



Born a Hero

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Category: Romance, Action

Description: Bryce's day turns upside down when he reaches out to help an elderly lady during a raging storm. By the time he gets her safely home, the levee breaks, and they're in deep... ahh, water. This lovely woman soon becomes his helper, saving folks from terrible consequences during the ensuing nightmare.

First they rescue a small child from drowning in a car, then a woman floating by, clinging for life to an uprooted tree, and even a puppy in terrible danger.

If Dena hadn't gotten out of her vehicle to pay for her gas, she would have been in the car when the wave of water washed it away. Her poor little boy wouldn't have had to face the fearful conditions alone.

Instead, she's left clinging to a pole, while strong winds, lightning, and heavy, freezing rain falls all around her. Death is close. But the fear for her son overrides everything else as she battles the storm in the fight for her life.

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Chapter One

Bryce Kelly had a hangover that would put a dog down, and he didn't need this... this nonsense happening today. Yet Mother Nature didn't give a hot damn about his needs. She was mad and her tantrums were gonna let the whole world know.

The rain had been incessant. The constant drumming on the roof and the flashes of lightning through the windows had begun to create havoc around the bar. Worried about the safety of his family, Sponge, the owner, had his fill of the lazy drunks and slackers hanging around and wanted to get the place closed up.

"Hey, Bryce, can you give me a hand clearing the joint out. That weather isn't playing around. I want to get home to the wife and kids."

"Sure, Sponge, but it'll cost ya."

Grinning, the older man agreed. "Right. The next beer's on me but not today. It's getting dark early, and the crazy storm has begun to worry me. I doubt there'll be anyone out in this mess tonight. The Governor has been going on about the levee holding and warning everyone to be prepared in case it doesn't. I'm closing down. Just give me a hand to get these losers out and help me pack away the liquor. I'm not sure it's safe being up on the shelves."

In a short time, Bryce had guided the last of the customers on their way through the river of water crawling higher on the stoop and had helped his old friend make his place safe. When the two of them headed in different directions, Bryce started walking through the huge puddles to his car and turned the corner in time before all

hell broke loose.

The levee must have let go because a wall of water came at him, and he could see the danger. Just ahead an older woman struggled in the rushing stream, gripping her plastic shopping bag as if it held the importance of the crown jewels. She fell to her knees and her empty arm reached out for a bush that gave way under the pressure.

Without thinking, he struggled through the knee-high and rising water to help her stand. He used his arms to get her upright and took her bags to get her hands free.

“Oh, God. Thank you. My house is just there.” Screaming now, she pointed at a two-story place close to the now empty street that normally held a lot of traffic.

Bryce nodded and with his arm guiding around her back he urged her toward the building. When her footing gave way, he lifted her against his side, hefting her as best he could while struggling to get them both to the door.

Once there, he took her key and using his strength against the water, he got them through the door and even shut it behind them. The water was quickly rising and not a moment too soon, he forced them both up the stairs to the second level.

Once there, they both collapsed on the floor, trying to catch their breath.

“Thank you. I don’t know what I’d have done without your help. I must have twisted my ankle in the first fall. I doubt I could have gotten this far alone.”

“Jesus, lady. Have you ever seen anything like this rain? I can’t believe we were in so much danger, and that it all happened so fast.” He watched as the rather spry woman who must be in her seventies rushed around, her limp obvious but ignored, gathering towels from a closet, and coming at him with a worried look on her face.

“My name is actually Sonja Bacevich not Jesus Lady.” She grinned at her pun and added, “Are you alright? You look like you’re hurting.”

Her Ukrainian accent delighted him. She sounded like his grandmother, the one he’d always loved more than any of his other relatives. Needing to take a moment, and not having a lot of strength left, he waved off her worry.

“I’ll be fine. Just need to catch my breath.” Bryce had gone to a wall and slid down to crouch while he let his body stop screaming at him for using the strength he didn’t have yet. When he saw Sonja hovering worriedly, he added, “I was in a hiking accident recently and my innards are still mad at me for cracking a few ribs. I’ll be fine as soon as I relax for a minute.”

Sonja pushed a chair over to him and helped him sit. “Haven’t you been watching the news? They said there’d be a storm and the rainfall would break records. I didn’t have many groceries left, so I went to the store, hoping I’d be back in time before the worst of the weather. But I twisted my ankle stepping off the curb. Thank God you came along when you did. Me and my bags of cookies might have drowned.”

