



# HOLDING ON

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**Holding On by Lisa Mills**

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## Chapter One

Danielle Jordan pressed her hand to her son's forehead, noting the glassy-eyed look in his eyes and the slump of his body. A tight knot formed in her stomach and spread cold fingers of dread into her chest. "Come on, Trevor. Let's get you inside."

She unhooked his seatbelt and helped him climb from the car on shaky legs. His eyes squeezed shut when the dazzling Florida sunshine struck him full in the face. He stumbled forward and sagged against her, as if too tired to bear his weight.

"Here, let Mommy carry you." He usually rejected any help, reminding her seven-year-olds were too big to let their mothers baby them. Today, he held up his arms, accepting her offer.

With a grunt of effort, she hefted him up and nestled him close. His hands looped around her shoulders, and he burrowed his forehead against her neck. When she kissed his temple, strands of her blond hair draped forward and mingled with his chocolate-colored curls. She pushed her hair back and tucked it behind her ear so it wouldn't tickle him. Squinting against the glare, she paused a moment to hook her purse over her arm and check her watch. Three minutes until their appointment.

By the time she reached the doors of the clinic, her back and shoulders ached. Another year, and she wouldn't be able to lift him. She hugged him tighter, wanting to hold on to these precious, irreplaceable moments of childhood that slipped away with every tick of the clock.

The clinic offered a reprieve from the midday heat, and the air conditioning chilled the sheen of perspiration on her skin. Danielle passed through the lobby, turning into the office area of the pediatrician who'd cared for Trevor since they'd moved to the area five years earlier.

The receptionist wore a sympathetic smile as Danielle scribbled their names on the sign-in sheet. "Not feeling so well, huh?"

"We've had better days, right, Trev?" She gave him a squeeze, hoping to coax a reaction from him.

A bleary nod and a snuffle was all the answer he could muster.

"It should just be a few minutes. Please have a seat."

Soon, a nurse wearing a smock covered in brightly colored dinosaurs stepped into the waiting room, holding a chart. "Trevor Jordan?"

Danielle helped Trevor to his feet and followed the nurse down the hall to an exam room with fun cartoon prints on the walls.

"He's run a fever four times in the last six weeks," Danielle explained when the nurse asked about his symptoms. "I was in a few weeks ago for the same thing."

"How long does the fever last?"

“A few days, more or less.”

“And are there any accompanying symptoms? Stuffy nose, cough, or rash?”

Danielle shook her head. “No, nothing. Just the fever.”

The questions continued for several minutes. Finally, the nurse closed the file and stood. “Let’s take your temperature, Trevor.”

He gave a weak nod and leaned against Danielle’s side while the nurse held the thermometer to his ear.

“One hundred one.” She ruffled his hair then turned away to record the information. “Please have him change into the gown and the doctor will be in shortly.” The door closed with a soft snick behind her.

Danielle helped him with his clothes, missing the days when he’d needed her to perform these simple tasks for him. She lifted him onto the exam table, then stood beside him, her arm wrapped around his warm shoulders.

The doctor entered wearing a stethoscope with a smiley face on the chest piece. The fiftyish man had warm hazel eyes and silvering hair at his temples. His fatherly bedside manner put Danielle at ease.

“I hear you’re feeling sick again, slugger. What’s your ball team going to do without their star hitter?”

That brought a tiny smile to Trevor’s face, but he seemed too tired to comment.

“Let’s see if we can find where this fever is hiding so we can chase it out. I’m going to look in your ears and mouth and see if it’s there, okay?”

Trevor didn’t put up any resistance as the doctor brought out a scope with a tiny light on the end of it and peered into his ears. He opened his mouth and sat still while the doctor checked his throat for any swelling or redness.

“Doesn’t seem to be hiding in either of those places, Trev. Can I feel your neck and poke you in the belly? I promise to do my best not to tickle you.”

He spent five minutes examining Trevor. A cryptic “Hmm,” was his only comment.

Trevor allowed the exam, but he sighed and gave persecuted looks each time the doctor asked him to move or help in any way. “Just a little longer,” Danielle told him as she helped him sit up again.

