

HEARTWARMING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

Love Inspired

The Soldier's Surprise Family

Jolene Navarro



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Аннотация

Unexpected DaddyTexas state trooper Garrett Kincaid is a lone wolf—until he becomes an instant father of two young children. The former soldier never knew he had a son . . . or that his little boy has a baby sister with nowhere to go. His landlady, lovely widow Anjelica Ortega-Garza, offers to help, and suddenly Garrett's life is all about nap schedules and baby bottles and trying to make his traumatised son smile. Falling for Anjelica isn't part of the plan. Yet even Garrett can't deny that love has begun building a family of four right around him.

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Garrett stared at his son's photo.

Anjelica kept her gaze on Garrett's face as he stared at the top photo of the boy. Not able to resist, she peeked over his arm and saw a serious little boy with Garrett's green-gray eyes staring back at them.

Garrett pressed his hand over his eyes.

Moving back, she wanted to give him space to collect himself. A broken heart was nothing new to her, but to watch such a controlled man fighting to hold it together made her want to wrap him in her arms.

He handed her the photo, paper-clipped to an information sheet. "I don't know how to do this, being a father."

"We can make it work." She blurted it out. Thinking of what had happened to those two small children, she knew they needed a home full of love and good memories. Tears started burning her eyes. "We have to make this right for them. We have to bring

them to a real home.”

He looked at her. “We?”

A seventh-generation Texan, **JOLENE NAVARRO** fills her life with family, faith and life’s beautiful messiness. She knows that as much as the world changes, people stay the same. Vow-keepers and heartbreakers. Jolene married a vow-keeper who shows her holding hands never gets old. When not writing, Jolene teaches art to inner-city teens and hangs out with her own four almost-grown kids. Find Jolene on Facebook or her blog, jolenenavarrowriter.com.

The Soldier’s
Surprise Family
Jolene Navarro



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Consider now, for the Lord has chosen you
to build a house for the sanctuary;
be courageous and act.

—1 Chronicles 28:10

This story is dedicated to the military families
that support, serve and protect our nation.
Especially Baron Von Guinther for talking
with me until the wee hours of the morning in

San Diego, brainstorming this story and helping me get to know the hero, Garrett Kincaid.

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Extract

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Chapter One

Texas state trooper Garrett Kincaid scanned the yard, hoping to find it empty. The afternoon sun had gone into hiding as the breeze carried the aroma from the overabundance of flowering plants. When he arrived home from a long shift, sleep was the only action item on his agenda. Ha, he was funny.

His garage apartment offered sweet seclusion a few steps away. He might actually avoid a conversation or another offer of a meal from his energetic landlady, Anjelica Ortega-Garza. She threatened his resolve to stay out of relationships. There was too much to like about her. He even liked the way she said her name with the Spanish pronunciation. It rolled off his tongue so smooth. He shook his head and made himself stop playing with her name. It was just a name.

It took so much effort to tell her no. He had to admit he'd never eaten so well. According to his mother, pushing buttons on a microwave counted as a home-cooked meal. And during their short marriage, Viviana's favorite dinner came in a to-go bag.

Another scent mixed with the flowers and he knew coffee and bacon were close. The lady could cook. She seemed to have an overdeveloped need to feed the entire population of Real County and every resident within a hundred-mile radius.

“Stop right there. Don't even think about it!”

Firm and sharp, the command stopped Garrett midmotion.

He turned to find the lady who had just been in his thoughts. Standing with her hands planted on her hips. Petite and lovely, she looked in charge. A purple scarf got caught up in the wind before she tucked it back into place.

He groaned. His resolve not to think of her in a personal way took a hit every time he saw her. So much for avoiding her.

Her normally friendly smile was gone, replaced with a glare, but not at him. A few feet away from her, a silky mop of a dog lay on its belly. Big brown eyes darted between Anjelica and a small herd of colorful chickens. Maybe they were a flock. What do you call a group of chickens?

He'd grown up in the city surrounded by noise, not hills and odd farm animals. A month ago he would have told anyone who asked that he was a city boy. But living fifteen miles from a town that was in the middle of nowhere, Texas, he discovered a new side of himself. And a new plan, to build a home of his own where people wouldn't bother him, especially an overly friendly landlady.

The one-room cabin would sit on the edge of the Frio River. He could see the waters running so clear it washed all the grime away from life.

He sighed. After his disastrous marriage, the biggest part of his plan was to stay single, no ties and no family. There was a sign over Anjelica that screamed Hero Needed and he vowed to never play that game again.

A small whine sounded from the silky mop with a pink bow.

Maybe he could still make it up the stairs to the apartment over her garage. He glanced to the door, estimating how long it would take to—

“Officer Kincaid!”

He dropped his head before turning to face her. The woman made him nervous with her whimsical smile and dancing movements. Fragile and naive, someone else who needed to be protected from the real world.

Her golden-brown eyes found him, bright and eager. The commander of a moment ago vanished as she made her way toward him. The fluff of a dog that Garrett had never seen before followed, deciding to chase her flowing skirts instead of the chickens. “How was work? I always pray nothing happens.” Her eyes slipped to the gun he had holstered at his hip. “Uneventful night in your line of work is a good thing, right?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I saved a couple of extra soft tacos. Egg and bacon along with fresh coffee. I can bring them to you.”

“I—” Before he could find a good excuse, Sheriff Torres’s patrol vehicle pulled into the drive and parked behind his SUV. An unexpected visit from the local sheriff usually brought bad news.

Anjelica’s smile vanished. She clutched her scarf with one hand as the other held her stomach. She displayed all the signs of someone who knew to expect bad news. In a few steps he closed the gap between them.

A woman in a fitted business suit and low heels got out of the passenger side. She was tall, with her dark blond hair forming a neat bun. In his cowboy hat, Sheriff Torres approached with the woman close behind.

“Morning, Anjelica. Kincaid.” He nodded to each of them and shook their hands.

Garrett watched as Anjelica took a deep breath, in and out.

“Kincaid, this is Sharon Gibson. She’s with CPS.”

Child Protective Services. Relief loosened the muscles he hadn’t even noticed had tightened. So it was work related and they were here for him, not her. He gave Anjelica a reassuring smile. Her shoulders dropped a notch and her smile returned. She moved to the woman and shook her hand.

The woman turned to him, offering a greeting. In her free hand, she carried a couple of folders. “Nice to meet you, Officer Kincaid.”

“Likewise. So, what can I do for you?” The one thing he dreaded the most was domestic situations involving kids. He turned to Torres. The sheriff shook his head. Garrett’s brows crunched inward. Now he was confused.

Sharon Gibson cleared her throat. “We’re here because of your son in Kerrville.”

“Excuse me?” There was no way he’d heard that right. He glanced at the sheriff’s grim face. “I don’t have any children. I’ve never even lived in Kerrville.”

“You were married to Viviana Barrera Kincaid while in

Houston, correct?"

"For a short time."

She tilted her head. "Are you saying her son is not yours or that you are unaware of the boy, Garrett River Kincaid Jr.?"

The world stopped spinning. Where had his blood gone? Glancing down, he noted that his body looked intact. Muscles pricked as if drained.

The woman looked around. "Is there somewhere we can sit and talk?"

His mind had gone blank. Sit? She wanted somewhere to sit? Behind an invisible wall, he watched Anjelica pick up her dog. Words were exchanged.

She walked to her porch and disappeared into the house. The woman, Sharon Gibson with CPS, followed her onto the porch and sat on a rocking chair.

Commands from his brain went unheard by his body. Nothing worked. Frozen. Viviana had found a way to pull him into her drama all over again.

Torres stopped next to him, placing a firm hand on his upper arm. "I take it you didn't know about the boy. No one likes being blindsided." The sheriff patted Garrett's tense shoulder. "Come on—we'll get this worked out."

A son, no way. There had to be a mistake. Viviana, for all her faults, would have told him about a child. It had to be Ed's, her boyfriend she kept going back to. How could they know for sure that the boy was his? He was going to be sick. Deep breaths.

He followed Torres up the steps, not seeing anything but the folders on the low table between the chairs.

Anjelica pushed open the screen door. The hinges needed to be oiled. She sat a tray on the small table. "I have sugar and cream. Does anyone need something else, like water?"

Sharon smiled. "This is perfect, thank you." She poured cream into her cup.

Garrett stared at the swirls of the white getting lost in the black liquid.

"Garrett?" Anjelica's voice brought him back to the present. The warmth and smile were gone. Now he got the same glare the chicken-chasing dog earned. He was a dog.

He shook his head. If he tried to drink or eat anything, it wouldn't stay down.