Bryce, thinking she was being slightly dramatic, smiled at her joking and stood to leave.

“Where do you think you’re going, young man? Have you looked outside?”

While she spoke the words, she pointed at the window she now leaned against and without thinking, Bryce followed her instructions and did just that. What he saw had his pulses clamoring and his head clearing from the few beers he’d consumed earlier. As if a fog lifted in his brain, he unmistakably watched trees drift past and parts of houses disappear under the sudden lake of rushing, dirty brown waves.

Oh, my God and more words to that effect rang in his head. Suddenly, he noticed a car

drifting past. Like a sailboat to nowhere, the water carried it along. And through a broken back-seat window, he saw the face of a terrified child.

Chapter Two

Without hesitating, Bryce pushed the lock on the panel upwards, forced the window to slide as far as it could, and sent the screen flying. Thankful for it being wide enough for him to crawl out, he heard Sonja's high-pitched voice.

"What in God's name are you doing?"

"I have to get to that kid. He's in danger."

"Yes, but are you strong enough? We better get you a rope or something so you can get him back here." She ran to the bedroom closet and came back with a package that had an old dog's outside leash in it. "I lost my dog, Randy, last month, and I put this away. Used it to let him run around the yard. It's a couple hundred feet. Take it and tie it to the sill."

Seeing the intelligence of her suggestion and using the base of a nearby lamp, he busted through the pane of glass and tied the end of the narrow cable around the check rail. The other end he clipped to his belt.

Then he removed his jacket and leapt into the water, flinching at the sudden coldness against his skin. Jeans now soaked to his waist, his drenched shoes offering little support, he could barely walk through the flowing water. In places the terrible coldness came to his chest.

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Trying desperately to stay upright, he used all his strength to keep moving in the direction of the small vehicle. The car which had been held up by some debris was now loose and moving again. Rushing as fast as he could, half swimming, half staggering, he got to the window and saw the child who might be six or seven had covered his face with his hands, crying hard.

Bryce bellowed to be heard over the horrible storm sounds and got the kid's attention. "Can you get yourself out of your car seat?"

The boy finally looked over and saw the man looming beside the door. He nodded his tear-filled face hesitantly. "Ye-ss. But I'm not allowed. Mummy said so."

Terrified that the car could flip over if it lodged on something underneath, and with no time to lose, Bryce pleaded. "You need to get out of the car little man. Just undo it, and I promise I'll make it okay with your mummy. Hurry, son."

As if the intense force of his warning got through, the boy squeezed the lock open and started to take off the harness.

Holding onto the car as best he could, Bryce forced his way partially inside, pushing past more of the glass with his body, feeling the cuts but having no time to worry about them.

Hearing a scrunch from below the car, he grabbed the tense body and forcibly pulled the boy from his seat, through the window, and into his arms. Then with all his might he pushed his legs against the side of the vehicle to get as far away from it as possible.

Just in time.

The car had begun taking in more water and started to sink. Then the smaller SUV flipped to the side, lodging itself next to a streetlamp that eerily turned on, casting it's glow. Lasting only moments, it dimmed, rendering them to near darkness.

Not wanting to be anywhere near the vehicle, Bryce fought to gain his feet while he held the boy aloft and again half swum and half staggered back the way he'd come, thankful for the cable that guided his way.

If it wasn't for Sonja's help in pulling them toward her, he wondered if he'd have made it. Thankfully, she didn't let the cable lag. Instead, she yanked on it until he was back at her window. Hefting the boy upward and into her waiting arms, he held onto the open sill, half in and half still in the water and just hung there. Panting, wishing his muscles would stop burning at the cruel treatment, he felt the drag of the water and knew he needed to move.

It was the cries of the child that made him gather the last of his strength, and with Sonja's help, he dragged himself up and over the window frame and flipped inside the room like a beached whale.

Chapter Three

Sonja left the boy to rush to Bryce's aid. "Just catch your breath, son. Take a minute. You're fine now." Once he lay heaped in a puddle, she turned to the child who also sat hovering on the floor where she'd left him. Speaking softly, humoring the youngster, she said, "We just need everyone to get dry and warm... right?"

