



THE RANCHER'S
MIRACLE BABY

April Arrington

 *Cherish*™

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The Rancher's Miracle Baby

Аннотация

EVERY MIRACLE HAS A PRICE Barrel racer Tammy Jenkins has outrun a lot of things in her life. A tornado is not one of them. She barely manages to find shelter and safety at the ranch of a handsome stranger, but the storm is swift and merciless in its destruction. Now Tammy's cowboy hero needs her help caring for a newly orphaned baby boy. Alex Weston had given up on ever having a family of his own. However, with the arrival of Tammy and the baby, his home is suddenly brightened by laughter, warmth and Tammy's graceful beauty. As much as his heart aches for more, Alex knows this is a temporary arrangement. Baby Brody needs a real family—something Tammy deserves, too. But can Alex let them go?

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“I thought you never used this room...”

Alex's soft breath tickled her neck. “I don't,” he whispered. “But I'll make an exception for Brody.”

He swept the flashlight over the interior of the room, highlighting baby blue walls, a wooden chest, rocking chair, changing table and...a crib.

She turned her head, stilling as her lips brushed the rough stubble of his jaw. Heart pounding, she fought the desire to nuzzle her cheek against his skin and asked, “Why do you have —”

“Nothing was damaged in here,” he said, voice husky. “The crib sheets are in the chest, and once you get Brody settled, you can have my room to yourself for the night.”

“But, Alex—”

“Not tonight, okay?” He lowered his head, his mouth moving against her temple and his broad palm settling on her hip. “Let’s just get some rest. We all need it.”

Of its own accord, her body sank back against his. She fit perfectly, his wide chest and muscular thighs cradling her as though she belonged there.

Had he lost a child?

Was that why he was no longer married?

The Rancher’s Miracle Baby

April Arrington



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APRIL ARRINGTON grew up in a small Southern town and developed a love for movies and books at an early age. Emotionally moving stories have always held a special place in her heart. April enjoys collecting pottery and soaking up the Georgia sun on her front porch.

Visit April at [Twitter.com/april_arrington](https://twitter.com/april_arrington) or [Facebook.com/authoraprilarrington](https://facebook.com/authoraprilarrington).

Dedicated to Patricia B. of Alabama

This writing life is tough. Knowing you’re on the other side of the page changes everything and helps me make it to The End.

You are a treasured reader, and the world is a great deal more beautiful with you in it.

Thank you for your sweet messages and for always reading.

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[Chapter One](#)

Tammy Jenkins had managed to outrun a lot of things in life. But this had her beat.

“If you’re on the road, we urge you to take shelter immediately.” The truck’s radio crackled, and static scrambled the urgent male voice coming through the speakers. “...summer outbreak...multiple tornadoes spotted. We’ve received reports of funnel clouds touching down in Leary County, Georgia. The most recent...forming...Deer Creek community.”

Deer Creek. Tammy gripped the steering wheel tighter, recalling the crooked green sign she’d passed a few miles back. The bent edges and bullet hole through the center had obscured some of the letters, but the words were legible enough.

A high-pitched neigh and sharp clang split her ears. She glanced in the side-view mirror and cringed as the trailer attached to the truck rocked to one side, squeaking and groaning.

“It’s okay, girl,” Tammy called out. “I’ll find somewhere to stop soon.”

Razz, her barrel-racing horse, had experienced her fair share of close calls. And just like when they were about to take a tumble in the arena, the mare sensed danger approaching.

Tammy looked past the trailer and studied the darkening horizon behind them. The wall of black clouds gathered momentum, increasing in size and staining the sky. It swallowed up the dying light of the late-afternoon sun, and a green hue bled through the inky darkness. Thick grass lining both sides of the isolated road rippled with each powerful surge of wind.

Sour acid crept up the back of Tammy’s throat, parching her mouth. She jerked her eyes forward, refocused on the road

and slammed her foot harder onto the accelerator. The engine rumbled, and the broken yellow line splitting the paved highway streamed by in a blur.

“No need to panic,” she said, nodding absently. “It’s July. These storms blow over faster than they appear. I’ll just have to outrun it before it gets started.”

She grinned. If there was one thing she was good at, it was racing. Heck, she didn’t have a gold buckle in the glove compartment and over three hundred grand in her savings account for nothing. And there hadn’t been a cloud in the sky this morning when she’d left Alabama and crossed the Georgia state line. Chances were, she and Razz would reach their destination earlier than planned.

Her smile slipped. She just wished she’d stayed on the busy interstate instead of cutting through a backwoods town. Especially one that was eerily similar to her rural hometown without a soul in sight.

But the empty road she’d taken was a shortcut. And loneliness had driven her to do what it had always done—made her act before thinking.

A second round of strong kicks rocked the trailer again and reverberated against the metal walls. The clouds looked darker than ever in the rearview mirror.

Calm down. She straightened and glanced at the trailer. Razz couldn’t hear or understand her, but talking to the horse would at least keep Tammy from freaking out.

“We’ll pull over somewhere, ride it out and be at Raintree Ranch before you know it, Razz.” Tammy forced a laugh, seeking comfort in the sound of her own voice. A strategy she’d been forced to adopt as a child and still utilized at twenty-five. “Jen will be so glad to see you.”

Her strained words fell into the empty cab and put a sinking feeling in her stomach. Lord, she wished Jen was with her now, sitting in the passenger seat and teasing her about speeding. A former barrel racer and Tammy’s best friend, Jen Taylor had always made traveling the rodeo circuit feel like home. But a year ago, Jen had gotten engaged, retired from racing and settled on Raintree Ranch in Georgia. And for the first time in eight years, Tammy no longer felt like she belonged on the circuit.

Instead, she felt alone. More alone than she cared to admit.

“Suck it up, girl,” Tammy muttered, studying the highway. “There’s no bawling on Sunday, and there are too many things to be grateful for. Think about taffeta and veils. Flowers and cakes. Rings and vows.”

Jen’s wedding was worth a bit of bad weather, and with it only a month away, Tammy was determined to be the best dang maid of honor on earth. After scoring another big win in the arena, she’d left the circuit to help Jen finalize seating arrangements, accompany her to a final wedding gown fitting and plan the most fantastic bachelorette party ever known to woman. All in preparation for the bright future awaiting Jen.

A future that included a husband, a home and, eventually, the

many children Jen planned to have. Babies Tammy had been asked to serve as godmother to and hoped to shower with love one day.

Tammy's smile returned, her spirits lifting. Her best friend was getting married. Starting a family. "Babies," she whispered.

Fat raindrops splattered against the dusty windshield in quick succession, then stopped as abruptly as they'd begun. Tammy flipped the wipers on, wincing as the rubber jerked noisily over the glass, smearing brown streaks of dirt in her line of vision. A vicious clap of thunder boomed against the ground beneath them and vibrated her sunglasses on the dashboard.

The angry storm wasn't just gaining on them—it was gnashing at their heels.

"It's not that bad, Razz," she said over the rumbles of thunder. "Just a little wind and rain."

Her eyes flicked over the empty landscape surrounding her. There were weeds, trees and fields but no houses or cars. There were no people. No signs of life. And nothing but static left on the radio.

Tammy swallowed hard, mouth trembling. "We need to pull over."

That was what the guy on the radio had said. That was what all news reporters blared in warning as tornadoes approached. It was safer to stop and get out of the vehicle. But the idea of lying facedown in a ditch with nothing but jeans and a T-shirt separating her from the elements was too terrifying to imagine.

And there was no way she could leave Razz in the trailer. She needed to find shelter for the mare. A stable or barn. Anything that would give Razz a stronger chance of survival than just running.

“There’s got to be something soon.” She peered ahead and willed the truck faster up the hill. “We’ll just...”

Her voice faded as several white balls tumbled across the road several feet ahead. Some bounced over the pavement and rolled into the grass. Others flew through the air sideways, never touching the ground. Dozens of them. One after the other.