At the end of the porch, across from Sharon, Sheriff Torres sat on the swing and took a drink from his cup. "Sure you don't want coffee? Maybe some water?"

"I'll get you some water." Anjelica disappeared into the house.

Sharon took a sip before she looked at him, a soft smile on her face. "So you were married to Viviana Barrera?"

Breathe, Garrett. You have to breathe. He nodded. His throat too dry to make a coherent sound.

"Her son's name is Garrett River Kincaid Jr. You're listed as the father on his birth certificate. Family members also say you're the father."

"Are you sure?" What kind of man didn't know he had a kid?

Even his loser of a father stuck around for the first few years. “I didn’t know.” His jaw hurt, but he made sure to keep his face calm. A clear mind and facts, that was what he needed to sort this out.

“This is an emergency situation. You can challenge with a DNA test if you want to, but the state uses the name on the birth certificate and acknowledges you as the legal father.”

Garrett looked at the curve of the rocker resting on the worn boards of the porch. What had Viviana done now? He cleared his throat, the need to explain, to make them understand, burning his gut.

He heard the creak of the screen door again and looked up. Anjelica handed him a water bottle. Fighting the urge to press the cold bottle against his neck, he rolled it between his palms. His landlady vanished inside the house again. “Why are you the one telling me this? Are they in trouble?” If CPS was involved, something had to be wrong.

Sheriff Torres leaned his elbows on his knees and Sharon took a deep breath. He wanted to yell at them to stop messing with him, but he sat and waited. He pressed his right thumb into the center of his left palm. He could hear the chickens in the yard and music playing somewhere in the house. None of it seemed real.

“There’s a history of domestic violence with her current boyfriend.”

Viviana’s life was a history of domestic violence, from the time she was born. The need to save her had eaten him for years.

“Yesterday a neighbor called to report shouting and gunshots. Two bodies were found. It looks as if he shot her, then turned the gun on himself. It’s under investigation. The officers found the boy, Garrett, his baby sister and a dog hiding in the backyard.”

All the blood left his body. If Sharon kept talking, he didn’t hear it. Viviana was dead. Grief and regret swamped him. She was dead and she had left children behind. Not just the one boy named Garrett Kincaid, but a daughter, too. Oh, Viviana.

He ran his hands through his hair. “More than one?” He didn’t understand. “How many children did she have? Are they Ed’s?” This couldn’t be real. “I can’t imagine he allowed her to put my name as the father. This isn’t making sense.”

The caseworker’s brow drew closer and she gave him a questioning look. “Ed? I don’t know who that is. The current boyfriend was James Barrow. He is the father of the little girl. She’s ten months old. He was an auto mechanic and had a job in Kerrville until about a month ago. His family lives in Houston.”

He rubbed his face. “She moved on to someone worse?” Trying to figure out Viviana’s love life wasn’t important right now. Her children were now orphaned. What a mess, a living nightmare.

He took in one long breath, counting to seven. “Tell me what you know.” He looked Sharon in the face. If what she said was correct, the boy wasn’t an orphan. Garrett’s stomach rolled.

No, the boy had a father, and that would be him. Maybe. Just because Viviana put his name on the birth certificate didn’t mean

the boy was his, but he couldn't just leave them, either. From the first time he met her at the age of ten, he had been desperate to rescue Viviana from her life. Taking her children would be a way to do that, since she never allowed him to help her.

“The boy, Garrett River, just turned five. Pilar is the girl—she’s ten months old. With the birth certificate, letters from the mother and other family members’ statements, we have enough evidence to immediately place them with you if you’re willing. It doesn’t mean you’re taking permanent custody of the girl. There will be a hearing for temporary placement that needs to happen rather fast. The courts will decide on that first, then permanent in six months.”

Custody and court dates? Garrett leaned back and closed his eyes. “I gave her an ultimatum. Viviana picked Ed. I left Houston, blocked her from my phone and filed for divorce.” He jolted from the rocking chair and paced along the edge of the porch. His muscles jumped under his skin, restless and tight.

Oh man, what if she’d tried to call and tell him about the pregnancy? He covered his eyes with his hands, pressing the palms hard against his eye sockets. He had been so set on not allowing her to use him again. His stubbornness could mean he had left a son behind. “What do I need to do now?”

“We need you to take immediate custody of the children.” She took a sip of her coffee. “Because you’re a state trooper, a veteran and the state-acknowledged biological father of the first child, we could place Pilar with you if you’re willing to take her.

We would still have to go to court, but my hope is you agree to be the temporary solution. We still need to follow up with home inspections and parenting classes.”

Looking at the horizon, Garrett cleared all thoughts and concentrated on breathing.

Torres cleared his throat. “So he doesn’t need a DNA test to claim the boy? Where are they now?”

“No, as far as we’re concerned, he’s the father. He’ll only need the DNA test if he wants to challenge the birth certificate. Right now the kids are in an emergency shelter in Kerrville. We’d like to get them out of there as soon as possible. It’s not designed for the care of infants and small children. There’s no one that’s capable of caring for the children on the mother’s side of the family, and the father’s side refuses to take them.”

“So you want me to take both of them.”

“We do prefer keeping them together whenever possible.”

He nodded. A baby needed a crib and a car seat... Well, he wasn’t even sure what all a baby needed. The boy was only five. Did he need special equipment? “What timeline are you looking at for me to take the kids?”

“So you’re willing to take both of the children?”

He nodded. He didn’t see any other choice. If that was his son and his son had a sister, he’d keep them together. Even if the boy wasn’t his son, he was Viviana’s and no kid deserved to start off life that way.

Everyone was looking at him. Glancing away from their

intense gazes, Garrett turned to the horizon. This was not how he imagined fatherhood entering his life. A strong urge to pray plagued him, but he didn't even know where to start.

Sharon gave him a big smile. "Good. I know this is a shock, but the faster we can get these little ones settled with you, the better. Can you pick them up tomorrow? We'll set up a house inspection afterward."

"Tomorrow." A flash of panic constricted his lungs. Garrett turned to Torres. He was the closest thing to a friend he had in this town, but their only connections were the Marines and state law enforcement. Could he help with the kids?

No, not the kids, his kids. Hoping the sick feeling in his gut didn't show on his face, he forced a smile for Sharon.

With a warm glow in her eyes, she leaned forward and touched his hand, offering him two plain-looking folders. These folders would change his life forever. Was he ready? Could he do this? Parenting two babies who'd suffered a major trauma. He had his own issues to deal with. Nodding, he took the folders from her. "Thank you." His fingers dropped them on the tabletop as if they had burned him.

He had been so careless and Viviana...oh, Viviana. He thought of the girl he had loved. His love had not been enough. Would he be enough for her children? The children were caught in a horrific trap and it looked as if he was their best hope. That didn't say much for the poor kids. He had to be stronger than his nightmares. Another wave of nausea rolled over his stomach.

This had to be made right. They needed a safe place, a home. He was all they had left. Maybe his mother could take some time off work.

Anjelica opened the door. “Do you need anything? More water? Something to eat?”

“I didn’t even think to ask. I got custody of two small children, a small boy and a baby girl. Can I move them into the apartment with me?”

“Two? Not just the son?” Her mouth open, she blinked a few times before turning to the CPS worker. “Without a doubt, they’ll be welcomed here. Anything they need.”

Sheriff Torres nodded and turned to Garrett. “I’ll talk to Pastor John. The church will make sure you have what you need. Don’t hesitate to ask for help on this. Check to see if you can take some days off work to get them settled.” He looked at Sharon. “He’ll have the support of the community. We’ll make sure he has all the bases covered.”

Garrett rubbed the back of his neck. All the bases would mean childcare with his crazy schedule and appropriate gear for the kids. Food that kids ate. Did a ten-month-old baby even eat? Was she still on a bottle? Oh man, they need psychotherapy. He jerked his head to the caseworker, who now stood next to him. “Did they witness the incident?”

Pursing her lips, she gave him a slight nod. “We believe the boy did. Everything’s in the report. Like I said, they found them in the backyard. At first the dog made it difficult to get to them.

We're not sure if they crawled out before or after the incident."

And there it just went. Had he really thought things couldn't get worse?

Anjelica moved closer to the edge of the porch. "Sharon, you don't need to worry." Tenderness softened her eyes to a golden honey as she looked at Sheriff Torres. "These kids won't be alone. We can all lend a hand."

Without even knowing what had happened, she stepped up and offered her service. He hated the thought of her reaction to the fact he had a son he didn't know existed.

Asking for help went against everything he'd ever taught himself. But if he and these poor kids were going to have a chance at surviving this ordeal, that was going to have to change.