Standing with difficulty, she went to the bathroom and returned with another handful of towels. "Here." She handed Bryce two and then took the rest to where the boy still lay in a heap, crying hard now.

“You stop that silliness, boy. You’re with the good guys. Everything will be just fine as long as we’re together. First, we need to get you warmed up and then we can get into my groceries over there. I bought bread and peanut butter and lots of cookies.”

She turned to where Bryce sat with the towel around his back and his face buried in the other. “There’s still enough hot water for you two to take a shower. How about you take the boy and both of you get warmed up.”

Bryce nodded at the idea and slowly stood. Limping from exhaustion, he came over to the child and reached down to heft the kid under his arm so they could move together to the bathroom.

“I’ve got some of my late husband’s clothes if you want a dry pair of sweatpants and a sweatshirt. He was a big man, not as tall as you, but they’ll be warm. Don’t have anything for the boy except my stuff so we’ll have to make do.”

She fled into the closet and came out with a pile of clothing which she put on the counter in the bathroom. Then she helped the boy peel off his wet clothes. “So, honey are you going to tell us your name, so we don’t have to call you kiddo?”

The boy’s head finally came up to look at her and he grinned. “My mom calls me kiddo, but my name is Justin. Not Justy.”

“Got it, Justin not Justy.”

Bryce, who’d been behind them leaned in and held his hand out to the boy. “My name is Bryce, not Brycy and this here angel is Sonja, not Jesus Lady.”

Sonja laughed until she saw the confusion on Justin’s face. “He’s teasing Justin. Look, you need to get warm, and the best way is to get into the shower and let the hot water do it’s magic.”

“I’ve never had a shower... only baths. I don’t know what to do.” His voice got weaker, and the tears were close. Not wanting to upset him, Sonja giggled and shared. “I was in my twenties when I had my first shower. It was so wonderful, I thought I’d died and gone to heaven. Look, I’ll give you a hand, but we need to be in and out to save water for Bryce.”

She helped the boy undress to his shorts and then whisked him into the shower. Bryce, who’d stood nearby in case they needed him, got involved and handed the kid a bar of soap. Thinking he’d be helpful, the slippery bar flipped from his hand. When he bent to pick it up, Sonja flashed the hose in his face, making both her and Justin laugh with glee.

“Sooo not funny you two.” He grumbled. But the twinkle in his eyes let Sonja know he had no problem with her way to entertain the boy and hold off his misery. In minutes, using the hand-held faucet, she rinsed Justin off, and Bryce wrapped him in another dry towel.

Taking his hand, she led him from the room. “It’s all yours now, Bryce. Get warmed up. I saw you still shivering.”

Putting Justin down on the bed, she looked at him, happy to see his quivering had stopped. “Okay now, let’s see what we have for you to wear? Here’s a nice warm pair of pajama pants we can roll up for you and this old shrunken t-shirt with the birdies on it will be fine. And look, this blue fleecy top might be big, but it’ll be warm over the t-shirt.” She helped him dress and put on fuzzy socks to keep his feet warm, thankful that her feet were tiny, and the fit would be better.

Then she led him to the bed and tucked him inside, under the covers, noticing that now he was warm, the tendency for tears had returned. “I want Mommy.” He all but wailed the words.

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She heard the door behind open and knew Bryce had joined them in time to hear Justin call for his mom.

When Bryce asked the question in both their minds, she waited to hear the boy's answer.

“Why were you alone in the car, Justin?”

“I wasn't.”

Chapter Four

Bryce moved closer so he could sit on the side of the bed next to the boy. He picked up his hand and held it gently. “There was no one in the car with you, buddy. I checked.”

“Mommy was. She got out for gas just before the water came. So I wasn't alone, wight?”

Bryce looked at Sonja nodding her head, and he quickly followed her example. “Right. So Mommy must still be at the gas station.”

“She had to go inside to pay the man.”

“Was the water there then?”

“Sort of. Not so high up. She was scared 'cause we couldn't get home unless she got

gas... so she stopped.”

“Is that when the water began to rise?”

“I guess so. There was lots of noise and everything happened fast. Mom came after the car; I saw her wunning until she fell. But then we went too fast, and more water came. I don’t know what happened to her.” Justin’s chin wobbled and his voice went low from the fear they saw in his face.