Baseballs...?

She shook her head at the foolish thought, a panicked laugh escaping her. There were no kids playing outside in this weather. And there were no baseball games nearby—

One struck the windshield, punching a hole through the glass and leaving a jagged web of cracks. Tammy stifled a scream and glanced at the passenger seat. Her chest clenched at the thick ball of ice wedged between the door and the seat.

She gritted her teeth and faced forward, blinking rapidly against the wind stinging her eyes through the gaping hole in the windshield. “Everything’s okay, Razz.” Her voice pitched higher as she shielded her face with one hand. “I’m gonna get us somewhere safe.”

The pounding kicks from inside the trailer intensified as hail hammered the truck and trailer. Razz cried out, the sound primal and fierce, and the trailer took a sharp swing to the left.

Tammy grappled with the steering wheel, fighting the wind and managing to redirect the truck's path. Mercifully, the hail stopped, and she sped over the crest of the hill and down the other side.

Two dirt driveways appeared ahead, one on either side of the road and framed by a line of trees. There were no houses visible, but both roads had to lead somewhere. And wherever they ended, there had to be a better chance of shelter there than on the barren highway.

“Which one?”

Tammy hesitated, eyeing each entrance and catching sight of a wooden fence lining the dirt road on the right. A fence was promising. It meant a house might follow and, hopefully, people.

“Right.” She shouted the word, demanding her stiff fingers loosen their death grip on the wheel long enough to make the turn.

She slammed her foot on the accelerator again, turning her face to the side as a fresh surge of rain flew through the busted windshield, smacking against her cheeks. The truck bounced over the uneven ground, jerking her around in the cab and slinging her bottle of soda from the low cup holder to the floorboard.

Tammy ducked her head, rubbed her wet face against her soggy shirtsleeve, then braved the lash of the rain again to scrutinize the end of the driveway.

There was a house, a truck...and a stable.

“Thank God,” she whispered, jerking the truck to a stop. “We’re going to be okay, Razz.”

Tammy laid on the horn, then shoved the door open with her shoulder, forcing it out against the wind. No one emerged from the house, and there was no movement outside.

Please. Oh, please let someone be here.

“Help!” She pounded her fist on the horn twice more before jumping out of the cab.

Her boots slid over the slick mud of the driveway, and she gripped the hard metal of the truck, forcing her way through the violent gusts of wind to the trailer.

Razz jerked her head against the open slats. Her dark eyes widened in panic, stark against the black and white markings surrounding them.

“I’m right here.” Tammy strived for a calm tone as the spray of wind and rain whipped her bare neck and arms. “I won’t leave you.”

She ducked her head and continued, making it to the back end and grabbing the latch on the gate. There were deep dents and dings where the hail had hit, making it difficult to pry the door open.

Razz cried out and thrashed against the walls of the trailer. Each panicked act from the horse sent a wave of dread through her.

“I know.” Tammy jerked harder at the handle, the bent metal cutting into the sensitive flesh of her palms. “I’m gonna get you

out, I promise.”

A strange stillness settled around the truck, and the lashing rain stopped. She froze, her hand tightening around the latch.

Moments later, a distant rumble sounded at her back, the rhythmic roar growing louder with each lurch of her heart. Tammy slowly turned and peeled the wet strands of her hair from her eyes with shaky fingers.

There it was. A towering funnel, churning less than a mile away across the landscape, lifting above the hill she and Razz had just traveled over and bearing down on the other side of the road. Its snakelike outline widened with each passing second, growing in size and tearing across the landscape opposite her.

She stood, transfixed, as her eyes tracked its powerful spin. Trees hid its base, but large chunks of debris lifted higher into the air with each second, floating on the outskirts of the black spiral before hurtling to the ground.

The jagged objects were too big and solid to be bits of vegetation. They flipped and twirled like confetti and loose pieces of paper, but they looked firm and heavy. Definitely man-made.

“Oh, no.” Tammy’s strangled whisper sounded foreign even to her own ears.

Broken beams of wood. Fragmented sections of brick walls. All pieces of a home. There’d been a house at the end of the other driveway, too. And, possibly...people.

Her heart stalled. “No...”

The trees standing at the base of the twister bent, touched the ground, then disappeared into the black swirl of wind. A fierce chorus of cracks and growls erupted into the air, and the furious churning of wind howled across the field.

Tammy squinted in confusion when the sidetracking motion of the tornado stopped. It was odd. There was movement. Large chunks of debris still twirled with the powerful twister, lifting and lowering with each roar of wind. But, somehow, it was standing still.

How could—

Her muscles seized. It wasn't standing still. The twister had shifted its path and was heading across the field again. In her direction.

She spun back to the trailer and jerked on the latch violently. "Help! Please!"

The wind swept away her cry, her lungs burning as Razz's kicks rocked the trailer.

Tammy squatted low and yanked harder on the handle, her heart hammering painfully. She needed to run to the house. But to leave Razz without a chance—

"Please." She pulled harder, her arms screaming in protest.

A shrill noise erupted at her side. Something flashed in the air—flat and silver—then slammed into her temple, knocking her to the ground.

Tammy blinked hard, a sharp pain slicing through her head and a flash of light distorting her vision. Wetness trickled down

her cheek.

Touching a trembling hand to it, she stared at the dark sky above her and noted the absence of rain. The white spots dancing in front of her eyes cleared, and she pulled her hand from her face and held it up. Red coated her palm.

“It’s just blood, Razz,” she whispered amid the mare’s cries, studying the black clouds through the gaps in her spread fingers.

A hard blow to the head. That was all. Something her father had doled out on a daily basis by the time she’d reached sixteen.

A large shape shifted, moving above her and obscuring the dark clouds. Tammy lowered her palm and her gaze locked with a pair of stormy gray eyes.

A man stared down at her, his broad shoulders and muscled girth blocking the wind. He had tanned skin and black hair sprinkled with silver. The striking mix as deep and rich as the storm overhead.

His big hands reached for her.

“My horse needs help,” she rasped, scrambling back.

His piercing gaze cut to the trailer as Razz’s kicks and desperate cries strengthened. He swung around, gripped the bent latch and wrestled the gate open. A moment later, Razz burst out of the trailer with disoriented jerks.

“Get,” he shouted, smacking the horse’s rear.

Razz leaped and took off, galloping out of sight.

“Come on.” He yanked Tammy to her feet, tucked her tight to his side and ran across the front lawn toward the house.

Tammy pumped her legs hard, keeping up with his powerful stride and ignoring the nausea roiling in her gut.

The massive surge of wind grew stronger at their backs, and their boots slipped repeatedly on the slick grass. They stumbled up the front steps to the door and fell to the porch floor as the vicious growl of the tornado drew closer.

This is it.

Tammy squeezed her eyes shut, the concrete pressing hard against her cheek and disjointed thoughts whipping through her mind.

She wouldn't make it to Jen's wedding. Wouldn't hug or kiss Jen's children one day. And would never get the chance to have babies of her own. It would remain the foolish dream it'd always been. The kind that belonged to a woman who'd never been able to trust a man with her body or her heart. Unrealistic and unattainable.

"Keep moving." The man's brawny arm tightened around her back as he forced his way to his knees.

Tammy looked up, her eyes freezing on his face. The strong jaw, aquiline nose and sculpted mouth belonged to a stranger. But at least she wasn't alone.

The thought was oddly comforting, and when she spoke, her voice remained steady despite the horrifying possibility she acknowledged.

"We're not going to make it."

* * *

THE HELL THEY WEREN'T.

Alex Weston balled his hand into a fist, pressed it to the porch floor and shoved to his haunches. He steadied himself against the strong surge of wind, then reached down and pulled the woman up with him.

She was soft—and strong. The slight curves of her biceps were firm underneath the pads of his fingers, and she'd matched his pace as they'd sprinted to the house. But she was slender and light. So light, each gust of wind threatened to steal her from his grasp.