A dry throat was hard to talk around. He swallowed and managed a simple "Thank you."

Sharon smiled. "I have given you some shocking information, Officer Kincaid. In the folders you'll find my number if you need to reach me. You'll be appointed a new caseworker." She smiled at Anjelica. "Thanks for helping."

"It's the least I can do." She looked at Garrett, her wide smile tighter than usual. The new coldness burned in her usually warm eyes.

Gathering her bag, Sharon turned away from them. She stopped at the last step. "You'll make a big difference in their lives. You're doing the right thing, Officer Kincaid."

Then why did it feel like he was making the worst mistake in

his life? He turned to Anjelica. “I have to go to the apartment and see what I can do to make it kid ready.”

Nodding, she followed him off the porch. “You’re going to need stuff for a baby. Crib, changing table, bottles, car seat, probably clothes and shoes for both of them.”

The lifeline that tethered him to Earth disappeared. It was as if he was floating away from everything he knew and had no way to get back. How was he going to make this work? Halfway up the steps, he realized Anjelica was still following him. He raised an eyebrow when he turned to look at her. “What are you doing?”

“I’m going with you. We’ll need to make a list. I probably have most of what you need.”

“I appreciate the offer, but you were heading into town. You don’t need to change your plans for me.”

She tilted her chin and looked him straight in the eye. “I’m not doing it for you. I’m doing it for those two little ones...” Lips pulled tight, she closed her eyes for a moment. “If they came to find you on a Saturday, it’s an emergency situation. With me, kids always come first.” Her normally open expression had a bit of steel in it as she narrowed her gaze.

Garrett sighed. “I have no doubt about that.”

“I have a grandmother, a mother, sisters and cousins that will help.”

He couldn’t imagine that kind of large family. Of course, this morning he couldn’t imagine being a father, either. Unfortunately, they didn’t have any other options. Innocents

couldn't be allowed to suffer because of his mistakes.

"Besides, you forgot these." She held up the two folders. Folders that he was sure told an ugly story.

He had to make this right. As much as he wanted to keep his distance from Little Miss Sunshine, he had a feeling he needed her more than he'd ever wanted, or needed, another person. He glanced behind her, scanning the fanciful farm. Especially a delicate female who seemed to live in another world altogether.

* * *

Anjelica kept her gaze hard and firm as she looked back up at Garrett. He sighed and turned his back to her, his hand resting on the wood rail. The muscles in his neck coiled. What kind of man didn't know he had a family?

Her cousin Yolanda said good looks spoiled a man. She would have argued that Garrett Kincaid was a solid man, a bit standoffish and a loner, but good. Now she wasn't so sure.

His jaw flexed as he unlocked the door. She gritted her teeth. How could men be so...so careless?

They entered the apartment in silence. He had a son and a baby daughter he didn't know about. She pulled her gaze away from his jawline and studied her hands. How could she have mistaken him as a man of honor?

Anjelica, judging Officer Kincaid won't solve any of the problems. You don't know the whole story. She knew when it came to children she had to be careful of filtering thoughts through a haze of resentment.

Holding her daughter happened only in dreams. Esperanza would have been five next month. Tomorrow's date was burned into her brain, the day she'd lost her precious baby girl. During this time, between Esperanza's death and due date, her emotions were always closer to the surface. A twist of the silver charms on her wrist helped her calm the negative thoughts.

Garrett moved to the kitchen counter that ran against the back wall. Redirecting her thoughts, she focused on him as he put the gun in a safe.

At the counter, he turned and leaned, arms crossed. His uniform stretched over broad shoulders. "Okay, enough of the silent treatment. You're bound to have questions."

"It's really none of my business." She scanned the bare room. Did he dismiss the dangers of his job the way Steve had waved off her worries of his joining the Marines? "Well, other than you're moving two children into my very small garage apartment. There's no real kitchen. And you have a very dangerous job."

The urge to scowl at him needed to be tempered. Her family lived by the rule of speaking your mind if it was helpful, kind and true. She wasn't doing a good job of it. There was always something helpful and encouraging to say, and if she tried hard enough, the right words would find their way to her lips. "What you're doing is a good thing. You stepping up and taking the kids, even if it is a little late." She bit her lip. That did not count as kind, it wasn't helpful and it might not be true. Her thoughts were going crazy.

Garrett stood across the room and stared at her, a tight, closed look on his hard face. “Do you have any questions or just observations?”

“Sorry.” Okay, she needed to come straight out and ask. “You have a young son and baby daughter that you didn’t know about? How does that happen?”

Leaning back against the counter again, his masculine knuckles turned white as he gripped the edge. “I’m not sure. Right now I’m feeling a bit blindsided.” With his head down, he seemed to be studying his boots. “It seems the boy’s mine. The girl has another father.” He raised his head and looked her in the eye. “There’s no excuse for abandoning a child, but I...I left town hoping to leave all my ex-wife’s drama behind. I didn’t know I was leaving behind a son to deal with the mess.”

She didn’t understand the blow to her emotions from hearing he had been married. Why would that even bother her?

With a heavy sigh, he stalked to the table and sat in one of the two chairs. Playing with the empty saltshaker, he never looked up. Anjelica moved to the other chair and waited.

“I met Viviana in the fifth grade. She was my best friend. By the time our freshman year came around, I was in love. I spent those four years rescuing her. When I left for Afghanistan, we stayed in touch. According to her letters, she’d made better choices and gotten out of her father’s house. He was not a nice man.” He looked up briefly, but with a sigh he lowered his head again.

“She said she was waiting for me to return home. We met at the airport and I asked her to marry me right there.” His focus moved from the simple saltshaker to the balcony door. “Looking back, I realize I had made her into a woman of my dreams. I imagined us with a home and family that even included a dog. While reading her letters, I created a life in my head that wasn’t real.”

Wrapping her hands over her upper arms, she tried to stave off the cold that crept into her veins. All of the letters Steve wrote her during his tour in the Middle East had been about home, too. He talked about the long hours of doing nothing. Telling her how he reread her letters over and over to get a piece of normal. He would draw pictures of the farm and the projects he planned to start when he got home. There were pages where he wrote of their daughter’s future and all the kids they would raise. Her heart twisted. Don’t go there, Anjelica.

She packed thoughts of her husband away and fixed her attention on Garrett. “How old were you when you joined?”

“Eighteen. I had just graduated and didn’t have many options.” He blew a hard puff of air. “The Marines were a blessing. They gave me focus and a sense of belonging, but it wasn’t always easy.” Standing, he rubbed the back of his neck. “I thought we were ready for the next phase of our life. I wanted to feel normal.” He gave a harsh laugh. “That didn’t work out so well.”

Garrett walked to the French doors and opened one of them. The breeze released some of the tension that had weighed down

the room. Four saxophone cases lined the wall. They were the only personal items other than a small stack of mail in his living quarters. The quietness lingered.

He reached for one of the cases. She'd heard him play several times, usually at night when he came in from work. Sometimes it was slow and soothing, other times energetic and raw, but it was always good. The music would wrap around her while she worked with the clay. She didn't feel so alone when he played.

Dropping the strap, he stared off through the French door. With a sigh, he joined her at the table. "It's hard allowing the old nightmare to resurface. A few weeks after we were married, Ed, one of her boyfriends she forgot to mention, started calling. Viviana ran to him, until he beat her—then she'd come home and I would patch her up. That had always been my job. After several attempts of trying to report him, I had to get out. At one point she threatened to tell the police I had hurt her. My career was on the line. I left. Changed my number. Deleted hers so I wouldn't be tempted to check on her. I made a clean break. I made sure she had no way to get in touch with me. If I had just left her one way to contact me..." With his elbow on the table, he pressed his forehead into his palm.

She heard resentment in each word. If his ex-wife had hidden the boy from him, he had every right to be angry. "Why are you taking the girl, too? It sounds like there's a chance the boy is not even yours. Why did they come to you for placement?"

"I guess we were still married when she gave birth, so my

name is on the birth certificate and there's no one else." He shrugged. "As a little girl, she had dreams of living in the county with lots of animals." He snorted. "I promised her I'd make her dreams come true. Maybe I can make good on the promise with her children. Also, I'd guess there is a fifty-fifty chance the boy is mine. I couldn't take one without the other—she's his baby sister. Can you imagine how much he would hate me if I didn't bring his sister home with him?" He scanned the room and blew out a hard puff of air.

She still struggled with the idea of not knowing about a child and then taking in two. "Where's their mother now? Why have they been taken from her?"

His jaw did the tick thing again and he nodded to the two folders she had set on the table. "Everything about them and their mother is in the folders." He shook his head.