“Not to worry, baby. Can you tell us her name?”

“Mommy.”

Bryce chuckled as did Sonja. Then the wise woman asked, “What do other people call her?”

“Oh, that name. Dena.”

“And your last name?”

“Low.”

Chapter Five

Dena Lore watched her car begin to move, carried along with the rush of water that seemed to appear from nowhere. One minute she was walking through an ankle-deep river and the next, her small SUV began sailing off, pushed by another from behind that had lost control.

She watched in horror as yet another vehicle began swerving and crashed into a sign. The weight from that truck pushed over the pole like a domino and the end of it

smashed into the window on the very seat where Justin sat. She heard the crack of the glass as it broke.

She'd begun running, her heart in her throat making breathing almost impossible, yet it felt like she wasn't moving at all. The weight of the rushing water flowing against her body had stopped her forward momentum.

Heart pounding, she fell face first and struggled to gain her feet. Justin! Her boy, her son, her reason for getting up every morning would be facing this danger alone. Only six-years-old, the child of her heart who made life bearable and the sun shine every day would be crying for his mommy. Giving up any semblance of self-control, she screamed her frustration and fought like hell. But the SUV floated away like some riverboat in full throttle.

Now fighting for her own life, she finally fought her way over to the nearest lamppost and wrapped her arms around it, clinging for dear life. Her thoughts fled with her boy as she gripped the metal base with all her might.

If anyone would have told her that at eighteen, she would give birth to a baby boy, end up a single mom, and love every minute of having this child to care for, she would have told them to stop hallucinating.

After all, wasn't she good-time Dena? The black-haired bombshell, always looking for a party? Drugs, drinking, hooking up with anyone who had a condom and a good line had been her MO.

Then along came the one hero who'd accidentally knocked into her in the only bar where they'd stopped asking for ID, and she knew instantly why God had put her on the earth.

"Oops, sorry Princess." His manners were impeccable.

This guy, not a boy her age, but a real man, found her funny and smart and hung around after the rest took off to go to the latest party. She stayed with him, and they talked for hours.

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“If I tell you my name will you tell me yours?” His teasing had made her laugh.

“Is that your usual schtick to hit on the girls?”

“Did it work?”

“Sure. They call me Princess.” He’d already referred to her in that way after knocking into her and it seemed cute to play it back at him. She laughed, loving the silliness.

“Then I’m your prince.”

“What’s your dream for the future?”

He told her then about his goal of becoming a doctor and how during his residency, time was only a magazine. “We’re normally run off their feet for days on end. The only reason I have this night off is because I worked two forty-eight hour shifts in five days and the boss found me asleep, standing up against the wall. What about you?”

Feeling like the biggest loser on the planet, she lied about her dismal work record. “I’m a – I’m still a student. But it’s funny. Because one day, I’d like to be a nurse.” She fed him what she thought he’d like to hear. Lies that came easy until she’d put them into words and realized how true they really were.

She’d make a great nurse. Hadn’t she looked after her father when he was terminal and her mom worked two jobs to keep a roof over their heads? Of course, that was before the old lady took off.

Once her mother became a widow, the first patsy who came along willing to take her under his wing, filled the slot as husband number two. She attached herself to the mealy-mouthed cheap bastard and quit both jobs. Problem was, he didn't want a teenage daughter as part of the bargain. And Mom wanted her last chance at having another man in her life to take care of her. One who didn't have death in his near future.

Shaking off the memories, she watched her new friend return with another round, and she let go of everything from her past, everything in her future especially her dismal store-clerking job, and just lived for the minutes with him.

When her hero saw her home after many drinks and a few sexy dances, she invited him up to the place she was housesitting and didn't ask about condoms or birth control or anything that would let the real world burst her bubble.

When he asked, she lied about her age. When he worried about her safety, she lied and said she was on the pill. When he asked about her parents, she lied and said they'd rented her this apartment because while in college, she needed a home and hated the dorms.

How could she tell him the truth? That she was using a coworker's place because she'd promised to look after her cat.

The bubble she formed around them was thin and delicate, but in her pathetic state of drunkenness, she didn't care. All she wanted was to be in his arms and know heaven. And for the first time in her useless life, she had reached the stars and knew then that all the songs and romantic shit people wrote about in books was real. Love did exist.