“Keep moving,” he growled, ignoring the panicked flare of her green eyes and forging ahead.

Alex shoved her forward and pressed her against the wall of the house. He jerked the front door open and helped her inside, but before he could follow, the wind caught it, ripping it wide-open to the side and yanking him around with it. The sharp edges of brick cut into his back.

Wet grass and dirt sprayed his face, and he spat against it, struggling to maintain control of the door and his panic. He squinted against the bite of wind and peered across the front lawn. The tornado barreled across the driveway toward the house, sucking up the wooden posts of the fence and spitting them out. The wood sliced through the air with shrill whistles, scattering in all directions and stabbing into the ground. Each jagged plank a deadly missile.

His eyes shot to the open field, which was bare and vulnerable

in the path of the twister. He'd just released the horses from their stalls when the woman had driven up. The stable walls were sturdy but no match for the violent storm the weather forecasters had warned against. He'd hoped the horses would have a better chance of surviving if they were free to run. But he had no idea if it'd been the right decision. Was no longer even sure if he would survive the massive twister.

“Hurry.”

It was a breathless sound, almost stolen by the wind. The door jerked in his grasp as the woman leaned farther outside, pulling hard on the edge of it.

A high-pitched screech filled the air, and a piece of metal slammed into one of the columns lining the front porch. Adrenaline spiked in his veins, pounding through his blood and burning his muscles. He renewed his grip on the door, and they yanked together, succeeding in wrenching the door closed as they staggered inside.

“This way.” Alex grabbed her elbow and darted through the living room, pulling her past the kitchen and down a narrow hallway in the center of the house.

A wry scoff escaped him. His first guest in nine years—other than the Kents living across the road—and he was manhandling her to the floor.

She dropped to her knees, and Alex covered her, tucking her bent form tight to his middle and cupping his hands over the top of her head. They pressed closer to the wall as the violent sounds

increased in intensity, filling the dark stillness enfolding them. It was impossible to see anything. But the sounds...

God help him—the sounds.

Glass shattered, objects thudded and the savage roar of the wind obliterated the silence. The house groaned, and the air hissed and whistled in all directions.

Alex's muscles locked, the skin on the back of his neck and forearms prickling. His blood froze into blocks of ice, and his jaw clenched so tight he thought his teeth would shatter.

The damned thing sounded as though it was ripping the house apart. Would rip them apart.

Bursts of panicked laughter moved through his chest. This was not how he'd planned to spend his Sunday evening. He'd expected a long day of work on his ranch, a whiskey and an evening spent alone. That was the way it'd been for nine years, since the day his ex-wife left. The way he wanted it. He preferred solitude and predictability.

But there was nothing as unpredictable as the weather. Except for a woman.

"It'll pass." The woman's strained words reached his ears briefly, then faded beneath the ferocious sounds passing overhead. "It'll pass."

Hell if he knew what it was. For some reason, he got the impression she wasn't even speaking to him. That she was simply voicing her thoughts out loud. But something in her tone and the warm, solid feel of her beneath him, breathing and surviving,

made the violent shudders racking his body stop. It melted the blocks of ice in his veins, relieving the chill on his skin.

He curled closer, ducked down amid the thundering clang of debris around them and pressed his cheek to the top of the woman's head. Her damp hair clung to the stubble on his jaw, and the musty smell of rain filled his nostrils. Each of her rapid breaths lifted her back tighter against his chest, and the sticky heat of blood from the wound on her temple clung to the pads of his fingers.

"Yeah," he said, his lips brushing her ear as he did his best to shelter her. "It'll pass."

Gradually, the pounding onslaught of debris against the house ceased. The violent winds eased to a swift rush, and the deafening roar faded into the distance. Light trickled down the hallway, and the air around them stilled. The worst of it couldn't have lasted more than forty seconds. But it had felt like an eternity.

"Is it over?"

Alex blinked hard against the dust lingering in the air and lifted his head, focusing on the weak light emanating from the other room. "Yeah." He cleared his throat and sat upright, untangling his fingers from the long, wet strands of her hair. "I think so."

She slipped from beneath him, slumped back against the wall and released a heavy breath. "Thank you."

Her green eyes, bright and beautiful, traveled slowly over his face. His skin warmed beneath her scrutiny, his attention straying

to the way her soaked T-shirt and jeans clung to her lush curves and long legs.

He shifted uncomfortably and redirected his thoughts to her age. She looked young. Very young. If he had to guess, he'd say midtwenties...if that. But he'd never been good at pinning someone's age. Just like no one had ever been good at guessing his.

The dash of premature gray he'd inherited made him look older than his thirty-five years. And, hell, to be honest, he felt as old as he probably looked nowadays.

She smiled slightly. "That's pitiful, isn't it?" She shook her head, her low laugh humorless. "A cheap, two-word phrase in exchange for saving my life."

A thin stream of blood flowed from her temple over her flushed cheek, then settled in the corner of her mouth. The tip of her tongue peeked out to touch it, and she frowned.

"Here." Alex tugged a rag from his back pocket and reached for the wound on her head. "It's—"

Her hand shot out and clamped tight around his wrist, halting his movements. "What're you doing?"

He stilled, then lowered his free hand slowly to the floor. Damn, she was strong. Stronger than he'd initially thought. Even though his wrist was too thick for her fingers to wrap around, she maintained control over it. And the panic in her eyes was more than just residual effects from the tornado.

"You're cut." He nodded toward her wound, softening his tone

and waiting beneath her hard stare. “You can use this to stop the bleeding.”

Her hold on his wrist eased, and her face flooded with color. “Th-thank you.”

She took the rag from him and pressed it to her head, wincing at the initial contact, then drew her knees tightly to her chest. He studied her for a moment and touched his other palm to the floor, noting the way she kept eyeing his hands.

“I’m sorry that rag’s not clean,” he said. “I get pretty sweaty outside during the day.” He remained still. “I’m Alex. Alex Weston.”

“Tammy Jenkins.” She held the rag up briefly. “And thank you again. For everything.”

“You’ve thanked me enough.” Cringing at the gruff sound of his voice, he stood slowly and stepped back, his boots crunching over shards of glass. “We better get outside. I need to check the damage to the house before I can be sure it’s safe to be in here.”

“The house across the road,” she said softly, peering up at him. “Did someone live there?”

“Did someone live...” His heart stalled. Dean Kent, his best friend and business partner, lived there. Along with his wife, Gloria, and their eleven-month-old son. “Why? What’d you see?”

“I think it hit that house, too,” she said, dodging his eyes and shoving to her feet. “I can’t be sure how bad, but it looked like...”

Her voice faded as his boots pounded across the floor, over the porch and down the front steps. The heavy humidity clogged

his nose and mouth, making it difficult to breathe, and the frantic sprint made his lungs ache. He jumped over several small piles of debris, registering wood planks, buckets and tree limbs.

He stopped at a twisted pile of metal and absorbed the damage around him. Trees were down everywhere. Some were split in half, the remaining jagged halves stabbing into the air. His stable was in shambles, but, thankfully, the main house seemed somewhat sturdy.

It appeared as though the twister had only sideswiped his house. But Tammy's tone had suggested Dean's house had been hit head-on.

Alex darted toward his truck, but the massive tree lying over the tailgate would take time to move. Precious time he didn't have.

Tammy, breathless, jogged up behind him. "Alex—"

"Do you have your keys?"

She patted her front pocket absently, her wide eyes focused over his left shoulder. "Yes. But they won't do you any good."

He spun and stifled a curse at the sight of her truck and trailer overturned in the mud. Though the worst of the storm had passed, dark clouds still cloaked the sky, and several large drops of rain hit his cheeks and forehead. Another storm approached.

Alex gripped a thick tree limb and hefted himself over the trunk, scrambling over broken branches and shards of glass. He ran as fast as his legs would allow, his boots pounding into puddles of water and mud splashing up his jeans.