Picking up one of the folders, she flipped it open. "You haven't seen the children?" It was the baby girl. Her heart melted at the big eyes, perfect tiny lips and tons of tight curls that surrounded the sweetest face. "Oh, Garrett, she's adorable. Look at her."

As if wearing a neck brace, he turned and gave the eight-by-ten photo a quick glance. With his attention back on the door on the opposite wall, he nodded. "She looks like her mother." He moved away. "For now, I should clean out the office so it can become their room."

"What happened? How'd she lose the kids? What about the fath...?" She flipped to the next photo. Shocked by the scene, her

stomach heaved. The folder fell from her grasp. She leaned over and braced herself. "I'm gonna be sick."

Garrett rushed to her side. He muttered under his breath as he pulled her hair back. "Do you need the restroom?"

Forcing in deep breaths, eyes closed, she shook her head. "No, I'm fine now."

"I should have warned you the crime-scene photos might be in there." He went to the mini refrigerator and pulled out a bottle of water. "Here." He pressed the cold plastic into her hand.

Sitting up, she leaned her head back. She adjusted her scarf. Knowing horrible things happened was one thing; seeing them in pictures was a completely different story. How was she going to get that out of her head? "Oh, Garrett, those poor babies. We have to help them."

Garrett pulled the other chair next to her and placed his hand on her shoulder at the base of her neck. "I'm sorry. I should've looked through them before letting you see the folders. I was...just avoiding."

"Were they in the room? Did they see what happened to their mother?"

"The boy might've been." He was so close she could hear his breathing. "Pilar is a baby and, hopefully, won't have any memory." Leaning back, he pushed his hair away from his forehead.

With the folder in hand, she was careful not to look at the bloody photos, instead focusing on the picture of the little girl

and her information sheet. “Her name is Pilar Rose. She just turned ten months old.” Making sure to breathe, she reached for the second folder.

Hand flat on the folder, he spread his long fingers over it as if to protect her from the contents. “I just want to see him.” She held her hand out for the deceptively plain folder Garrett covered. “I’m prepared now. I was caught off guard. Let me see them.”

Instead of handing over his son’s file, he opened it.

She kept her gaze on Garrett’s face as he stared at the top photo of the little boy. He blinked several times and his throat worked up and down. Not able to resist, she peeked over his arm and saw a serious little boy with Garrett’s green-gray eyes staring back at them. He was a little darker with a mop of curly hair, but other than that, she was looking at a young version of the man sitting next to her. Garrett pressed his hand over his eyes.

She moved back, wanting to give him space to collect himself. Two breaths in, one hard breath out. Counting the steady rhythm gave her something to focus on instead of asking questions. He was breathing with his whole body. A broken heart was nothing new to her, but to watch such a controlled man fighting to hold it together made her want to wrap him in her arms.

The hard muscle along his jaw popped. This time, instead of wanting to scowl at him, she wanted to comfort him. Fisting her hand in her lap to keep from running her fingers along the tense muscle, she fought the urge to sooth him.

After a long while, he slid his hand down his face and covered

his mouth, looking up at the ceiling. She saw moisture on his eyelashes. He handed her the photo, paper-clipped to an information sheet. Scanning the sheet gave her somewhere safe to look. “Garrett River Kincaid Jr. He has your name.”

“And apparently everything else, too. No DNA test needed. It’s like looking at an old picture of me as a kid.” He stood but didn’t go anywhere. The silence grew tense.

She didn’t know what to say, so she tossed a few words around. “He has curly hair.” Well, that was a stupid thing to say.

“I had curly hair as a kid, too. When I went to school, my dad shaved it off so I wouldn’t look like a girl. It came back straighter.” He lifted one hand and ran it through his own thick hair.

The neat cut was now unruly, but she still couldn’t imagine him with curls. “The kids in my family all start off with ringlets, too, but around five or six they lose them.”

“I don’t know how to do this, being a father.”

“We can make it work.” She blurted it out. Thinking of what happened to those two small children, she knew they needed a home full of love and good memories. Tears started burning her eyes. “We have to make this right for them. We have to bring them to a real home.”

He took his eyes off the bare walls and looked at her. “We?”

“I won’t let you not let me help.” She hugged the folders.

The obstinate man lifted an eyebrow at her.

She gritted her teeth and pressed the folders closer to her

chest. With one deep breath, Anjelica looked back at him. “Okay, so I didn’t word that very well, but you get my meaning. They need more than food and a bed to sleep in. They need consistency, a home filled with love, and you need help.”

“Right now they need a safe place.” He disappeared into the smaller room he was using as an office.

She hadn’t been up here since he moved into the garage apartment. There was nothing on the walls. The bookshelf remained empty. A brown sofa and a small round table with two chairs had been provided in the rental. He hadn’t added anything of his own, not even a TV. The only personal items were the saxophone cases. Not a single picture of his family or friends.

Garrett came back into the living area and sat a laptop on the table. “He’s five and she’s ten months old. What am I gonna need? Maybe I should make the smaller room my bedroom and put them in the bigger room.” He looked up at her. “Or does a ten-month-old need to be in a room with an adult...a parent? I work nights sometimes and if there’s an emergency...”

The color left his face.

“Garrett, you’ll need someone to watch them when you’re at work.”

“I’m going to call my mother. If she could move here, that could work. I can sleep on the sofa. I’ve had worse.”

She had a bad feeling he was going to be stubborn about taking help. “I have some baby stuff. It’s all unused. I have a crib, high chair, changing table, rocker and the smaller stuff like blankets.”

He rubbed his eyes and stared at the screen.

“You need some sleep.”

He checked his watch. “I’m fine.”

She reached over and pushed the top down on his computer.

“Get some sleep. I’ll have the things they need by the time you wake up.”

She took a deep breath and smiled. Could she do it? Could she hand over all of Esperanza’s furniture? She closed her eyes and felt the peace wash over her. Garrett’s baby girl needed a room full of love, and Esperanza didn’t.

It was time. She opened her eyes and smiled at Garrett. “God provides.”

He sighed. “Not sure about God, but I’m not your problem to fix. I do need some sleep, but I don’t have a lot of time to waste to get everything ready for...”

“You have enough time to sleep. I’m telling you, almost everything you need is close. Okay? When you wake up, come over to the house.”

Yes, it felt right. Maybe this was why she hadn’t cleaned out her baby girl’s room yet. God knew Garrett would need it.

Chapter Two

An explosion rattled the walls. Garrett jerked straight up from sleep. No, not an explosion, just another nightmare. He threw back the heavy blanket and sat on the edge of the bed. Avoiding the frayed braided rug, he made sure to plant his bare feet on the cold tile floor. Taking several deep breaths, he anchored himself

in Clear Water, Texas. In the present. Sand blew against the roof. Grinding his back molars, he buried his fingers in his hair. Not sand. Afghanistan belonged in his past. The thin glass in his window shuddered under the force of the violent wind outside.

The sound that had woken him penetrated the room again. Not in his head, but outside. A hefty storm was making a fuss and building power. Barefoot, he left the bedroom and walked across the apartment. The security light keeping it from being too dark to see. Opening the French doors, he stood at the threshold of the small balcony. Tiny bits of hail had collected on the deck. A few minuscule chunks pelted him. His thin T-shirt offered little protection from their sting.

He blinked, confused by a cloth flapping in the desert wind, twisting around a group of kids playing soccer. His fingers closed around the iron railing. It was cold, hard...real. He inhaled, pushing his lungs to their limit. With eyes shut, Garrett fought to get his mind back to the here and now. I am standing on my balcony in Clear Water, Texas.

It had been a while since he'd had this type of episode. Maybe the news he'd gotten today was part of this mixed-up nightmare. He was taking full responsibility of two kids. He knew firsthand no matter what you did, bad things still happened. Another boy's smiling face and bright dark eyes came to mind. Counting breaths, he shook his head.

His mind latched on to the present, and he opened his eyes again. This time, he made sure he saw Anjelica's backyard. Even

in the dark he could still make out the miniature farm surrounded by ranches that gave the illusion of endless hills and trees. A cry came from the area of her large garden.

A bedsheet? Okay, that was real. Why was that crazy woman chasing a bedsheet across her yard in the middle of a storm? He didn't even have a sense of time. He glanced inside and saw the clock, which read 10:33 p.m. He had slept longer than he'd planned.

Shaking his head, he grabbed his trench coat and slipped on his boots. With his hat firmly planted on his head, he made his way down the stairs of the garage apartment. He knew she was a bit on the fanciful side, but this was strange behavior even for her. She had no business being outside with hail and lightning. Did she have a death wish?