The next morning when she woke up, he'd left without any way for her to contact him. She'd cried for days, stayed in bed, praying he'd return and lost yet another job because of her disappearing act... not the first time.

Once she'd finally admitted he wouldn't be back, it seemed to be the catalyst she needed. No more bars or one-night stands. No more messing up her life. No more letting the future look after itself.

She started an online care-giving course, got a better job so she could move out of the ratty, shared apartment where so many hung out, and became a responsible person. She'd even changed her address to a less expensive place to live. But she never forgot the guy who'd made her feel like she mattered, like she was pretty special.

Unfortunately, he forgot about her.

A month later, reading the pregnancy test kit, the truth slammed her in the head. He'd left her pregnant.

And now her reason for living was missing. Scrambling to get to her vehicle had been futile. She'd never felt so inadequate or alone. Crying, broken and terrified, she knew one thing... she needed to stay alive. Because when this nightmare had passed, she'd do everything it took to find her baby.

Chapter Six

Once Bryce finished his shower and had put on the dry clothes, he returned to the bedroom where Sonja and Justin were huddled together making peanut butter sandwiches on the bed.

Sonja had used a blanket like a tablecloth and with the end of a comb, she was spreading peanut butter. As soon as she saw him, she lifted the article in her hand and said, "It's new so wipe that look off your face."

He laughed. “At this point, I don’t care. Just hand me one of those slices. I can smell the peanuts from here, and I’m suddenly starved.”

Doing as he asked, she slathered another couple of slices and passed them over. Then she ripped open a package of Oreos and handed one to Justin.

When she came close, Bryce whispered, “How’s the kid? Any sign of a temperature? Did he get any cuts from the car window. I tried not to let him too close to the edge.”

Sonja shook her head. “Nope, he’s fine, aren’t you, Justin?”

“Yep. I like this bwead. Can I have another?”

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Sonja laughed. “I think we can safely say he isn’t suffering at all.” Her expression became serious. “How about you? I noticed you were in discomfort before the superman antics. Are you okay?”

“I’ll live.” When he saw her hesitation, he added, “Don’t worry, Jesus Lady, I’m a doctor. I can gauge exactly how my body is at the moment.”

“Right. You know the old saying about a mechanic who always drives the worst rattletrap. Or a carpenter who’s own house is—”

He interrupted with a laugh and added, “I get it. And you’re probably right. I know a few doctors who smoke and are overweight. But, you can trust me, I don’t live in the clouds. I’ll be fine now that the worst is over.”

Sonja’s habit of shaking her head when she wanted to make a point registered.

“What?”

“Have you looked out the window recently? I don’t know about you but for me it seems like the rain is worse and the water’s rising. I checked the staircase, thinking to go down and get a knife. Unfortunately, it’s moving up the stairs. We might have to think about heading for the attic if things keep up this way.”

Bryce wolfed down the cookie in his hand and followed her example, heading for the staircase. Sure enough, flash flooding had forced the water to rise so fast, it had become rather terrifying. His thoughts of returning to the hospital fled as he surveyed their situation.

Without the power on, and the darkness almost complete, he decided his most important next step would be to find some source of light. His phone had been lost in his swim to rescue the boy and he had no way of contacting anyone.

Returning to the bedroom, he nodded at Sonja's arched silent question and said, "Do you have any flashlights up here?"

Smiling, she pointed at the night table. "I have even better. My husband believed in coal oil lamps, and he kept a few in storage along with a jar of the kerosene. I also have a couple of LED contraptions that are better than a flashlight when you pull them open. They give off a good amount of illumination, so I think we'll be fine." So saying, she lifted one of the articles she'd pointed at and tugged the top up to show him that she knew what she was talking about. The room suddenly seemed warmer as the lamp flashed brightly.

"Great." He took the one she held out and said, "So... where's your attic?"

Chapter Seven

Bryce left the old woman and boy chatting sleepily, cuddled together, while he followed her whispered directions and went into the large walk-in closet. There, he saw the opening in the ceiling where the attic could be found. Getting out the steps she'd noted that were kept to the side for the small woman to get to the upper shelves, he stood on the top rung and pushed over the moveable doorway.