A power line was down and crisscrossed the road in a snakelike pattern. He jerked to a halt and stiffened at the sound of feet sloshing over wet ground behind him.

“Wait.” He threw out his arm and glanced over his shoulder.

Tammy skittered to a stop, her boots slipping over the mud. Her chest rose and fell with heavy breaths as she surveyed the downed power line.

Alex stood still, each heavy thump of his heart marking the seconds ticking by. To hell with it. Dean and Gloria were on the other side. He stepped carefully over each curve of the tangled line until he reached the opposite side of the road.

To his surprise, Tammy followed, her boots taking the same path as his. He waited for her to reach him safely, then they ran the rest of the way to Dean’s house.

“Dear God...” His voice left him, and his frantic steps slowed.

There was no longer a two-story house. Just a foundation filled with fragmented brick walls, massive piles of wood, shredded insulation and broken glass. There were no movements and no voices. Only the distant rumble of thunder and random plop of raindrops striking the wreckage filled the silence.

“Dean?” Alex winced. His shaky voice barely rose above the rasp of the wind. He cleared his throat and tried again. “Dean!”

No answer. He took a hesitant step forward, then another until he reached the highest pile of rubble, visually sifting through splintered doors, broken window frames and loose bricks. Dread seeped into his veins and weakened his limbs. He began walking

the perimeter, struggling to stay upright and fighting the urge to collapse on the wet ground.

Maybe they weren't home. He nodded and kept moving. They might have driven the twenty miles to town to get groceries and could still be there. He rounded what used to be the back of the house and scanned the heaps.

That was what it was—they weren't home. Thank God.

"They weren't here," he called out, turning and starting back toward Tammy. "They—"

He froze. The toe of a purple shoe stuck out beneath a toppled, broken brick wall.

Those dang shoes of yours are gonna blind me one day, Gloria.

Alex began to shake. How many times had he heard Dean tease his wife about her purple shoes? The bright ones she liked to run in every morning after they'd fed and turned out the horses?

It's not my shoes that are blinding you, baby, she would chide Dean. It's my beauty.

"Gloria?" Alex hit his knees and touched the laces with trembling fingers. He could still hear her laugh in his head. Joyful and energetic. "Gloria."

There was no answer. He gripped the edge of the bricks and heaved, barely registering Tammy dropping to his side and lifting with him. They wrestled with the weight of the brick wall, and he counted off, directing Tammy to shove with him in tandem until they managed to shift it. Huge chunks crumbled away, and the

largest section broke off to the side, revealing Dean and Gloria underneath.

Lifeless.

“No.” Alex shook his head, tuning out Tammy’s soft sobs. “This is the wrong one. This is the wrong damned house.” He shot to his feet, choked back the bile rising in his throat, then threw his head back to shout up at the dark sky. “You got the wrong one, you son of a bitch!”

The storm should’ve taken his house. It was an empty shell. A pathetic structure that would never shelter children or a married couple—his infertility had seen to the former and his ex-wife had ensured the latter. He wasn’t a father or a husband. Hell, he wasn’t even a man in the real sense of the word. And there was no bright future to look forward to in his life.

“It should’ve been me, you bastard,” he yelled, his voice hoarse and his throat raw.

Not Gloria. Not Dean. And not...Brody. His stomach heaved. Not that beautiful boy who’d just learned to walk. The son Dean had been so proud of and whom Gloria had smothered with affection.

“Alex?”

He doubled over, clamping a hand over his mouth and trying not to gag.

Tammy moved closer to his side. “I hear something, Alex.”

He glanced up. Tears marred her smooth cheeks, mingling with the dirt and rain on her face. “They’re gone,” he choked.

“There’s no one.”

“No.” She shook her head. “Listen.”

Alex heard it then. A faint cry, no louder than a weak whisper, swept by his ear on a surge of wind. He couldn’t tell if it was an animal or a human. If it was a final cry of death or a declaration of life. All he knew as he scanned the wreckage in front of him was that he was terrified of what he might find.

Chapter Two

Tammy tilted her head and strained to pinpoint the soft cries escaping the demolished house in front of her. They were muffled and seemed to emanate from a stack of rubble next to...

She stifled a sob, tore her eyes from the couple lying in front of her and pointed at a high pile of debris. “There,” she said.

For a moment, she didn’t think Alex would move. He remained doubled over beside her, silent and still. But when a fresh round of cries rang out from the rubble, he shot upright, scrambled toward the towering mass in the center of the demolished home and began heaving jagged two-by-fours out of the way.

The broad muscles of his back strained the thin, wet material of his T-shirt as he flung the debris away. He jerked to a stop when he reached a ragged portion of a wall—the only one left standing. A battered door dangled from its hinges and barely covered an opening.

Tammy stepped to his side, hope welling within her chest. Other than a hole having been punched through the upper corner,

the door looked relatively untouched. Just like the plastic hanger sitting on the ground in front of it. And the healthy cry of a child reverberated within.

Alex reached out and gripped the doorknob, the shine of the brass dulled by mud and bits of leaves. The door squeaked as he pulled it out slowly, then propped it open. The dim light from the cloudy sky overhead barely lit the interior.

A young child huddled on the ground against the back corner. He stopped crying and looked up, his red cheeks wet with tears. The denim overalls and striped shirt he wore were damp, too.

His big brown eyes moved from Tammy to Alex, then his face crumpled. A renewed round of cries escaped him and echoed over the ravaged landscape surrounding them. Chubby hands reached up toward Alex, the small fingers grasping empty air.

Tammy gasped, her chest burning, and glanced at Alex.

He didn't move. He stood motionless amid thick planks of wood and pink insulation. The increasing gusts of wind ruffled his hair and a stoic expression blanketed his pale face.

“Alex?”

Throat aching, Tammy hesitated briefly, then knelt and scooped up the boy. His thin arms wrapped tight around her neck, and his hot face pressed against her skin, his sobs ringing in her ears.

“Alex.” She spoke firmly and dipped her head toward the boy at her chest. “What’s his name?”

Alex blinked, eyes refocusing on her, and whispered, “Brody.”

Tammy smoothed a palm gently over the boy's soft brown hair. "We're here, Brody." Her chin trembled, and she bit her lip hard before saying, "We're here now."

She stepped carefully over a large portion of the roof, the tattered shingles flapping in the wind and clacking against the rafters.

"Don't let him see," Alex rasped.

He moved swiftly to block the couple behind them, then cleared a safe path to the grass.

Tammy walked slowly behind him, swallowing hard and concentrating on his confident movements. His brawny frame seemed massive above the razed house, and under normal circumstances his towering presence would have set her nerves on edge. But she didn't feel the usual waves of apprehension. Only a deep sense of gratitude. And she found herself huddling closer to his back with each step, the boy in her arms growing quiet by the time they'd reached the road.

Alex stopped and held out his hands, slight tremors jerking his fingers. "Let me have him."

Tammy nodded and eased Brody into his arms. Alex squatted, set Brody on his feet, then ran his palms over the boy's limbs. He examined him closely.

"Nothing's broken," he said, his strained voice tinged with wonder. "There's not a scratch on him."

Brody whimpered and took two clumsy steps forward, bumping awkwardly between Alex's knees and settling against

his broad chest. He laid his head against Alex's shirt and gripped the material with both hands.

"I know, little man." Alex dropped a swift kiss to the top of Brody's head before pressing him back into Tammy's arms. He spun away and started walking. "We better get him to the house. More clouds are rolling in."

Tammy looked up, her lids fluttering against the sporadic drizzle falling from a darker sky, then followed Alex. They took a different path than before, moving farther up the road before crossing to avoid the downed power line. The dirt drive leading to Alex's house had transformed to slick mud, and what was left of the late-afternoon light died, giving way to night and leaving the ravaged path cloaked in darkness.

Tammy swiped a clammy hand over her brow when they finally reached the front lawn. It seemed like the longest walk she'd ever taken. Her arms grew heavy with Brody's weight as she waited outside for Alex to check the house and make sure it was structurally sound.