By the time he walked through the gate, she was balanced halfway up the deer-proof fence, attempting to untangle the sheet from the eight-foot corner post. Her bare feet were precariously poised on the tie bar between the huge cedar post and the stay. Her new fluffball pet leaped about and barked.

“Bumper! Stop it!” She tugged at the sheet. Anjelica's long dark hair was plastered to her like a second skin, making her look more like an elf. Even standing on the tie bar, she couldn't reach the top of the corner post. Did she notice the hail? Cutoff sweatpants exposed her golden-brown skin to the elements. He shook his head as he cut across the tilled garden.

The dog finally caught the edge of the white sheet between

its teeth. “Bumper! No! Bad girl! Let go!” As she tried to pull the sheet away from the Yorkie, Little Miss Sunshine lost her balance.

Garrett rushed to catch her. She landed in his arms with an “Oomph.” Lightning streaked across the sky as he ran for her covered back porch. He counted the seconds between seeing the flash and hearing the thunder. Five seconds. Too close for comfort. His arms tightened their hold when she started wiggling. “Hold still or I’ll drop you.” She might be small, but she struggled against him with toned muscles.

He leaped up the three steps and under the eclectic collection of ceramic wind chimes that lined her porch. Their musical notes sounded angry tonight.

“No! No, I have to cover the bush! The hail’s gonna destroy it.” “You don’t have any shoes on, and even small hail can be dangerous.” Once he had her bare feet on the boards, he looked into her large eyes to check their dilation for signs of a concussion. Her irises were so dark he couldn’t see her pupils in the dim light.

Maybe she already had brain damage. Another bright light flashed, and for a split second he could see everything as if it was high noon. He saw a thick heavy scar that ran across the base of her neck. The soft edge disappeared into her hairline by her cheek. Then he was blinded again just as quickly. Was that why she always wore a scarf?

She tried to push past him. “I’ve got to cover my plant before

it's destroyed.”

The ceramic chimes thrashed in a sudden gust of wind, and it was hard to hear over all the noise. “No, stay here.” He made a gesture to her head and feet, hoping she understood. “I’ll cover the plant.”

Pulling his hat low, he ran back into the storm and crossed the yard to retrieve the sheet. The dog followed, leaping and barking like they were playing a game.

“Bumper, get back here,” Anjelica yelled from the top step. The undisciplined dog ignored her.

With one hard yank, he had the sheet down. The two-foot bush had already lost some of its early growth. Small leaves dotted the ground. Using the wind to help, he threw the sheet over the top of the plant. Then Garrett looked around for something to anchor it.

“Here, use these.” Anjelica ran past him to pick up some red bricks lining the bottom of the fence. At least she had mud boots and a hat on this time, along with a bright orange scarf wrapped around her neck.

The pelts of hail grew harder. He tucked his head and drew his shoulders higher. He was apparently as crazy as his landlady.

The dog pulled on the sheet, tossing her head back and forth with a growl. The furball could fit in his pocket but fought with the fierceness of a lion. The pink bow did nothing to soften her attitude.

“I’ve got this!” Garrett pointed toward her porch, hoping she would follow his command. She shook her head and moved to

the base of the bush with a brick.

“Bumper! Stop!” The dog darted away from Anjelica and grabbed another corner.

Garrett scooped the bit of fluff up in one hand, holding the pup out of the way while he tucked the heavy sheet around a brick with the other, making sure it was under the bush and tight enough to stay in place.

On the opposite side of the shrub, his tiny landlady crawled out from under the plant and put her hands on her hips. “I think that’ll do it,” she yelled before finally running back to the safety of the deep porch.

He followed. One step behind her, he tried to shield her from the worst of the storm.

Once on the porch, she threw her beat-up hat on a bench, then sat on a worn rocking chair and pulled off a boot. She wore two left rubber boots. One of them had colorful stripes, but the other one was purple with white flowers all over it. Yep, she lived in another world altogether.

“Glad you found proper footwear.”

Waving a delicate hand toward her yard, she said, “This wasn’t in the weather report. I couldn’t find my boots when I realized it was starting to hail.” She pulled off the purple boot and dumped water out of it. “My only thought was to get to my Esperanza. It just started sprouting spring leaves.”

She never made eye contact as she flipped her hair over her shoulder. Wet, it looked black. Instead of the usual colorful

blouse, she wore an oversize faded purple T-shirt with Fighting Angoras Football printed across the front. “I know it sounds irrational, but I just wanted to cover my plant.” With a deep sigh, she stood. “Thank you so much for coming to the rescue, but I guess that’s what you do. Rush into danger like a good soldier.” She stood and took Bumper from him. The little dog started licking her face. “You know, now that you’re a father, you’ll have to be more careful.”

His eyebrow lifted high as he stared at her. “Did you really just call me out for being in this storm? I wouldn’t be out in the storm if you had stayed inside.”

She blushed and looked away. “Sorry. I’m not feeling very rational right now.” With the back of her free hand, she wiped at her eyes.

Oh, please don’t cry. He scanned her cluster of outbuildings and enclosed pens behind the garden area, a mismatched collection of painted structures that housed chickens, rabbits and goats. She was the mayor of a miniature village for all the misfit farm animals in the county, and now he was adding two children to the mix. He shouldn’t be surprised she had easily agreed to him moving the kids into the garage apartment. She collected damaged goods. “Looks like everyone else is safe from the storm.” That should make her happy.

She rewarded him with a smile. Nodding, she kissed the top of the silky mop’s head. “My dad bragged he built those to withstand a tornado.”

The hail was larger now, dime-sized nuggets zinging off the tin roof like ricocheting bullets, putting his nerves on edge. He took a deep breath. He was in Clear Water, Texas. Far from war.

At least tornadoes were rare in the Hill Country. He took off his own hat and slapped it against his leg. Chips of ice clattered to the wood flooring. Calling the weather in Texas unpredictable was the definition of understatement.

It wouldn't surprise him if he found a few bruises in the morning. He pushed his hair back. The little froufrou dog ran over to him and put a paw on his muddy boot. The clipped tail wagged so hard its whole body squirmed. "Bumper?"

Anjelica smiled at the wet rat. "I found her just the other day on Bumper Gate Road. I put an ad in the local paper, but no one's come to claim her."

Standing in front of him, she moved in for a hug before he realized what she had planned. "Thank you for saving my plant. I do think you'll do a fine job as a father."

His jaw clenched. He had never been a touchy hugging kind of guy, but he'd been hugged more times in the few months since he'd moved to Clearwater than he had his entire life. He remained still, not wanting to offend her by pulling away.

Kids liked hugs, too. He remembered wanting to be in his mother's lap, but she had always been too tired or too busy. He managed to lift an arm and give her a pat on the shoulder, hopefully not too stiff. She shivered in his arms. They were both cold and wet. "You need to go inside and change."

She backed up and grinned at him as if she'd made a new friend. "Thank you, Officer Kincaid. Um, now that you're a father, you might think of a less dangerous job?"

He frowned. "I like my job."

Another flash of lightning. He counted again, one Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi. A golf ball of solid ice landed at his feet. He narrowed his eyes and then looked at the path back to his apartment. The trip back to the garage wasn't far, but with that last bolt of lightning, he doubted it was wise to run across the yard again. He looked at his watch. It had taken him a couple of hours to go to sleep, but he had been out for seven hours.

"Officer Kincaid—"

"Call me Garrett."

"Oh!" She grabbed his arm. "Now is as good a time as any to show you the baby equipment."

She leaned in closer, and the smell of vanilla and earth intrigued his nose. The lyrical sound of her voice tickled his ear. "Promise not to tell my parents I was outside in this weather. My mom would have a fit and Papa would tell me to move back home, again. They wouldn't like that I'd go that far for a simple shrub."

He had a feeling there was nothing simple about the shrub.

"Come on." She turned and opened the screen door.

Garrett followed her and crossed over the well-trodden threshold. In his line of work, he'd been in about every kind of housing, but this was straight out of a children's picture book.

Alice's rabbit hole had nothing on this girl.

It was everything his apartment wasn't. The old farmhouse had a huge kitchen. A family of ten could easily sit at the table.

Even though the cabinets were painted white, splashes of color touched everything. More ceramic creatures hung from strings, while others lined the windows and cabinets.

"Sorry about the mess. I made a big batch of tortilla soup earlier tonight to share with my grandparents and a few other people in town. Then an idea struck, and I ended up in my ceramic studio before I cleaned. Have you eaten since lunch? Here, let me get you some." Without waiting for his reply, she loaded a ceramic bowl with the aromatic soup. Fresh herbs and spices filled the kitchen. His stomach grumbled in anticipation.

