had always blamed himself for his inability to save the woman he'd adored.

Eli glanced at the heavy sheet of paper crunched in his hand. Guinevere and Lance... Geez, were they serious? Gwen had probably gotten a few chuckles over the names, but Eli wondered if old Lance got the joke. If he didn't, he wasn't the man for Gwen.

No one was the man for Gwen but Eli. So what was he going to do about it?

"Doctor! Doctor!" The strident voice came from the backyard. The panic in that voice brought Eli to his feet.

Nancy Davidson, face as white as a fresh sheet of typing paper, stood between the two houses. Nurse Nancy, as everyone called her, was Doc Bartelt's right hand. She was unflappable – or had been up until now.

"It's Doc," she shouted. "Come quick."

Eli jumped down the steps and sprinted across the lawn and into the backyard. Doc lay on the ground, his leg bent at an impossible angle, his face whiter than Nancy's. The ladder leaning crookedly against the side of the house gave a clue to what the odd thump of a few moments earlier had been.

Nancy fell to her knees and checked Doc in perfect nurse fashion. The routine seemed to soothe her, and her hands stopped trembling.

"What happened?" Eli asked.

"I told him not to climb up there and clean the gutters. All the rain's made the ground soft. You're just begging for trouble to go up on a ladder in springtime. But do you think he'd listen?" She snorted.

"Contrary to what you might believe, Miss Smart Aleck, you are *not* my mother," Doc snapped, though pain drew his mouth tight. The man might resemble Alan Alda with his long, lean build, but in quiet voice and manner, he wasn't even close.

"Well, if he's this feisty it can't be that bad," Eli observed.

"Quit talking like I'm not here or too senile to understand. It's broken."

"I could figure that out for myself," Eli said.

"Get me a Tylenol No. 3, Nance. And you, boy, set the leg."

"Me?"

"They call you doctor, don't they?"

"My patients mostly call me moo and oink."

"Ha-ha. Fix it."

Eli glanced at Nancy, who rolled her eyes, confirming Eli's suspicion. Doc didn't want to go to the hospital. He'd try anything to stay in Pine River.

"I can't set your leg, Doc. I'm a vet."

"Well, at least look at it. Make all that education your parents paid for worth something more than horse healin'."

"If you were a horse, I'd be your doctor."

"If I were a horse, you'd shoot me."

"Don't think it hasn't crossed my mind," Nancy muttered.

Eli hid a smile. The two of them were always sparring. Doc was a crusty old coot, though he had to be in his midfifties at most. Still, he cultivated the cranky, small-town-doctor persona.

Nancy, a friend of Gwen's from school, had grown up knowing Doc. She thought that gave her a right to tell him what to do. Doc didn't.

Nancy tried to rip Doc's pants leg so she could see better. She didn't have much luck so she scowled at Eli from her position next to the prone man. "Do you think you might *do* something? From what I can tell this is an open, compound fracture."

Which meant the bone protruded from the skin. Eli hated when that happened. "Yuck."

Nancy rolled her eyes. "Wuss. Get down here."

When Nancy said "Jump!" the correct response was "How high, ma'am?" So Eli went down on his knees. "Did you call for an ambulance?"

She gave him a withering glare. Nurse Nancy knew emergency procedures. “You know how long that will take.”

Pine River was thirty miles from the nearest hospital – small-town life at its most dangerous.

Eli found his pocketknife and slit Doc’s pants farther. “Excellent work, Doc. You’re going to need a pin in this.”

“Goody,” Doc spat from between clenched teeth. “Nance, the Tylenol and an antibiotic, hmm?”

Eli did what he could, but basically he was a horse doctor. Doc needed a human one. When the ambulance came, Eli gratefully turned his patient over to the experts.

“I’m going to be in the hospital a few days, then out of commission awhile.” The paramedic loaded Doc onto a gurney.

“Should have thought of that before you did a Peter Pan off the ladder,” Nancy said.

Doc turned to the paramedic. “Could you make her go away?”

The young man gave Nancy a wary look. “I don’t think so, sir.”

“That’s what I figured. Nancy, cancel my appointments. Get a temporary replacement.”

“You know how that will go.”

Doc sighed, and for just a minute, Eli felt sorry for him. Pain in the behind that he was, the man was devoted to his patients and the town. Pine River was not the number-one choice for new doctors. Doc had needed a partner for years; there just weren’t any to be had. The

money stank, the hours were worse and the prospects for advancement mighty slim.