"Razz," she called softly, cradling Brody's head against the painful throb in her chest and peering into the darkness.

Closing her eyes, she shifted the baby to her other hip and listened for the sound of hooves or neighs but heard neither. Only the rhythmic chirp of crickets, the faint croak of frogs and a sprinkle of rain striking the ground filled the empty land surrounding them.

Her legs grew weak, and a strange buzzing took over,

assaulting her senses and mingling with the remembered images of Brody's parents lying among the rubble.

"You can come in." Alex stood on the front porch, holding a camping lantern. The bright light bathed his handsome features and highlighted the weather-beaten foliage littering the steps below him. "It's safe. Just be careful of the glass."

Safe. Tammy pulled in a strong breath and held Brody tighter as she made her way inside. She hadn't felt that way in a long time. Not a single corner of the world felt safe anymore, and she never stayed in one place long enough to find out if it was.

"We should probably get him out of those wet clothes." Alex gestured toward the dark hallway and turned to close the door behind them.

The door frame had been damaged by the storm, and he kicked the corner of it with his boot repeatedly until it shut. Tammy walked slowly down the hall, feeling her way with a hand on the wall as they drifted out of reach of the lantern's light and arrived at the first door on the left. She fumbled around to find the doorknob, then twisted, but it was locked.

"Not there," he bit out.

She jumped and glanced over her shoulder. Brody lifted his head from her chest and started crying again.

Alex winced and looked down, cursing softly. "I'm sorry," he said, easing awkwardly around them and moving farther down the hall. "I don't use that room. And the windows are blown out in the guest room." He opened a door at the end of the hall and

motioned for her to precede him inside. “But you’re welcome to this one.”

She took a few steps, then hesitated at the threshold, an uneasy feeling knotting in her stomach as she scrutinized his expression. He’d sheltered her during intense events, and she truly believed she’d seen him at one of his weakest moments back at the demolished home. But...he was still a stranger. One who obviously cared for Brody but refused to hold the boy. And she’d learned a long time ago that a kind face could mask a multitude of evils.

Alex slowly reached out and rubbed his hand over Brody’s back. “I’m sorry,” he repeated gently. “From the looks of your truck, you’re not going to be able to drive it tonight. Power’s out. Landlines and cell service are down, so we can’t make any calls, either. I did mean what I said. You’re welcome to use this room tonight.”

His expression softened, and his tempting mouth curved up at the corners in what she suspected was supposed to be a smile. But it fell flat, as though he rarely used it, and he turned away.

Broken. Tammy swallowed hard past the lump in her throat. His body was agile, solid and strong. But his smile was broken.

She straightened and followed him into the room, trying to shake off the strange thought—and the unfamiliar urge to touch him. To comfort a man. They both arose from the intensity of the day’s events. And the loss he and Brody had suffered was enough to evoke sympathy from even the hardest of hearts.

“I pull from a well, so there’s no running water.” Alex crossed the room and riffled through the closet. Hangers clacked, and clothing rustled. “I have some bottled water on hand that I can put in the bathroom for you.” He held up a couple of shirts and a pair of jogging pants. “It wouldn’t hurt for you to put on some dry clothes, too. These will swallow you both whole, but they’ll at least keep you comfortable while the others dry out.”

Tammy looked down and plucked at her soggy T-shirt and jeans. Brody squirmed against her, squinting against the light Alex held.

“I’ll wait in the kitchen,” Alex said. “If you don’t mind seeing to Brody?”

At her nod, he placed the clothes and lantern on a dresser, then left, calling over his shoulder, “I’ll take the wet clothes when you’re done and lay ’em out to dry.”

“Thank you,” she said.

But he was gone.

The white light glowing from the lantern lit up half of what seemed to be the master bedroom, and the dresser cast a long shadow over an open door on the other side of the bed. The room definitely belonged to Alex. If the absence of feminine decor hadn’t hinted strongly enough, the light scent of sandalwood and man—the same one that had enveloped her as Alex had covered her in the hallway—affirmed it.

Brody made a sound of frustration and rubbed his face against the base of her throat.

“Guess it’s just you and me for now.” She cradled him closer, closed the door, then grabbed the lantern from the dresser. “Let’s get cleaned up, okay?”

It took several minutes to gather what she needed from the bathroom and strip the wet clothes from Brody. He grew fussy, wriggling and batting at her hands as he lay on a soft towel on the bed.

“Mama.” He twisted away from her touch and tears rolled down his cheeks. “Mama.”

“I know, baby,” Tammy said, scooting closer across the mattress. “I’m so sorry.” She strained to keep her voice steady and forced herself to continue. “I’ll be quick, I promise.”

She hummed a soft tune while she worked, hesitating briefly after removing the diaper and cleaning his bottom, then grabbed one of the T-shirts Alex had provided.

“This will have to do for now,” she said, folding the cotton shirt into a makeshift diaper around him and tying knots at the corners. “I’ll get something better soon.”

He rubbed his eyes with a fist, and his thumb drifted toward his mouth. Tammy caught it before it could slip between his lips, then wiped it clean with a damp washcloth. His face scrunched up, and he fussed until she released it.

“There,” she whispered, bending close and placing her palm to the soft skin of his chest. His heart pulsated beneath her fingertips. “Does that feel a little better?”

Brody blinked slowly, his eyes growing heavy as they

wandered over her face. He returned his thumb to his mouth, and his free hand reached up, his fingers tangling in her hair, rubbing the damp strands. He grew quiet, drifted off, and his hand slipped from her hair to drop back to the mattress.

A heavy ache settled over Tammy and lodged in her bones. Being careful not to wake him, she stood and gathered several towels from the bathroom. She rolled each one and arranged them on the bed around him as a barrier.

Keeping a close eye on him, she changed out of her wet clothes and into the dry ones Alex had provided. Her mouth quirked as she held the jogging pants to her middle to keep them from falling. Alex had been right. The pants were at least three sizes too big, but she folded the waistband over several times and tied a knot in the bottom of the T-shirt to take up some of the slack in both.

When she was finished, she pulled her cell phone from the soggy pocket of her jeans and tried calling Jen. But there was no service, just as Alex had said. Sighing, she turned it off, gathered up the wet clothes and lantern, then made her way down the hall, drawing to an abrupt halt in the kitchen.

Alex stood by the sink, tossing back a shot glass and drinking deeply. He stilled as the light bathed his face and the bottle of whiskey in his hand.

A trickle of dread crept across the flesh of her back and sent a chill up her neck. The sight was nothing new. Her father had adopted the same pose every morning and every night. For him,

each day began and ended with a bottle, and she imagined it was still that way, though she hadn't laid eyes on him in eight years.

The desire to run was strong. It spiked up her legs and throbbed in her muscles, urging her to drop everything and take off. Even if it meant walking twenty miles in the dark to the nearest town.

"I brought the wet clothes," Tammy said, shifting from one foot to the other, her boots crunching over shards of broken glass. "I can lay them out if you'll just tell me where—"

"No." He set the shot glass and bottle on the counter, then held out his hand. It still trembled, and the light from the lantern couldn't dispel the sad shadows in his eyes. "I'll take care of them. Thanks."

The calm tone of his voice eased her tension slightly, and she handed the clothes over before returning to the bedroom to check on Brody. She set the lantern on the nightstand, then trailed a hand over his rosy cheek, closing her eyes and focusing on his slow breaths.

His soft baby scent mingled with that of Alex's, still lingering on the sheets. Uncomfortable, she kissed Brody's forehead gently, then slipped away and stood by the window. She parted the curtains, and the glow from the lantern highlighted her reflection in the windowpane.

"He sleeping?"

Alex's broad chest appeared in the reflection behind her, and she stepped quickly to the side and faced him. "Yeah."

“Thanks for seeing to him,” he said, looking at Brody.

Tammy nodded. “He...he’s been asking for his mama.”