She pulled a spoon out of the dishwasher and moved to the table. "Here, sit down and eat. I'll slice an avocado and heat you up a corn tortilla. What do you want to drink? I have milk, sweet tea and water."

"Water's fine." Before he got the first spoonful of soup to his lips, she had a small plate with avocados and thin corn chips on the table next to him. Another trip and she handed him a warm tortilla and a tall glass of ice water.

"I'll put some in a container for you to take to the apartment for later." She set a blue bowl on the counter, then dug around in the cabinets. "I'm the only person that lives here, and I still can't find a lid." Pulling out a red one, she held it up and smiled at him. "Found one." She snapped the red lid onto the blue bowl.

Of course she did. Why start matching now? “Please sit and eat with me.”

With the dog bouncing about her feet, she sat down across from him. She slid the plastic bowl his way.

“Thanks.” He dunked the tortilla into the warm soup. He didn’t want to waste time with forming more words. He had fallen in love. He closed his eyes and savored the rich flavors on his tongue.

“I’m the one that’s grateful. Thank you for braving the storm and helping me cover Esperanza.”

He opened his eyes. He really shouldn’t have been surprised by anything she said. “You name your plants?”

She smiled again, but this time it was a little tighter, not as bright. “It’s an Esperanza plant, the same name as my daughter. I planted it as a memorial for her.”

Great going, Garrett. “Well, it’s a beautiful plant. And a beautiful name. It means hope, right?” He cleared his suddenly dry throat. “Looks like we covered it in time.”

Maybe he should leave...instead of staring at her like an idiot. Obviously, she no longer had her daughter. The baby stuff she said she had, it must have been...another reminder that children couldn’t always be protected from bad things. And now he was responsible for two who already had a tragic backstory. He took a deep breath and set the spoon down, his appetite gone. “Thanks for the soup.”

“I’m glad I had it here for you. Are you finished?”

A nod was all he managed. She took everything to the sink. The lights flickered as the thunder rolled through the house. She tilted her head toward the ceiling. “Doesn’t sound like it’s letting up.” The lights wavered again. “Follow me—I’ll show you the baby stuff I have ready for you and Pilar.” She walked through an archway that took them into a living room. Several mix-and-match sofas and chairs made for a welcoming room. He was surprised by the white sofa. The red floral sofa he expected, but the white one? How did she keep it clean? He didn’t know anyone who actually dared to have white furniture. Red, white and blue pillows and blankets were everywhere. Yellow flowers were tucked into odd containers all over the room. It looked well lived-in, the site of years of family events and memories.

“I’ve been wanting to tell you how much I appreciate you playing the sax on the balcony. When I’m working in the studio, I open my door to listen. You should come to church with me one Sunday. Pastor John is really into music. Did you ever play in a band?”

He nodded and followed her around the furniture that looked as if they’d been salvaged from an old barn. “All through school, and when I joined the Marines, I played for them, too.”

“Wow.” She stopped in front of a floor-to-ceiling bookcase and looked up at him, making him feel taller than his six-one. “I would have taken you for a football player, you know, the warrior type. I don’t think of soldiers as musicians. Do you play any other instruments?” She tilted her head as if trying to recalibrate what

she knew about him.

“I was a total band geek, marching and jazz. I play some strings, too, but I prefer the sax. I didn’t get any size on me until later in high school—I wasn’t a jock.” He cleared his throat. She looked as if she wanted to add him to her collection of odd animals now.

He glanced at the shelf behind her, and a wooden display with a folded flag caught his eye. The flag sat above some medals and a picture of a young Hispanic male in dress blues. Next to that was a wedding picture. A very young Anjelica in a white wedding dress standing in the arms of the same soldier. Letters were etched into the wood: Estevan Diego Garza.

She turned and looked behind her. “Oh, that’s my husband, Steve.”

“He was a marine, too.” Way to go and state the obvious, Garrett.

“Yes, one of the heroes that didn’t come home.” Graceful fingers touched the picture. “Being a hero was his life’s dream. He planned to become a firefighter or EMT when he got home.” A bright flash flooded the room in blinding light. Then everything went dark and silent.

He reached out to touch her arm, but the lights were on again and she had her happy face back in place. “I’m sorry. I’m going on and on. You’re here to see the baby stuff.” A few steps and she opened a white painted door.

Nerves started crawling again. Garrett’s skin became too tight

for his body. The urge to escape and go back to his simple rooms had him feeling edgy. There was nothing wrong with beige. Beige was calming, very calming. A peaceful color for kids who needed a quiet place to heal. He liked quiet places.

Concern in her eyes, Anjelica placed a gentle touch on his arm. "Are you okay?"

She was the one who'd lost her soldier and a baby, but she was worried about him?

"I'm good. We need to get this settled so I can figure out the next steps I need to take to make this right."

"Garrett, it's not your fault the way things played out."

A corner of his mouth twitched. She actually had him smiling. "I don't think that's what you were thinking earlier."

"Guilty. Sometimes we dive headfirst into conclusions and judge too fast. Sorry. So are you ready to see the stuff?"

"Lead the way."

* * *

Anjelica stood at her daughter's door. She had put so much planning and time into decorating this space. Each step had been documented and sent to Steve, along with images of her growing belly.

Five years ago, she spent hours in that rocking chair, crying until every part of her body ached. After a while, she was able to visit the room without crying. The sadness was still there, but softer. The last few months, she kept telling herself to call her mom and sisters so they could help her pack it up.

Now she knew God had another plan for this room. “Garrett, most of what Pilar will need is here.” She turned on the overhead light and waited for him to join her.

In the middle of the room, she stopped and took a deep breath before she turned back to him. “This would have been Esperanza’s room. Nothing has ever been used.”

Garrett stood in the doorway and scanned the room with a slow steady movement. “I can’t take your stuff from here.”

“Why not? I was to the point of packing it up. It was made for a little girl. Everything your daughter needs is waiting for her.”

His head jerked up. “She’s not my daughter.” Both hands dug into his hair, interlocking the fingers at his neck. With his head back, he closed his eyes and blew out a slow waft of air. “I guess by tomorrow she’ll be my daughter.” He closed his eyes, his jaw working twice as fast as before.

She wanted to put her arms around him and soothe the pain. Instead she stepped away and placed her hand on the quilt draped over the rocking chair. Buena had made the blanket. “Garrett, you can do this. I think God brings people into our world that need us and vice versa. It’s been heavy on my heart that all the stuff was being wasted.” She walked to the white crib that was tucked into a colorfully painted cove that had once been a closet. Pink and green triangle flags hung over the bed. “Please let me give it to Pilar and your son.”

Confusion marred his strong face as he watched her. “Why are you doing this? What do you get out of helping us?”

Adjusting the blankets they had picked out so long ago, she smiled at his cynicism. “I can’t save every child out there, but I can help you save these two.” If she wasn’t careful, she was going to cry. She feared he would misunderstand and this could all fall apart. She stiffened her spine as she turned and glared at him, making sure not to show any weakness. “Stop being so suspicious and say thank you.”

He walked around the room. Touching the rocking chair, setting it in motion. He saw the bags full of new supplies and clothes. “What’s this?”

“While you were sleeping, I called a few of my family members and ladies from the church. They gathered some stuff you’ll need for the children.”

In front of the chest of drawers, he stopped and looked at the wall.

She had painted Esperanza across the upper part of the wall, surrounded by stars and butterflies. The whole room was decorated with flowers and friendly critters, a little secret garden.

With a frown, he stared at the wall. “You painted this?”

A nod was all she managed.

He moved to the window and held the wispy sheer curtain to the side so he could look out into the storm. Wind slammed the rain against the window.

“I called my mother.”

Disappointment should not have been her first reaction, but it was. She had started thinking of them as a team when it came to

these two kids she hadn't even met yet. "Oh, so she's coming to help? You don't need me, then."

He rubbed his face. "No." He looked away, staring at the mural. "She hasn't returned my calls. It looks like I'll need someone to watch the kids. A temporary fix for now. Until I can get a place of my own and make permanent arrangements." He turned back to her. "Is there anyone in your family you recommend?"

"Me." Before he could form any words to argue against her idea, she rushed on to explain. "I've been thinking about this all day. I'm a sub at the school and I volunteer with the group home. I know what these babies have been through, so you wouldn't have to explain that to someone new. I can stop taking sub jobs and you can pay me the same daily fee, but I would be available day or night."

He looked back out the window. Lightning flashed. She forced herself to breathe and waited for him to process the options.