“I’m done picking on you, Trevor.” The doctor stepped back and draped his stethoscope around his neck. “You rest a minute while I make some notes, okay?”

Danielle held Trevor’s hand while the doctor scribbled furiously on the chart. She tried to look over his shoulder, wishing he’d quit writing and tell her how to treat Trevor’s fevers. As much as she loved the snuggling and pampering she’d done the last day or two, Danielle wanted her rowdy boy back.

When the doctor stopped writing and closed the file, he turned to Danielle with a sober expression on his face. “I’d like to order some lab work so I have more information to work with. We can take samples here and send them to a lab for testing if you’d like to get it over with today.”

Her heartbeat stalled for a moment. She grabbed a Dr. Seuss book from a magazine rack and handed it to Trevor, then stepped into the hall with the doctor. “You mean, you don’t know what’s causing this yet?”

“I have some ideas. The blood-work should provide a few more clues.”

His vague answer unsettled her further. “Are you concerned? Is this more serious than a cold or something?”

“I don’t see evidence of a viral or bacterial infection. Four unexplained fevers in two months’ time isn’t something to brush aside without an investigation. I want to be thorough.”

“Can you give me some idea of what you’re looking for?”

He held up his hands in a placating manner as if to stop the flow of anxious questions. “It’s all speculation at this point. I hope it’s nothing, but I want to rule out a few possibilities. Better to err on the side of caution.”

Danielle didn’t like the look in his eyes, as if he knew something he wasn’t ready to tell her. She wanted to demand answers, badger him until he explained his concerns, but he’d only talk in vague terms until he had solid facts. She buried her urge to pepper him with questions and took a few deep, calming breaths. “Thank you, doctor. You’ll call when you have the results, right?”

“Of course.” He shook Danielle’s hand and moved down the hallway to the next exam room. Danielle went back to Trevor, fighting a panicky feeling. She wanted to pull him into a crushing hug and smother him with kisses and tears. If only a mother’s love were medicine enough.

A nurse came in a few minutes later and drew a vial of blood, eliciting only a few whimpers from Trevor, who put on a brave face for the promise of a cherry sucker.

Danielle helped Trevor dress and gathered their things. At the front desk, she wrote a check for the office visit, and glanced at the dismal balance recorded in her register. The blood-work would probably cost another hundred dollars or more. And since she hadn’t met the insurance deductible for the year, she’d be paying out of pocket. Her budget couldn’t stretch any further than it already did. How was she going to cover the bill?

Guilt pricked her. What a time to think of money. Her son, the precious center of her world, was sick. A few dollars meant nothing in comparison. She would find a way to get by. Somehow.

With Trevor snuggled close, she carried him out to the car, pushing back the weariness that dogged her soul so often of late. She just needed to work harder to get them through this. More hours. More effort. She could do it for Trevor. She *had* to do it for Trevor.

There was no one else.

~ ~ ~

Danielle squinted at the computer screen, straining to focus on the fine details in the layout she was working on. She rubbed the tension from her brow, wishing she had time

for a nap. Trevor had been restless throughout the night, so neither of them had slept well. But napping during work hours wasn't a luxury her checkbook would allow.

Taking Trevor to the doctor and staying home to care for him had forced her to reschedule an appointment with a client who was already on a tight deadline for the literature they'd hired her to do for them. As much as she needed to rest, she wanted to finish up the layout design of the eight-page brochure so it would be ready for review when they met the next day. She hoped her extra initiative would make up for her recent unreliability. At this point, she couldn't afford to lose a client. But her mind, dulled by the need for rest, refused to focus.

"Caffeine," she muttered. "That's what I need." A soft drink would give her a kick and help her put in another hour. With any luck that was the time she needed to complete the basic layout. Then tomorrow she could polish the brochure and have it ready to present to the client.

The phone rang, giving Danielle an excuse to take a break. She grabbed the cordless receiver from its dock on her desk as she made her way to the kitchen. "Seaside Advertising and Design." She could afford only one phone line, and she had to have her home-based business listed in the phone book so clients could find her. Her friends used the number too. Since she never knew whether the call would be personal or business, so she always answered with a business greeting to be safe.