He watched the baby, his mouth tightening, then took her place at the window. A muscle ticked in his strong jaw as he stared at the darkness outside.

Tammy fiddled with the T-shirt knotted at her waist. “I’m sorry about Dean and Gloria.”

Alex dipped his head briefly, then turned away, shoving his hands in his pockets.

“Did you know them well?” she asked.

“Yeah.” He dragged a broad hand over the back of his neck, his tone husky. “We all grew up together. Dean and I’ve been best friends since second grade. And Gloria and Susan—” His words broke off, and his knuckles turned white, his grip tightening around the base of his neck. “Dean helped me build this house. And I helped him build his.”

Tammy stilled, her palms aching to reach out and settle over his hard grip. Ease the pain in some small way. She focused on his words instead, wondering who Susan was and why he’d clammed up so abruptly after mentioning her.

His wife, maybe? This was a big house for a single man. But she hadn’t seen any women’s clothing in the closet or feminine toiletries in the bathroom.

“Is Susan—”

A steady pounding drummed the roof and bore down on the walls of the house. Fat drops of water splattered against the

windowpane, and steady streams began flowing down the glass.

“It’s raining again,” he said, releasing his neck and placing his palm to the window. His biceps flexed below the soggy sleeve of his shirt. “I don’t know when emergency services will make their rounds out here. We’re so far from town.” His whole body shook as he stared straight ahead. “I can’t leave them out there alone,” he choked. “Not like that.”

He shoved off the window and strode swiftly to the door.

“Alex?”

He paused, gripping the door frame and keeping his broad back to her.

Tammy blinked back tears and gnawed her lower lip, wanting so much to help but feeling useless. “What can I do?”

He glanced over his shoulder, his voice thin. “Stay here and take care of Brody until I get back?”

She nodded. “Of course.”

He left and the rain grew heavier, the sound of water pummeling the house filling the room. Rhythmic tings and plops started in the hallway as water leaked from the ceiling and hit the hardwood floor.

Shivering despite the heat of the summer night, Tammy moved slowly to the bed and sat down. She watched the empty doorway for over an hour, waiting to see if someone who knew Alex would walk in. A wife or girlfriend. Maybe a family member or friend. Anyone who cared enough to brave the weather, make the drive to Alex’s ranch and check on him.

But no one did.

Eventually, the day became too heavy to carry, and the tears she'd struggled to hold back ran down her cheeks, the salty taste seeping into the corners of her mouth. She gave in and lay on the bed, curling into a ball near Brody and placing a comforting hand on his small shoulder.

She thought of Brody's parents and Razz in the dark, in the rain. She thought of Brody. And Alex...

His distinctive scent grew stronger as she silenced her sobs in the pillow and realized that, for the first time, she'd found two people who were more alone than she was.

* * *

"I'M REAL SORRY, ALEX."

Alex forced a nod as Jaxon Lennox, a paramedic and old classmate from high school, joined his colleague and lifted a second gurney into the back of an ambulance. The white sheet covering Dean flapped in the early-morning breeze.

Stomach churning, Alex spun away from the sight and studied the ruins of Dean's house. The rain from last night had soaked the wreckage, leaving deep puddles of dingy water on the piles of broken wood and battered bricks.

Alex had remained at Dean and Gloria's side all night until emergency services arrived in the early-morning hours. He'd been unable to bring himself to leave. The scene blurred in front of him, and he blinked hard, balling his fists against his thighs to keep from dragging them over his burning eyes.

The ambulance doors thudded closed, and Alex stiffened as footsteps approached from behind.

“I spoke to the sheriff. He said he’d contact a social worker this morning about the baby,” Jaxon said. “Probably Ms. Maxine.”

Alex held his breath and tried to suppress the heat welling in his chest and searing his cheeks. Deer Creek was a tiny community by anyone’s standards, and everyone knew Ms. Maxine. Most everyone also knew Ms. Maxine had served as Alex’s social worker from the time he’d turned five until he’d aged out of foster care at eighteen. She’d attended his high school graduation and his wedding. And had been the first guest at his and Susan’s housewarming party eleven years ago, with an armful of gifts in tow.

Ms. Maxine was one of the brightest spots of a naively hopeful past that he wanted to forget.

“Sheriff said she should be at your place this afternoon to collect the child. I told him about that overturned truck at your place, too, and he said he’ll send someone out as soon as he can.” Jaxon sighed. “Wish we could’ve gotten here sooner, but things are so crazy right now. That storm was a monster, and it damaged a lot of houses, though this was the worst I’ve seen so far. Listen, I know you and Dean were close, and if you need anything…” His voice trailed away. “Well, you know where I am.”

“Thanks,” Alex said, barely shoving the word past his lips.

It’d be more polite to turn around and offer his hand or try to dredge up a smile, but he couldn’t manage either. The expression

of pity on a person's face was something he'd become unable to stomach.

The heavy presence at Alex's back disappeared, then a second set of doors slammed shut. An engine cranked, and the ambulance drove away, sloshing through the deep mudholes left in the dirt driveway of Dean's property.

Alex stared blindly at the rubble before him, frowning as the sun cleared the horizon. It blazed bright, tingeing the scoured landscape in a golden glow and coaxing the birds to sing in ravaged trees. There wasn't a single cloud marring the deep blue of the sky.

His skin warmed, and his soggy shirt and jeans clung uncomfortably to him. The damp band of his Stetson began to dry against his forehead, turning tight and stiff.

It was a hell of a thing—the sun rising on a day like this. The damned thing shouldn't have the nerve.

He scoffed and shook his head, squeezing his eyes hard enough to clear them, then started sifting through the mess on the ground for anything worth saving. A dented microwave, filled with muddy water, was lodged between broken staircase rails and a cracked cabinet door. Two recliners and one sofa were overturned, and the cushions were twisted within a tangle of curtains, sheets and wood beams. The remnants of a smashed crib littered a large, heavy pile of broken bricks.

Alex flinched, his boots jerking to a stop. This shouldn't have happened. Dean had walked the line all his life, married a good

woman and had a healthy baby boy. This house should still be standing with their small family safely in it.

“I’m sorry, Dean,” Alex said, plucking a bent nail from the ground and cringing at the tremor in his voice. “I should’ve built it stronger.”

He gritted his teeth, flung the nail into the distance and kept moving, carefully investigating each stack of wreckage and methodically collecting the few scattered remains that might be of use. He shoved a few unbroken jars of baby food, several intact juice boxes and a half dozen dry disposable diapers into a stray trash bag. One hour later, he started back to his ranch, wanting nothing more than to guzzle a bottle of whiskey, collapse onto his bed and escape into oblivion.

But that wasn’t a possibility. A woman and baby were still on his ranch—whatever little there was left of it—and he had to remain hospitable for at least a few more hours. Then they’d both be on their way and he’d have the comforting silence of privacy back.

The thought should’ve been a welcome one. But the relief he felt at their expected absence was overshadowed by a pang of loss. One that was accompanied by the warm image of Tammy’s bright green eyes and the remembered feel of Brody’s small, grasping fingers against his chest. All of which were ridiculous things for a man like him to dwell on.

Shrugging off the unwanted sensation, Alex picked up his pace and searched each empty field he passed for any sign of his

horses. He'd made it past the downed power line and across the road when a sporadic pattering sounded behind him. It continued with each of his swift strides, then stopped abruptly when he stilled, a soft whine emerging at his back.

He glanced over his shoulder. A puppy—Labrador, maybe?—stood frozen in place, his yellow fur dark with mud and grime. The dog's black eyes widened soulfully, then he ducked his head and took up whining again.

Alex turned, then eased his bag to the ground. "Where'd you come from?"

The pup wagged his tail rapidly, then rolled belly up and wiggled. The leaves clinging to his matted fur and the pine needles stuck to his paws were an indication that he might have spent the night in the woods.