Well, she tried to wait. "I also had another idea. Please, listen and think about it before you respond. I think you and the kids should move into the house. It's bigger and I can live in the apartment."

She chewed on the inside of her cheek while waiting for his response.

"No." He crossed his arms. "I'm not kicking you out of your family home."

"You're not." Hands planted on her hips, she tilted her head.

“The garage is part of my family home and I actually lived there as a teenager once.”

“No. We’ll stay in the apartment. It’s fine. I’m not moving into your house.”

“Okay. Then what about hiring me as your babysitter?” She smiled. “I do think it’s important to have someone that can watch them with your crazy hours. I can be right there at a moment’s notice. The next best thing to a live-in nanny. I always wanted to be Mary Poppins.”

He didn’t say anything. He stared at her with the muscles flexing in his arms.

She broke eye contact first and rearranged some of the pillows. “You don’t have to worry about taking the kids anywhere or waiting for someone to get here. It’s perfect, right?”

“I don’t like asking for help.”

A giant eye-roll threatened to pop from her head. Stubborn men. “You didn’t have to ask for help. I’m offering. My heart is hurting for these babies. I’m so sorry your mother isn’t coming, but I think this will work out well for the children.”

He sighed. “It’s funny if you think about it.” He leaned across the crib, picking up a stuffed ladybug. “This morning I didn’t even have a girlfriend. Now I’m talking about baby furniture and hiring a nanny. Seems I skipped a few steps from bachelorhood to fatherhood.”

The sadness in his eyes ate at her heart. “God has placed these kids with you. It’s going to be okay.”

He sighed. “Are you sure you want to take us on full-time? I have a feeling these will not be well-adjusted kids.” He gave her a lazy, lopsided grin. “I know I’m not well-adjusted—I’m barely housebroken. I don’t even know what a normal family should look like.”

“Well, the one thing I’m an expert on is family, and first let me tell you, there is no such thing as normal. Believe me, I know.” She could not hold back any longer; she walked over and hugged him. His frame tightened as if in fight-or-flight mode. She held him gently until he relaxed and gave her a stiff pat on her shoulder. “Garrett, I want to help those sweet kids.”

The muscles in his forearms bulged. Head down, he backed away from her. “They might not be so sweet.” Then he nodded, his face relaxing. “Okay, so I have a stocked nursery and a nanny. This might work.” He looked up. “Thank you, Anjelica.” Halfway to the door, he stopped. “What about the boy? I need to get him a bed, too.”

“I can call around, but if nothing comes up, we have a couple of bunk beds upstairs.” She brushed past him to cross the living room but paused in the doorway. The smell of earth after a rainstorm crossed her senses. Closing her eyes, she absorbed the scent. It was rich and dark.

“Anjelica?”

Jerked out of her own head, she jumped forward and bumped into him. Large hands steadied her. “Are you okay?”

Looking up, she saw the concern in his eyes. He looked that

way a great deal when around her. He probably thought she was a complete flake and maybe he was right.

“I’m fine. We can move all the stuff in the morning.” She rushed past him. She needed some distance. That was it. Other than her family, and the one date she’d had with Jake Torres, she hadn’t been this close to a man in a long time. She’d forgotten how good they smelled, and how different they were compared to her.

“Can I use your restroom?” he asked.

“Sure—right through that door.” She pointed to the right of the staircase.

Standing in the middle of the living room, she lost her purpose. What was she doing?

Anjelica went back into the kitchen. Bumper barked, demanding attention. The little Yorkie looked like a rat just rescued from a flooded river. Anjelica grabbed a towel and rubbed down the little dog. Garrett and Steve seemed to have a great deal in common. Why did some men want to rush into danger?

Buela and Mom were always on her about getting back into the dating scene. She knew it was time. But not with Garrett. He had too much on his plate already.

The biggest problem was his job. He was a lawman and she didn’t see that changing anytime soon.

Talking to the dog, she made her way to the studio off her kitchen. “Just because I married one soldier doesn’t mean I want

another one in my life. No thank you.” She held Bumper up so they were face-to-face. “Next time around, I want a man with a nice safe job. Maybe I should warn Garrett about the matchmaking duo. Now that he’s a single father, I’m sure they have bumped him up on their list.” She chuckled. This might be fun to watch, because it was not going to be her. Nope, his job was too dangerous for her peace of mind. But she was ready to date again.

In a few months, she’d be twenty-five. On her wedding day, she had imagined life with Steve in five and ten years. He’d be back home full-time, and they’d have two or three kids. She rubbed the little dog’s head and sighed.

Si Dios quiere. Her parents had taught her that saying for her whole life, to trust in God’s will. Sometimes it was easier to say she trusted in God’s will than live like it. The wind rushed against the wall and slammed the screen door. Hail hit the roof harder and the storm whirled around the old house.

Loud banging made her jump. The wind played games with her outdoor furniture. She rushed to the door.

Garrett gently caught her by the arm. His hard face looked even sterner. “You can’t go out there.” His voice sounded like a growl. “It’s even more dangerous than before. It’s late anyway—you should go to bed.”

She narrowed her eyes and pulled her arm out of his light grip. With her hands on her hips, she lifted her chin. “I outgrew a bedtime a few years back. What about you?”

The wind manhandled the hundred-year-old oak trees around her yard. The sound sent chills up her spine. She sucked in a large volume of air as she looked out the window. The force of the storm pelted the hail into the passageway. The rain came in at such a slant, looking as if it could slice through skin.

With muttered words under his breath, Garrett pushed her farther into the kitchen. “Is there a room without so many windows?”

“My studio.” Bumper barked and jumped around her feet. “There’s just the garden doors, but I have shutters over them. It’s in there.” She pointed to the door on the other side of her table. “But my animals. What—”

“They have shelter.” He opened the door, flipped on the light and peered in. “This is good.” He took her hand and pulled her inside the studio space and closed the door.

Sitting on the wooden bench her grandfather had carved, she patted the empty spot next to her. His big frame took up the rest of the space, long legs stretched out in front of him.

Total chaos reigned outside. She often thought of the wind as a gentle lullaby at night, but not now. It expressed itself like a two-year-old in a full-blown temper tantrum, a giant two-year-old. It sounded as if trees were being tossed around.

Bumper buried her head under Anjelica’s arm. Her heart slammed against her sternum. “Dear God, please keep everyone safe.” Thunder rolled, but in the studio they couldn’t see the flashes of lightning. The walls rattled. The lights went out,

plunging them into darkness. “Oh no, I left candles in the kitchen.”

“We’ll be fine. It shouldn’t last long. We’re safer in here in case any furniture or branches get tossed into one of your windows.”

Another clap of thunder was followed by a loud crash. This time the whole earth shook. An explosion sounded too close. Had something hit the house? Blood rushed to her ears. “What was that? Oh, my babies have to be scared.”

His long fingers found her hand and took hold. “It’s okay. Good thing about Texas is the storms never last long. So this is your grandparents’ house?” His voice reached out to her, low and soothing.

She knew he was distracting her and she let him. “My great-grandparents had the property and a small house. My grandparents started this house and added on and updated as the family grew. They wanted to move into town and have a smaller place, so they sold it to Steve and me.”

As quickly as the wind had started, it was gone, the silence heavy. Anjelica held her breath and waited, but she couldn’t even hear the rain anymore. “Is the storm over?”

He squeezed her hand. “Stay here while I check the damage.” He stood. He flipped the switch, but the room stayed dark.

“I’m going with you.”

He frowned and opened his mouth, then shook his head. “Stay close to me. There could be lines down. We don’t want to rush out and make things worse. Trees and structures could still fall.”

Bumper squirmed in her arms. “Let me put her in the washroom and get the flashlights.”

As they exited the back door, she gasped. Her world had been turned upside down. She prayed she’d find everyone safe and sound.

Garrett’s warmth and solidness comforted her. Looking around, she found most of the rocking chairs and some of her wind chimes were missing. Broken pieces of ceramic projects littered the ground. Frantically scanning for the piece celebrating her wedding and then pregnancy, she didn’t find it. It was her favorite, whimsical shapes and swirls with sunflowers, frogs and butterflies in an asymmetrical layout.

She gasped. Large pieces of it were scattered across the porch. She found one of the frogs on the bottom step. She picked it up and ran her thumb along the jagged edge where the leg had been.

Garrett rushed to her side. “What is it? Are you okay?”

She nodded. “Sorry. It’s one of my wind chimes. I started this one when we bought the house. Each section was tied to a memory.” She made sure to smile at him. “It’s just an object, right? The memories are in my heart. Let’s make sure everyone’s all right. That’s the important thing. Not broken pieces of clay.”