"Danielle, it's me."

Hearing the voice of her best friend brought a sense of calm to Danielle's otherwise chaotic life. She cherished their friendship. Some weeks, talking with Janna was the only thing that kept her sane. No matter how bad Danielle felt, Janna could always cheer her up. Seemed like Janna was always doing the cheering—and the helping, and the listening—which left Danielle feeling like a leech. She didn't bring much to the relationship, and couldn't understand why Janna liked her and remained so devoted. But she was glad for a friend like her. "Hey, how are you guys doing?"

"We're good, but Cory said that Trevor wasn't at school today. Is he sick?" Janna's son, Cory, had been friends with Trevor since they'd met at the public library's story hour five years earlier. Janna and Danielle had grown close over the years too.

A lump formed in Danielle's throat. "Another fever," she explained, her voice breaking.

"Are you crying?" Sympathy bled through the phone line and washed over Danielle, threatening to unleash the dam of tears she'd been holding back for hours. "Because if you're crying, I'm coming over."

She yanked open the refrigerator door and studied the supply of soda cans until the weepy feeling passed. "No," Danielle assured her, glad her voice no longer betrayed her. She didn't have time to be emotional. She grabbed a can of diet cola and popped the tab with too much force. "I'm fine. We're fine. It's just frustrating that the doctor hasn't been able to fix this yet. But they're running more tests. I hope we'll have answers soon."

“Sure you’re okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine. Really.”

“Listen, I called because I know how all this puts you behind with work. If you need a hand with babysitting or housework or something, don’t be afraid to ask for help. I have a light week, so I’m happy to do what I can.”

“Thanks, Janna.” Danielle was grateful for the love and support that her friend offered so freely, so the stab of envy that accompanied her gratitude embarrassed her. Janna was a stay-at-home-mom. Her husband Mack sold fancy import cars for a living, and he made enough money that they could live comfortably on one income. Needing Janna’s help left Danielle feeling inadequate and a little jealous of the white-picket-fence life she wanted but didn’t have. Would probably never have.

But today, her desperation trumped her pride and forced her to accept the help. She needed someone to lean on since she didn’t have any family to speak of—not any that would claim her. Besides, Janna seemed to enjoy being helpful.

“Trevor’s feeling better this evening. I’m hoping he can go back to school tomorrow. On the chance that he can’t, I have to meet with a client at one-thirty. I’d reschedule, but I already cancelled on them once—”

“Say no more,” Janna assured her. “Just call me. I’ll keep the afternoon open.”

“Thanks.” Danielle walked back to her desk and prodded her computer out of sleep mode while Janna told her about the sale on kids’ clothes at Target. Danielle tried to focus on the conversation but worries crowded in to distract her. Work, finances, Trevor’s fever . . . Thankfully, Janna could carry the weight of the conversation with only minor participation from Danielle.

“Hey listen, Mack’s calling me. He can’t find Cory’s baseball glove.”

“Sounds like a major emergency,” Danielle said, forcing a smile into her voice. “Go take care of your guys.”

Janna’s laugh sounded happy and carefree. “I’ll talk to you tomorrow. Call me either way, okay?”

“Will do. Goodnight and thanks again.”

“No problem.”

Danielle returned the phone to its base and focused on the brochure layout on her computer screen. *You can do this*, she thought, drawing on a nearly depleted well of motivation. *For Trevor.*

## Chapter Two

“Of course, I’ll make those changes right away and place the photos you’ve selected from the shoot. When the layout is finalized, I’ll get you a draft to review before it goes to the printer.” Danielle gathered her papers from the conference table and tucked them into her attaché. The meeting at her client’s office had run long and she wanted to get home to Trevor.

“Fine, but I feel I need to stress again the importance of making the deadline we’re on.” Mr. Hartog glared down at her, still acting testy that she’d rescheduled yesterday’s appointment. “If we don’t have these brochures for the trade show, we’ll be seriously handicapped in our sales efforts.”