Alex lowered to his haunches and rubbed a hand over the puppy's thick middle before checking the rest of him for injuries. The dog was healthy, unharmed and looked to be about seven or eight weeks old.

"You belong to Earl, buddy?" he asked, scratching behind the pup's ear.

Old Earl Haggert bred and sold Labs. Could be one of his. Earl's place was about a mile up the road, and it was possible the dog might've wandered that far. With the storm they'd had yesterday, it seemed like everything had been displaced.

The dog stopped whining, licked Alex's fingers and nuzzled a wet nose into his palm.

Alex grinned, a soothing heat unfurling in his veins. “Well, hell. What’s one more?” He stood, picked up his bag and started walking again. “You might as well come on.” He patted his thigh with his free hand. “You can stay today, and I’ll get you back to Earl tomorrow.”

The dog followed, bounding forward with as much gusto as his short legs would allow.

“But it’s only fair I warn you that there’s not much to my place anymore.” Alex slowed his step until the pup fell into a comfortable pace at his side. “Not after that tornado. My stable is shot, the fences are busted and my horses are missing. Got a damaged roof and broken windows all over the house. ’Bout the only thing not ruined was my bed, and a woman and baby are piled up on that.”

The dog yelped up at him, and Alex cocked an eyebrow.

“I know, right? Only thing worse than all that is a man talking to himself.” He grimaced, gripped the bag tighter and increased his pace again. “That’s a damned shame in itself.”

Alex clamped his mouth shut and forged ahead.

Rhythmic thuds echoed across the ravaged field as they drew closer to his house. He stopped a few feet from the end of the driveway, the dog skittering to an awkward halt against his shins.

Tammy pushed a wheelbarrow from one side of the front lawn to the other, pausing every few feet to pick up a broken tree limb and toss it into the cart. The wheels squeaked with each shove, and the contents clanged every time it bumped over

uneven ground. Brody tottered close at Tammy's side, his brown hair gleaming in the sun. He followed her lead, bent to grab a stick and stumbled.

"Whoa, there." Tammy stopped the wheelbarrow and steadied him with one hand. She waited as he fumbled around in the grass, then straightened and held out a twig. "Good job," she praised, pointing at the wheelbarrow. "Can you put it in the cart?"

Brody stretched up on his tiptoes, flung the wood into the wheelbarrow and squealed.

"Nicely done," Tammy said, clapping.

Brody smiled, smacked his hands together awkwardly, then waddled toward another stick. Tammy laughed, her face lighting with pleasure.

The rich sound traveled across the front lawn and vibrated around Alex, sending a pleasurable tingle over his skin. He tried not to stare as she chased after Brody, her long brown hair falling in tangled waves over her shoulders and her slim legs moving with grace. They wore their clothes from last night and, though dry, her jeans and Brody's overalls were wrinkled and stained with mud.

But even weather-beaten, she and Brody were a beautiful sight. The kind he'd imagined years ago when he'd hammered shingles onto his newly constructed roof and set the windows in their frames. He'd spent the last free hour before his wedding looking through the glass pane of the kitchen window at the front lawn, envisioning Susan and the children they'd planned to have

playing, laughing and living well.

Tammy's and Brody's energetic movements across the green grass breathed a bit of life into that old fantasy, conjuring it to the forefront of his mind and coaxing it past the tight knot in his chest. And it stung just as much as it soothed.

Alex averted his eyes and scrubbed the toe of his boot over the dirt.

“Hey.”

He glanced up at the sound of Tammy's voice. She'd stopped following Brody and studied him closely, her gaze traveling over his face.

“I found the wheelbarrow out back and thought I'd make myself useful,” she said, tucking her hair behind her ears and brushing a hand over her rumpled T-shirt. “Brody's been crying for his parents. I thought taking him outside and keeping him busy might help. Hope you don't mind. And I found a banana and cereal in the kitchen that I gave to him. The paramedics stopped by a couple of hours ago, and I sent them in your direction. Did they make it to you okay?”

He nodded, swallowing the thick lump in his throat, and gestured to the white bandage covering her temple. “How's your cut?”

Her fingers drifted up and touched it as though she'd forgotten it was there. “Oh, it's fine. I told them it was nothing, but they insisted on patching me up anyway.” She waved a hand in the air, then shoved it in her pocket. “They checked Brody out, too, while

they were here. He's just like you said. Not a scratch on him."

Brody stood behind her, holding a stick out with a chubby hand and staring at the dog snuffling around in the dirt at Alex's heels. The boy's eyebrows rose, and his mouth parted. He pointed his free hand at the pup and shouted.

The dog poked his head between Alex's ankles. He eyed Brody, then bounded across the grass and leaped for the stick Brody held, knocking the boy down in the process.

Brody plopped down on his backside and sat, stunned, for a moment. His brown eyes widened and a wounded expression crossed his face before he took up crying.

Alex froze, a strangled laugh dying in his throat and escaping him in a choked grunt. Years ago, he'd seen Dean hit his butt in the same position with an identical look on his face. Except Dean had been twelve years old and the cause of it had been the kickback from a shotgun. One he'd swiped from his dad's gun cabinet and used without permission, accidentally shooting out a window on his dad's truck.

Dean had insisted he'd outgrown his BB gun, but he hadn't been too grown to shed tears that day. He'd taken one look at that shattered glass and cried, "My dad's gonna kick my ass good for this one!"

Of course, his dad hadn't. He'd fussed a great deal but had been relieved that Dean and Alex hadn't been injured. That they'd emerged from what could've been a deadly incident without a scratch on them. Like Brody.

A boy who would grow up without ever knowing how great a man his father had been.

Alex dropped his bag, turned his back on the trio and stifled a guttural roar, the rage streaking through him almost uncontrollable.

“Oh, it’s all right, Brody.” Tammy’s soothing words quieted the baby’s sobs. “You’re okay, and there are a lot more sticks where that one came from.” There were shuffling sounds, then she asked, “This little guy a friend of yours, Alex?”

He glanced over his shoulder to find her kneeling on the ground, petting the dog and hugging Brody to her side. Her eyes met his, and the smile on her face melted away, a concerned expression taking its place. The kind he knew all too well.

Unable to answer her, he spun away, stalked up the front porch steps and entered the kitchen. He went straight to the cabinet, grabbed a bottle, then upended it, drinking deeply. The fiery liquid burned a trail down his throat and lit up his gut, forcing him to set it down and gasp for breath.

He watched through the window as Tammy got to her feet and took a hesitant step toward the house. She stopped, frowned up at the front porch, then walked away. The squeak of wheels rang out and the consistent clang of sticks being thrown into the cart resumed.

Alex gripped the edge of the counter and closed his eyes. She probably thought he was a crazy, selfish bastard. And to a certain extent he was. But how could he explain it? How could anything

he might say help her understand?

He was truly grateful that Brody had survived the storm and that Tammy had escaped without serious injury. Last night as he'd grieved at Dean's side, he'd even thanked heaven that he, himself, had managed to emerge from yesterday's carnage still breathing. That he wasn't buried beneath the broken walls of his house being pummeled by rain.

But no amount of gratitude would ease the anger of knowing that death had stolen Dean and Gloria. Or change the fact that, sometimes, life could hurt like hell.

Chapter Three

A body rests easier after doing the right thing.

Alex stood on the front porch and waited as Tammy finished changing Brody's diaper on the grass, recalling the words Ms. Maxine had repeated to him a thousand times over the years. Ones she'd spoken when he'd gotten suspended from middle school for smoking, then reminded him of when he'd returned to his foster parents' house after sneaking out for a weekend party binge as a teen.

It was a phrase he'd grown to know well. And one he'd strictly adhered to after mending his ways and proposing to Susan.

But there were some things a man couldn't control.

He adjusted the bag of cookies under his arm and gripped the can of soda in his hand tighter, hoping the toothpaste he'd rubbed over his teeth masked the whiskey on his breath. Abstaining from the bottle between the hours of five in the morning and nine at

night was a rule he'd taken pride in for nine years. But, surely, his grief from losing his best friends excused today's slip.