“Try anyway.” The paramedic started to take Doc away. “Wait!” Doc held out a hand to Eli. Surprised, Eli took it. “Call Gwen. Tell her...”

Eli waited, expecting declarations of love for the man’s only child. “Yeah, Doc, what should I say?”

“Tell her to get her butt home.”

Doc disappeared into the ambulance, the doors slammed shut and the vehicle rumbled off. Eli stood there dumbfounded.

Nancy appeared at his side. “Some bedside manner, huh?”

“Pain makes you say crazy things.”

“Maybe. Then how would you explain his everyday manner?”

“Old age?”

“The man is fifty-six years old. My mother, who may I say is as happy and spry as a lark, has calluses older than him.”

“Only fifty-six, huh?” That must be right. As long as most folks could remember, Doc Bartelt had been the doctor in Pine River – for nearly thirty years anyway.

“So are you going to tell Gwen to get her butt home, or should IT’ Nancy asked.

“You.”

“Coward.”

“That would be me.”

Nancy grinned. “All right. I’ll call her before I call the patients.” She stared in the direction of the long-gone

ambulance and an odd sort of wistfulness came over her face. "I'd sure like to go with him, though."

"He'd want you to call the patients. You know how he is."

She snapped back from wherever she'd been and became once again Nurse Nancy, Doc's right-hand woman, though she didn't look too happy about it at the moment. "Patients first. Always and forever."

Eli stuck his hands in his pockets. His fingers touched the torn wedding announcement, and he caught the glimmer of an idea.

Until he heard Gwen pronounced another man's wife there was always hope. Eli had one month before the wedding, and he meant to make the most of it. He would do what he must to force Gwen to see the truth. He'd just discovered a truth of his own.

He should never have let her go.

THE PHONE RANG, shrill in the depths of the day. Gwen Bartelt did not flinch or gasp; she barely woke up. With practiced ease she found the phone on her nightstand, punched the button, her eyes still closed, and brought the receiver to her ear. "What?"

"Gwen?"

Her first name spoken in a familiar voice made Gwen's eyes snap open. She could see nothing but the faint green glow of the phone from the corner of her eye. The heavy curtains on her windows blocked out every snatch of light. She had spent a fortune on those curtains. In her profession a good day's sleep was priceless.

Gwen sat up, rubbing at thick and grainy eyelids. How long had she been asleep? Not long enough.

"Nancy?"

"I'm sorry. I woke you up, didn't I?"

Shaking her head, Gwen tapped the light on her nightstand and squinted at the clock-10:30 a.m. Lovely, she'd been asleep for half an hour. No wonder she couldn't seem to get her mind around... something.

Her sleep-fogged brain cleared with the speed thunderstorms raced out over Lake Michigan. Phone calls that did not begin with "Dr. Bartelt, we have trouble in the ER" meant one thing. Bad news.

"Is something the matter with Doc?"

"Damn right. He's too stubborn for his own good. I told that old goat not to climb that ladder, but did he listen? No-o."

"Nancy!" Gwen bit out, tired, impatient and scared. "Focus! What happened?"

"He's in Mercy Hospital, having his broken leg put back together with a pin." Silence descended over the line, then a question tumbled free. "Can you come home?"

Gwen stared into the semidarkness and thought of home. She didn't want to go. Then Nancy said the one thing that could make her go where she had not been for a very long time. "He asked for you, Gwen."

"Really?" The needy note in her voice embarrassed her. She'd have thought her father would chew nails before he'd ask for anything, especially for the prodigal daughter to return home.

“No, I lied.” An exasperated growl that was so “Nancy” Gwen almost smiled traveled across phone line. “Yes, really. Will you?”

Gwen needed nothing less than to take time off one month before her wedding and honeymoon. Her fiancé, who also happened to be her boss, would be put out. He would pout. She couldn’t resist.

“I’ll be there this afternoon,” she said.

THE FIRST SIGHT of Pine River always made Gwen want to cry. Perfect little town, so pretty and sweet, with pines along the river, just as the name promised.

She drove past the large, colorful sign at the city limits that announced: Pine River. Come For A Visit You’ll Stay For A Lifetime. Midwest propaganda at its finest.

“It should say, Just A Visit Seems Like A Lifetime,” Gwen muttered.

Though she’d lived in Pine River the first eighteen years of her life, she’d always wanted out. She couldn’t remember the mother who had died when she was two, but everyone else in town did. They said Gwen looked like her, talked like her, walked like her. No wonder Doc could barely stand the sight of her.