Danielle bit her tongue. His company had procrastinated starting on their literature for the new product lines, then hired her at the last minute, giving her only weeks to arrange photography, layout, and printing. They were asking the impossible. If she hadn’t needed the money so badly, she would have turned them down. As it was, she’d been working day and night to get the job done in their unreasonable time frame.

“I understand, Mr. Hartog. I intend to work straight through the next few days. The printer reserved Monday and Tuesday for this project. It will be boxed and delivered to your door by Wednesday.”

“The trade show starts Thursday, so it’d better be,” he grumbled, walking her to the door.

She heard the “or else” loud and clear. Working to keep her tone polite, she answered with a simple, “I understand.”

Outside, warm Florida sunshine and a gentle Gulf breeze gave a welcomed reprieve from the Mr. Hartog’s oppressive attitude. Danielle wondered if he treated all his employees with the grouchy disdain he threw at her. If so, she was glad her business association with him was only short-term.

Shrugging off her heavy mood, Danielle climbed into her car and tuned the radio to a country station playing a whimsical song. As she headed down the coastal highway, she sang along with the lyrics, smiling and letting her worries go for a while. The shoreline of the Gulf offered calming scenery that didn’t go to waste on her. This is why she’d moved here. The warm weather and beautiful vistas were a balm to her battered soul.

Nearing home, Danielle turned into her small neighborhood, and pulled her Accord into the driveway. The wheels crackled over the crushed shells as she slipped in alongside Janna’s minivan. The sight of her homey cottage with its faded gray-blue siding and white shutters brought a surge of warmth to her breast. She felt blessed that she and Trevor had made such a happy home together, and she would do anything to hold

on to it. She wanted Trevor to have a childhood he could look back on with good memories, not the pain and hurt that she felt when she thought of her upbringing.

Eager to surround herself with comforting sights and sounds, she grabbed her attaché case and headed for the front door. Janna met her there, wearing a bright smile and a white apron stained with splatters of a red sauce that strangely accented her red hair. “Surprise!” she said in a singsong voice. “I made dinner.”

The mouth-watering aroma of spaghetti greeted Danielle as she stepped inside. Trevor appeared, wearing a big smile, back to his normal self. A few days of rest, maybe that was all he’d needed. She bent and pulled him into a hug. He smelled of laundry detergent and sweat.

When he wiggled out of her arms, she carried her work materials to the desk in one corner of the living room and started unpacking.

Janna followed. “Cute blouse.”

Danielle smoothed her hand over the crisp turquoise linen. “It was on clearance. I couldn’t resist.”

“It’s your color. Makes the blue in your eyes more vivid.”

“Thanks.” When her bag was unpacked, she turned from her desk and looked around. “Hey, you guys cleaned up.” The layer of dust had been vanquished from the end tables, and the carpets bore tracks from the sweeper. The picture window was missing the hazy fingerprints that usually marked the glass.

“Hope you don’t mind. I know you’ve been crazy-busy with this latest client. How was mister pain-in-the-backside today?” Janna wrinkled her nose, skewing the lines of freckles that ran across her fair skin.

“Charming as usual.” Danielle followed Janna into the kitchen. “He wasn’t happy I rescheduled yesterday’s appointment. And he’s still blaming me that we’re on such a tight deadline. How is it my fault that he waited until three weeks before his show to consider what literature they would need?”

“It’s not. But that type needs someone to blame so they can maintain delusions that they’re perfect. Just ignore him.”

“I know I shouldn’t let him bother me,” Danielle confessed. “But something about him gets to me.” She knew what it was. He reminded her of her father, which triggered an unmet need for approval. But she didn’t want to talk about that part of her past, not even with Janna.

“Well, I find that most bad days improve with good food. Have a plate of spaghetti and meatballs. It’s guaranteed to make you feel better.” Janna dished up a couple plates of noodles and ladled sauce and meatballs over them. Trevor, who seemed to be enjoying the surprise he and Janna had cooked up, retrieved napkins in one hand and forks in the other and brought them to the breakfast bar.