Then he hiked himself up, his ribs screaming from being tortured yet again and checked around with his light. Seeing it didn't really have a wide enough glare, he scrambled up and over the rim to climb onto the floor.

Suddenly, a worried voice called from below, and he peered down.

“Are you okay?” Sonja stood with her hands in a prayer position, agitation obvious from the way she clasped her fingers.

“It’s dry from what I can tell, Sonja. This old house was well built. Someone even laid flooring up here.”

“My husband and son were the contractors and geniuses about construction. They’d thought to build a craft room and office space up there one day, so they went ahead and started by putting in a floor. Never did get that finished. When Hank passed on, Jamie moved to Los Angeles, and the attic room never got done.”

Wishing he could continue their conversation yet knowing they were running out of time; he changed the subject. “Which side of the house are the dormer windows you mentioned?”

“On the front, facing south.”

Bryce moved the light in that direction and saw what she had meant. In the distance, he suddenly made out the form of the two windows from the flash of lightning streaks viewed through the glass.

“Your husband was brilliant for thinking of putting those features in. It might save our lives if the water doesn’t stop rising.”

“That’s what I came to tell you. It’s now leaking onto the floor in the bedroom. I think we need to start moving stuff up here as soon as possible.”

“Jesus, lady. You’re just full of good news aren’t you?”

Grinning cheekily, she answered. “Yeah, Jesus Lady is a pain in the ass. Thank goodness, I’m Sonja.”

Laughing, he added, “Sonja, my angel. Okay, let’s start planning what we need and make it happen as soon as possible. Anything you think is important, grab it, and haul it into the closet. I’ll begin packing everything up here.”

“Right on it, boss.” She sent him a sassy thumbs-up and disappeared from view.

Within the next fifteen minutes, working together, they managed to haul a number of articles up top. Worried about the chance they might have to climb outside on the roof, he pulled the sliding barn door off the closet and hauled it up as a platform should they need it.

Sonja appeared wreathed in smiles and awkwardly holding onto long, foam swimming floaters in different bright colors she’d stored in the spare bedroom. “It’s amazing what an adoring grandma will have around for when the grandkids come to visit.”

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Laughing, he hugged her shoulder, took the four long forms, and threw them up into the attic. “I wish you were my grandma.” He kissed the top of her head affectionately and then got back to work.

Next, he carried all the quilts, blankets, pillows, towels, bottles of water and boxes piled ready for him, and finally the wastebasket shaped like a bucket Sonja had gathered. Worried about how difficult climbing would be for Sonja, he took their makeshift rope and the bags of food from her, so she’d have her hands free.

Last thing he remembered – fill the juice bottles with water – the ones she’d bought with her groceries. They’d drank from them with their picnic and though they had another half-dozen, it seemed a good idea to have clean drinking water. Finally, he felt ready to make the move.

He could see that the creeping water now measured a foot and seemed to be rising fast. “Sonja, I think we need to make a shift now.”

“I agree. It’s not raining cats and dogs at the moment – more like lions and elephants.”

He shook his head teasingly. “You and your old sayings. Guess you nailed it though.”

“Hells bells, I’m a woman of the times, boy. Keep up.” Her comeback made him chuckle. She disappeared with her light then, and he followed to find her wading through the water to get to the sleeping boy.

“It’s okay. I can carry him.” So saying, he reached down and pulled Justin close.

When the small child trustingly wrapped his arms around Bryce's neck and buried his face, something inside Bryce twisted into a soft mushy mess. He'd had interactions with small patients before and always appreciated their unconscious loving ways. But something about this boy stirred him deeply. He could get very used to this feeling.

Holding the boy that way also let him feel the heat pouring out of the small body. "Sonja, do you have a first-aid kit?"

"Sure. Never thought of that. I'll get it."

"Does it have any Tylenol or aspirin?"

"No. But I have some in the medicine drawer. I'll grab that too."

"And a thermometer if you have one."

"It's in the kit, why?"

"I think our little waif here might be building a bit of a temperature. Not to worry, we'll check him once we get everything up here."

In a few minutes, he had safely put the boy on the bed of quilts he'd made for him near the window and next he went below to help Sonja. Surprisingly, the spry woman had little need of his assistance. It was her sore ankle that made help necessary.