Well, she’d left the place behind and been nothing but happy ever since – except for missing Eli. She’d seen him sporadically after graduation, when she’d driven off to Milwaukee and he’d gone to Madison, but not at all in the past five years. Oh, they’d written and they’d phoned, but she missed having her very best friend in her life.

Unfortunately, Eli loved Pine River and he wasn't ever going to leave.

Gwen winced as the bright May sunshine hit her sore eyes. She was running on adrenaline and caffeine. There'd been no sleep for her after Nancy's phone call.

Pulling to a stop in front of the rambling three-story house where she'd been born, Gwen stared out the windshield for a long moment. The place had always been too large for just her father and her, but it had been in the Bartelt family since Wisconsin was admitted to the Union over one hundred and fifty years before. Back in the days of large families, this house had been full of love, laughter, children. Now it looked pretty unloved, sad and empty – which, Gwen acknowledged, was most likely a reflection of her mood than anything else.

If she were a patient, she'd tell herself her recent depression was common enough on the threshold of changing your life forever. Wasn't that what wedding jitters were all about? But to be honest, the cloud that seemed to follow her everywhere, like Pigpen's little ball of dust, had appeared long before the ring on her finger.

Nancy emerged onto the porch, waved, then hopped down the steps and approached the car. As always, the woman didn't have a spot on her white nurse's outfit. Gwen couldn't believe Nancy hadn't told Doc where to get off with his insistence that this nurse wear a traditional white uniform, just as all his other nurses had. At least the triangular nurse's cap wasn't perched atop Nancy's head. That would have been a bit much. Instead, her long, slightly curly, chestnut hair was secured in a thick braid down her back.

Gwen got out of the car and they hugged. Nancy was taller and bigger boned than Gwen, but her bright-blue eyes and freckles made her appear smaller and younger than she was. An attractive, amusing, intelligent woman, why on earth was she devoting her life to Doc?

"I thought you'd be here long before now." Nancy rubbed Gwen's shoulder a moment in a silent show of sympathy before releasing her. "What happened?"

Gwen sighed. To drive from Milwaukee to Pine River took three hours with luck, much longer than that if you were Gwen Bartelt and bad luck was your middle name.

"Traffic," she said shortly, unwilling to go into all the other things she had needed to attend to before leaving her condominium on the east side of Milwaukee: call Lance, get a week off, listen as he begged her to stay – not for love but because it would mess up the schedule – ask her neighbor to pick up the mail and water the plants...

"Ah, traffic." Nancy nodded. In Pine River the word *traffic* in conjunction with Chicago, Minneapolis or Milwaukee always brought on long faces and frowns. Though most Pine River folks didn't venture into traffic, they'd heard all about it.

Gwen and Nancy walked toward the house, and as was her way, Nancy answered questions Gwen hadn't even asked yet. "Doc's fine. Resting while comfortably drugged. He's going to be in the hospital a few days with light traction before he can get a cast and come home. I doubt he'll be able to work for a month."

“He’ll be able to hobble me down the aisle, won’t he?”

Nancy stopped and faced Gwen. “If I were you, I wouldn’t even go there, girl.”

“Huh?”

“Your father is hot as a hornet about your getting married to a guy he’s never heard of. He got the invitation, bitched all morning, then stomped out to do the eaves and fell on his butt.”

Guilt washed over Gwen. She should have told him in person. There still would have been a scene, but maybe Doc wouldn’t be in the hospital. She pushed the guilt aside. With a head harder than the average brick, Doc would have gone up on that ladder sooner or later, regardless of what had been in the mail that morning.

“He’s never met Lance,” Gwen pointed out, “because he refuses to leave this town or his patients.”

“He’s been to Milwaukee a few times.”

“For a conference or a consult. Yippee.”

“At least he went, Gwen.”

Gwen blushed. True enough. She’d been so busy with work, and so darned glad to get out of Pine River, she hadn’t come back at all. Until now.

“You could have at least brought up the fact that you were dating seriously before springing a wedding on him.”

Gwen shrugged. She could have. But she just knew her father would loathe Lance. Doc was an old-school physician who abhorred the namby-pamby elite. Lance was the elite of the elite. Even his name would send her

father off on a bender of sarcasm. So why was she marrying the man?

She'd been lonely most of her life; only Eli had helped. But sooner or later Eli would marry and have as many kids as he had dogs – that had always been his dream.

Gwen winced. Then he would be lost to her forever. She'd begun to pull away from him several years ago so that when the man who was her best friend found a new one her heart would not shatter.