Danielle slid onto a barstool and enjoyed the rare treat of having someone take care of her. “Mmmm.” She closed her eyes and let the rich flavors of her first bite roll over her tongue. “Tastes like heaven, Janna. You’re my hero.”

Janna untied the string at her waist then lifted the apron over her head. “Then my work here is done. I’m going home so you two can enjoy your evening. And try not to work too hard, Dani-dear.” She gave Trevor a peck on the cheek and squeezed Danielle’s shoulder as she headed for the door.

Danielle swiveled on the chair, watching her go. “Thanks. I’ll call you later.”

When the door clicked shut, Danielle turned back to Trevor. Spaghetti sauce dotted his chin and streaked his upper lip. His sweet, saucy face warmed her to the core. Grumpy Mr. Hartog aside, life was pretty good, and tonight they were going to enjoy it.

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Danielle guided her car down the highway, a vise-like grip on the steering wheel. The doctor had called and asked her to come to his office ... alone. He said they needed to discuss the results of Trevor’s blood tests. Her insides rolling with fear, she’d agreed to the three o’clock appointment.

Trevor had returned to school that day, the fever gone. Danielle had decided he must be fine. Anything serious would linger around and cause more problems, right? But the doctor wouldn’t insist on talking to her in person if it was minor. More than once she fought the irrational urge to turn the car around and drive as fast as she could in the opposite direction. But common sense told her this was something she couldn’t escape. She kept driving toward the clinic, feeling like a convict walking to his execution.

Drawing near to her destination, Danielle switched lanes and prepared to turn into the expansive parking lot. The closer she came to the doctor and his dreaded test results, the more she wished she’d brought someone with her. *Kevin*. If only Trevor’s father could be here with her. The year they’d fallen in love had been the best year of her life, so full of love and hope and promise. But he wasn’t a part of her life anymore. No one was. Not her parents, her brother, or anyone from her hometown. She and Trevor were alone in the world.

Shame and hurt pressed in on her heart. Why didn’t she have people in her life who would share the joy and the pain with her? What had she done to deserve to live so isolated and alone? Janna was a good friend, but she had her own family. She couldn’t be expected to fill all the holes that pockmarked Danielle’s life.

Just as quickly as the emotions had come, she shoved them away. She didn’t have the time or the luxury of indulging in self-pity or regrets. Besides, she didn’t want to share her life with any of the people from her past. They’d failed her and hurt her over and over. She would never give them the chance to wound her again. Never.

Danielle found a parking space and tucked her keys into her purse. Eighty-degree temperatures oppressed her the instant she opened the car door. She forced herself to climb out and walk toward the clinic.

Once inside, a nurse showed Danielle to the doctor's office. A large desk and cluttered bookshelves crowded the small room. Pictures of the doctor in exotic locales—on a pier holding up a swordfish, standing atop a rocky boulder, kneeling in the cleft of a glacier—lined the walls. *Vacations*, she decided. *Our co-pays at work*.

Having examined all the interesting scenery, she lowered herself into one of the guest chairs near his desk. Her collar seemed to grow tighter by the minute. She tugged at the neckline of her shirt, trying to catch her breath.

Finally, the doctor entered, carrying a chart and looking grim. "Thank you for coming, Miss Jordan." He sat at his desk and opened the file. Several seconds passed in weighted silence while he shuffled through papers.

Danielle swallowed hard and forced herself to breathe slowly. Inhale. Exhale. One moment at a time. That was how she'd endure this. Inhale. Exhale.

The doctor laid down the file and folded his hands over the stack. The sympathetic look in his eye confirmed her fears. Raw panic ripped through her. *Run! Leave before he can say things you don't want to hear*. But fear, ripe and heavy, stole her breath and held her to the chair.

"Miss Jordan, there's no easy way to say this." He shifted uneasily, causing his chair to hiss and squeak. "I'm sorry. Your son has leukemia."

Thank you for taking the time to read this sample of my writing. If you enjoyed this portion of *Holding On* and would like to read more, click below for more information and links to purchase the book.

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