Only, his shortcomings were easier to deal with—and accept—when there were no witnesses to them.

Alex winced and rolled his shoulders to ease the tight knot at the base of his neck. He couldn't stay holed up in the kitchen all afternoon, tossing back shots, while Tammy cleaned up the front yard and took care of Brody. The only thing left to do was pull his shit together and at least be hospitable. It was what any gentleman would do. And he still knew how to be one. Even if it'd been years since he'd put his good manners into practice.

A little longer. That's it. Make them comfortable for a few more hours, and soon Ms. Maxine would whisk Brody away to a new home and the wrecker would cart Tammy and her overturned truck back to the highway. Then he could curl up with a bottle for hours and grieve in private.

Alex nodded curtly and eased his way down the front steps to Tammy's side. "Figured you might be thirsty," he said, handing the soda to her as she knelt next to the baby. "Power's still out, so it's warm. Sorry about that."

"Thanks." She lifted Brody to his feet, then took the soda and popped the top.

Her slim throat moved as she drank deeply, drawing Alex's eyes to the flushed skin of her neck and upper chest. The dog climbed onto her knees and jumped to lick the can. She pushed him away with her free hand, causing the collar of her T-shirt to

slip to one side. It revealed a faint tan line below her collarbones that contrasted sharply with the ivory complexion of the upper swell of her breast.

Alex had a sudden urge to trail his lips across her warm skin and breathe in her sweet scent. He peeled his gaze away, ignoring the heat simmering in his veins, and caught her eyes on him. She lowered the can, straightened her shirt with her free hand and pushed to her feet.

Ah, hell. A gentleman didn't ogle a woman, and this was becoming a habit.

Cheeks burning, he cleared his throat and gestured to the trash bag on the ground nearby. "I see you found the diapers. There's some baby food and juice in there, too. Not a lot. But enough to get him through at least one more day."

Something tugged at his jeans, and a frustrated squeal erupted. He looked down, finding Brody attempting to climb up his leg, his small arm stretched out and tiny fingers grabbing for the bag of cookies under Alex's arm.

Tammy laughed. "I don't think he's interested in baby food. Looks like he'd much rather get a hold of those cookies."

A soft breeze ruffled Brody's hair, and the boy blinked wide, pleading eyes up at him. The brown strands and deep chestnut pools were the same shade as Dean's, and his small cries were impossible to resist.

Alex's chest constricted so tight he could barely breathe. "A social worker is coming for him," he rasped, reminding himself

as much as informing Tammy. He handed a cookie to Brody, then smoothed his knuckles across the boy's soft cheek. "And someone's arranging to have your truck and trailer hauled to the body shop in town. Don't know how long it'll take to fix 'em, but power will probably be restored in town first. You'll have a better chance of reaching a friend or family member sooner there."

She nodded absently, and her gaze drifted to the empty field behind him. "I looked for Razz this morning," she said softly. "I couldn't find her."

"Your horse?"

"Yeah." Those emerald eyes returned to his face. "Do you think she survived?"

He grimaced, then watched Brody mouth the cookie and spin in awkward circles to avoid the puppy leaping for the treat. "Can't say for sure."

Chances were, her horse was gone along with all of his. God help him, he didn't want to lie to her. But he didn't want to see pain engulf those beautiful features, either.

"She might've made it," Alex said, squinting against the sharp rays of the sun and scanning the landscape. "There's a chance she's huddled up somewhere with mine."

Though he wouldn't bet what little money he had left on it. And he didn't even want to think about how much it'd cost to put this struggling ranch back in working order.

"How many do you have?" she asked.

"Ten."

“You board them?”

“And breed them.” He turned to study a field behind him. “Mainly for ranch work. I try for blue roans, since they’ve brought in the most over the past two years.” His throat tightened. “Dean was my partner.”

Brody yelped and reached for a second cookie. Alex gave him another, then held the bag out to Tammy. She took a cookie and turned it over in her hand, staring at it with a furrowed brow.

“I know the storm was bad,” she said. “But Razz is fast.” She glanced up, a hesitant smile appearing. “She’s the best barrel horse on the circuit.”

So, she raced. Alex surveyed the slim but strong curves of Tammy’s arms and legs more closely. No wonder she’d held her own through yesterday’s nightmare. The few rodeo riders he’d known were a tough lot. Full of grit and fight.

He’d never taken to the circuit life, though he’d tried it once years ago, riding bulls one summer in his early twenties. It was fun, brought in a decent amount of cash and provided an outlet for his reckless streak. But then he’d started missing Susan and realized he wanted her more. Wanted a wife and home. A family of his own. And he’d decided it wasn’t fair to keep Susan waiting. That he should return to Deer Creek, settle down like Dean and do the right thing.

His jaw clenched. If he’d known then how much he’d end up disappointing Susan, the right thing to do would’ve been a very different choice.

“I’m hoping she dodged the worst of it.”

Alex blinked and refocused on Tammy’s face, his stomach dropping. “What?”

“Razz,” Tammy clarified, studying him again. “She might have outrun the tornado, and if she managed to survive, then maybe your horses did, too.” Her attention drifted to Brody, and her smile widened. “After all, this little guy came out of it okay.”

Brody grinned, his mouth laden with crumbs, and stretched his arms out to Tammy. She slipped her cookie in her pocket, lifted him up and cradled his head against her chest.

“Yeah, he did,” Alex murmured, his eyes clinging to the gentle embrace of her arms around Brody and the slow sway of her body as she rocked him.

The movements were calming, and Brody soaked it up, his eyelids growing heavy and his breaths slowing. Her brown hair slipped over her shoulder and rested against Brody, the wavy locks sharing the same chestnut tones as those of the baby.

She was a natural at comforting a child and, had Alex not known better, he would have assumed Brody belonged to her. It would be the easiest thing in the world to mistake the two of them for family. For mother and son.

An ache streamed through Alex’s limbs, making his palms itch to reach out and tug them both close. To hold them in a protective embrace, feel the steady pulse of their hearts and draw strength from their solid presence. To imagine, just for a moment, that he belonged, too. As a man and a father...

But that would be a mistake. He stiffened and turned away. He'd been abandoned as a child and had struggled to fit in with each of the three foster families he'd lived with as a youth. He'd had to fight his damndest to establish enough stability in his life to offer Susan the promise of a secure future filled with family and happiness. Things he'd failed to deliver, wrecking Susan's dreams along with his own.

No. Nature knew what it was doing. He wasn't built to be a family man—it wasn't in his DNA to be a father—and he was foolish for even entertaining the fantasy.

“Someone's here.”

Tammy's words were joined with the faint churn of an engine and the slosh of tires through mud down the driveway. A compact car eased over the hill, maneuvered around various piles of debris and drew to a stop several feet behind the fallen tree blocking the path. The door opened, and an older woman stepped out, wisps of gray hair escaping her topknot in the soft breeze.

Alex caught his breath, smothering the urge to run into her arms and seek comfort like he had as a boy. Instead, he placed the bag of cookies on the ground, took off his hat and waited.

A sad smile dispersed the soft wrinkles lining the woman's face as she made her way over. “Oh, Alex.” She wrapped her arms tight around him, standing on the toes of her high heels to whisper in his ear, “I'm so sorry about Dean and Gloria.”

A low cry dislodged from Alex's throat and pried its way out of his mouth. He coughed, closing his throat against another sob,

and tucked the top of her head gently under his chin. “Thank you, Ms. Maxine.”

He gave in to the moment, closing his eyes and squeezing her close. The familiar scent of her perfume arose from her clothing, and the sweet aroma took him back years. All the way back to when he was a dumb kid and the only bright spot in each day had been her forgiving smile and unconditional support. Ms. Maxine was the closest he’d ever come to having a real mother. His mother had abandoned him at an early age. And from what little information Maxine had available to share with him, his father had never been in the picture.

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