“Are you sure?” He looked back at the porch. “Was it the one with the big sunflower and bugs?”

She had to laugh. “Yes, butterflies, ladybugs and frogs. Steve loved frogs. He always had a pet one growing up. He wanted to put a pond for frogs on the property. I didn’t want the cleanup or

risk to children. I was going to decorate the nursery with frogs if we had a boy.” She closed her eyes and gathered her thoughts. “I’m sorry—this doesn’t matter.”

“Do you want to gather it up?”

“No, it... We need to take care of my poor babies.”

The beams of their flashlights scanned the area. Debris, both natural and man-made, cluttered the yard. As they walked past the empty garden, she let out her breath with a sigh of relief. Her pens and outbuildings all stood strong. He followed her to each shed and helped her check the huddled groups of animals. Everyone was safe and accounted for. Her father would be proud of his work.

Garrett’s phone went off. Glancing down, he pulled his lips tight. “I need to go. We have low water crossings that need to be barricaded.” He glanced at her little farm. “Everyone is safe for now. You stay inside until we can get someone out here to look deeper at the damage.”

He turned to the garage and stopped. There on the roof they found the reason for the loud crash.

The old hackberry tree had moved into his bedroom. Thinking of the possibilities, she felt her heart skip. “I’m so glad you came to my house.”

He gave a dry laugh and shook his head. “There has to be irony in this somehow. I just inherited two homeless kids and now it looks like I’m homeless, too.” He rubbed the back of his neck.

“No, you’re not. I think when you said no to my offer of the

house, God wanted you to say yes.”

“You’re joking, right?” He looked down at her.

She shrugged and gave a halfhearted laugh. “Maybe. But you have to admit my plan is sounding better now.”

“I’m still not kicking you out of your own house. Where would you live?”

“I can move into town. You could have a fully furnished house. We don’t even have to move anything.”

“No. I couldn’t live in your house while you live somewhere else. I’ll call Sharon and tell her I need more time before I pick up the kids.”

“We can’t let those babies stay in emergency care. If you refuse to live in my house, I could call my family and have the roof fixed in less than twenty-four hours. You know there aren’t a great deal of rental options in Clear Water.” She tucked her hand into the bend in his arm and leaned in close. “Si Dios quiere.”

“Did you just say he wants God?”

“No. It’s a saying that means to trust in God’s will. My grandmother and mother say it all the time. It’s drilled into my brain. Si Dios quiere. It’s how I try to live my life. The worse things get, the more I lean on that trust.”

“I don’t trust easily.” He was looking straight ahead. The muscle in his jaw popped. “My son probably doesn’t trust men at all. Will you go with me? I’m sure they have issues, too, and men would be on the top of the list. You, being the nanny, might help them feel safer.”

“I would love to.”

He nodded and patted her hand. “Okay. Don’t worry about the roof.” He waved to the apartment. “I’ll take care of it after I get off work.”

“You don’t worry about this.” She made a bigger wave. “You worry about rescuing the good people of the county and I’ll take care of my property. You are about to discover the power of the Ortega army. Be very happy we are on your side.” She gave him her best wicked laugh. “My father and brothers will have all this cleaned up and fixed before you can drive your patrol car around the county three times.”

He looked at her one more time. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yes, I’m stronger than I look. I promise.” She’d learned the hard way how strong she could be. Now she hoped she was strong enough to make the right choices for her heart. She wasn’t sure how much more it could take.

Si Dios quiere. I’m trusting You, God.

Chapter Three

Anjelica looked at her hands clasped tightly around the handle of the bag she had packed for the two little ones they were about to take home. Garrett pulled his truck into the empty parking lot of a nondescript brick building. It didn’t even have windows on the front, just one glass door.

During the forty-five-minute trip to town, she told her heart not to get too engaged. These were his children. His family, not hers. She was just the nanny. But still, the pictures of those

innocent faces embedded themselves in her head. She had a feeling that in the end, her heart would be broken again. She was never the kind of person who could keep an emotional distance. With her, it was always all in or not. How did someone teach their heart portion control?

Garrett cut the engine. He leaned over the steering wheel and looked at the sky. "I can't believe how fast this has happened."

"You made it easy for her to move the kids from an emergency shelter to a home. I'm sure she wishes all her cases were this easy." She checked her watch again. "We're early."

With a glance to the backseat, he opened the top button of his starched blue shirt. His black cowboy hat and jeans looked sharp. "Well, I guess it's time to fill those car seats." He cleared his throat. "Thank you for all you've done so far."

"How could I not help?" Waiting for him to move out of the truck, she sat in silence. Her attention went to her watch again.

Thirty minutes early. If he needed to sit out in the parking lot, she could do that, but she really wanted to see the kids.

"Okay." With one hand on the door, he turned to her. "Are you ready?"

She bit back a laugh and just nodded. He was a mess. She imagined a first-time dad might react the same way with the birth of his child. But for him, skipping those first few years probably made it harder.

The heat off the black asphalt threatened to melt her makeup. Garrett held the glass door open for her as he pulled on his collar.

“It’s unusually warm for March.”

Nodding, she entered a sterile and empty lobby. Green vinyl chairs lined a paneled wall. Above them were posters depicting women and children, along with warning signs of abuse or neglect. A narrow corridor led to rows of more doors.

Without any hesitation, Garrett started down the hallway. At the far end, Sharon and an older man stepped out from one of the rooms. “Oh, Officer Kincaid, you’re early. Good. The children are here. This is Joe Ackerman. He’s your new caseworker.”

The men shook hands and everyone else was introduced. Half of the wall behind Garrett was glass, so they could clearly see inside what looked like a conference room.

The man stepped back through the door and spoke with a woman who stood inside holding an infant car seat. A little boy sat in an oversize chair, his feet dangling above the floor as his small hand hung over the side of the yellow blanket covering the baby.

Anjelica touched Garrett’s arm. Looking down, he raised his eyebrows at her. She pointed to the brother and sister. “There they are.” Not sure why she was whispering, Anjelica shifted her gaze between the man standing next to her and the little boy who looked so much like him.

His forearm tensed under her hand. He stopped talking and became still. Nothing moved.

Sharon broke the silence. “Are you ready to meet them?” She turned to look at the kids.

Garrett took in a deep breath. He licked his lips and his throat worked as if he were trying to swallow. Anjelica wanted to wrap him in her arms.

Sharon continued talking, apparently oblivious to his struggles. “He attended the Head Start program. We know he can speak Spanish and English, but he hasn’t spoken since they’ve been in custody. They documented that his oral development is behind, but that isn’t unusual for a dual-language child. Pilar is physically behind. She’s not sitting up on her own yet. There are small developmental delays, but they look to be more environmental.” She sighed and looked back at the kids. “He’s protective of his sister and gets very upset if he can’t see her. There are several signs of general neglect.”

“Such as?” Garrett asked without taking his eyes off the children.

“He knows how to make her bottle and dress them both, and he can work a microwave. We have found him changing her diaper. For a five-year-old, that indicates to us that he was the caregiver.”

Had she just heard him growl?

Anjelica’s fingers tightened around his arm. Garrett’s other hand came up and covered hers.

“He’s been appointed a child psychologist. He’s experienced a traumatic event and will need time to heal and feel safe. You’ll need patience in large supplies.” She looked at Garrett and smiled. “I’m so relieved you’re letting us place Pilar with you.

I'm not sure Rio would survive being separated from his sister."

Garrett nodded. "Rio?"

"At Head Start they called him Garrett, but we've discovered his grandmother called him Rio. The rest of the family called him River. What do you want to call him?" Sharon looked through the window at the kids.

Garrett shrugged. "We could ask him what he wants to be called. If he wants Garrett, I'll go by something else. Can we go in now?"

Oh no. I'm not gonna cry. Anjelica let go of Garrett and squeezed her fingers together in front of her. With a count to five, she steadied her heartbeat.

He paused with his hand on the door. "What do I say?"

Sharon gave him a soft smile. "Keep it simple. I'll introduce you. But still tell him who you are and what's going to happen in small steps. Don't lie or make promises you can't keep."

With a nod, he walked through the door. Anjelica followed but hung back, staying close to the wall. She needed to proceed slowly. This was his time to bond with the kids. As much as she wanted to hold that baby girl, she was only a temporary babysitter. The hired help.

The mini Garrett tucked his feet under himself and hovered over his sister. His curly dark hair hung in his face, hiding his eyes. The baby appeared to be asleep. She looked too small for a ten-month-old.

Anjelica watched as Sharon and Garrett approached the little

boy. The small body froze, becoming unnaturally still. He didn't look at them directly but from the corner of his eye.

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