Lately the loneliness had begun to prey on her. She got on well with Lance, and they shared a vision for the future – brilliant careers augmented by perfect partners. She had no illusions that Lance loved her, just as he had no illusions that she loved him, which was the way they both wanted it.

No kids, no pets, no everlasting love – three very good rules – because if everlasting love knocked on Gwen's door she was going to throw the bolt and hide under her bed.

She'd seen what that kind of love did to a person, and she wanted no part of it. What she wanted was a sane, mutually satisfying relationship. If Lance died or things didn't work out, she'd be sad, but she'd survive. Unlike her father. He might breathe and walk and work, but he wasn't really living, and he hadn't been for almost thirty years.

"Earth to Gwen." Nancy waved her hand in front of Gwen's eyes. "Where did you go?"

"Memory lane. Sorry. This place has that effect on me."

Nancy's eyes darkened, but she didn't commiserate. One of Gwen's favorite things about Nancy was that she knew sometimes sympathy only made matters worse. "Let's go inside and put away your suitcase. Then we can drive to Mercy. I canceled your dad's patients for today and tomorrow, though God knows what we'll do for the next month."

"You drove to Mercy and back, then made all those calls? Damn, you're good."

Nancy's lips curved as she shook her head. "You know how Doc is. Patients first. I stayed here and Eli went over to Mercy. He just got back."

Gwen's gaze went to the house next door – a house where most of her happy memories of Pine River resided – just as two black rockets of fur shot from the backyard and headed straight for them.

Nancy saw them coming. "Sit!" she snapped.

The two identical black labs skidded to a halt, their rear ends sliding along the ground and hitting their front feet. Gwen's gaze went to their mouths and stuck there. Something furry hung out.

"What do they have in their mouths?" Gwen asked, though she really didn't want to know. "Oh, no! Drop it!"

Obediently, the labs opened their jaws, and two scraggly, wet bits of fluff landed at their feet.

"Please don't tell me they've brought us dead things."

"No. They wouldn't hurt a flea. They're just possessed." Nancy took a step toward the dogs and the balls of fluff, which had begun to tumble about and mew. At her approach, the dogs started to wiggle their rumps and

wag their tails. "Stay." They stilled. "Where did you get these?" Nancy demanded, as if the two would tell her.

Their mouths opened in doggy grins, tongues lolling, and Nancy gave an exasperated sigh. "These two bring home every cat in town. They don't hurt them. They just want to carry them around and get them all slimy. They're the scourge of the neighborhood."

Gwen's lips twitched. She couldn't help it. The dogs' initial glee had turned to expressions of abject embarrassment as Nancy talked about them. Obviously, they'd been down this road before.

"Elijah Drycinski," Nancy shouted. "Get out here!"

The screen door opened and Eli stepped out.

Gwen's mouth fell open. What had happened to him?

Maybe she hadn't seen him in five years, but she would remember if Eli looked like a GQ model. He'd always been just Eli, the guy next door and her very best friend. Shy and sweet, but smart, gentle with animals, uncomfortable with people — except for her.

He'd never been *that* tall or *that* muscular. He'd worn glasses and kept his hair so short he didn't need to comb it. Who was this man over six feet tall, with biceps bulging out of a black T-shirt that stretched over an equally well-endowed chest? The rugged, manly face, upon which perched no hint of glasses, appeared a bit familiar, and the black hair that had always been too short to curl now wound below his ears and flashed blue highlights in the sun.

"What the...?" Gwen murmured.

Nancy chuckled. "I always said he'd be a late bloomer, but you wouldn't listen."

“Bloom? He looks more like he detonated.”

“Gwen?” Eli shaded his eyes against the late-afternoon sun.

Though his voice had changed years ago from a boy’s to a man’s, it now held a hint of hoarseness, a worldliness unlike the Eli she knew, which sent an odd skitter down Gwen’s spine. Goose bumps raised on her legs. Only a reaction to a cool spring wind, she assured herself. She’d worn shorts to travel, and in May Wisconsin, shorts were almost always a mistake.

As Eli approached, a smile of welcome spreading across his face, unfamiliar lines created by sun and wind and cold deepened about his black eyes, altering his countenance in new and intriguing ways.

She was staring and she needed to stop. Gwen stepped forward, arms spread wide for a welcome home hug. “Hey, Eli.”

Instead of hugging her back and letting her go, Eli pulled Gwen close to his remarkable new body, then brushed her lips with his.

And the world did a funny sort of shimmy.