Complimenting her on her strength and wishing more of his patients were the same, he commented, "Hey, Sonja. You're very agile for your age, but I think your ankle could use a bit of a bandage."

"Don't be rude, brat. My age indeed. I'll have you know, I'm only in my mid-seventies. I do yoga every weekday for half an hour before bed. Keeps me limber

which is what made me start the exercise routine when I was much younger. In my “28-day Exercise Plan” book, it says you’re as young as your back is flexible, and I genuinely believe that’s true.”

“Good for you, Methuselah. And I mean that sincerely. So what about the weekends?”

“In my day, we took the weekends off from work, and I still follow that golden rule. Gives me something to look forward to.”

They laughed together and worked over Justin to make him comfy. Sonja ground the Tylenol in a spoon and added water and a bit of sugar off one of the cookies, and he drank it down, still half-asleep.

Soon they too settled down beside the boy, and Bryce took a few moments to use a tensor bandage for Sonja’s ankle. Then he made her put it up on a pillow. Wrapping blankets around their shoulders as the cold sunk into their bones, they rested.

Once Bryce knew that Sonja had drifted off, he looked over her way. She’d cuddled into a nest, sitting with her back against one of the wider rafters. Exhaustion noticeable, her head had slunk to the side, and low snoring sounds could be heard.

Turning the lamps off to save the batteries and the oil, he sat keeping vigilance, watching the storm rage on the other side of the window. Continuously active, his mind took some time to slow down and his body to be restful. Thinking he should be doing something, feeling the responsibility of the moment crawling into his gut, he forced himself to stay vigilant.

He tried drinking a bit of their water and then deep breathing to calm his nerves that were still pumping too much adrenalin. Forcing sleep away, he kept blinking and then walking around, doing exercises, anything to stay awake. Finally, unable to continue

because of the pain he hadn't really dealt with, he took a couple of the Tylenol from the full bottle, huddled under his own quilt, and watched the raging storm taking place on the other side of their protective glass.

Realizing just how close they came to being killed worked like a wake-up call. Keeping his eyes glued to the river of raging water, he sat mesmerized. Because of the darkness, he could barely make out the sights, but at one point a house glided past and all he could see was the roof. Then some cars floated along, carried by the waves and even a motorhome on its side drifted until it hit against something from under the water that seemed to wedge it in place.

Eventually, the water's force pushed it along also. When the lightning flashes were the strongest, he saw other folks across the way clinging to their roof and blessed the fact that Sonja's menfolk had built her home the way they did. So they could stay inside where at least they were dry.

He checked on Justin yet again to be sure his temperature had leveled out. A half of an extra-strength Tylenol pill had helped, he knew. Sonja'd even insisted on rubbing his chest with Vicks VapoRub, saying she'd grown up using it whenever she had a cold, and it always soothed her.

Seeing as how Justin had liked her rubbing his chest and back and even the bottom of his feet with the menthol greasiness, who was he to say anything. If it pacified them both, then he was all for it. Checking the thermometer he took from under Justin's arm, he saw that it was still higher than he'd have liked but it wasn't life-threatening.

He left off the heavy quilt Sonja had wrapped around the boy and when his eyes opened, he gave him a bit more of the Tylenol with sugar. Bryce let the air cool him down before replacing the covers.

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Looking at his watch, he wasn't surprised to see that dawn would be breaking in an hour. Realizing the rain had slowed to a heavy downpour from the raging storm conditions of earlier, he prayed it would soon stop altogether.

The new day couldn't come fast enough for him. Forcing himself to relax, he understood that the hours ahead would need a herculean effort from everyone involved. The worst part for them would be keeping poor Justin from distressing over his missing mother.

Chapter Eight

Thankful for the large metal garbage can below that gave her a platform to balance on, Dena clung to the pole for what seemed like hours. While fighting the elements to keep her head above the water, she cried heartbrokenly. The guilt over losing Justin weighed on her and became worse as time went by.

Memories of the precious past kept her mind occupied as her body instinctively hung on though her muscles screamed at the treatment. The only way she could get through the horror was to ignore the dark cold water, forget about the wind that had played havoc with her surroundings, and pay no attention to the continuous flashes that ripped open the skies.

A few times, lightning flares came extremely close, and that's when she understood her own danger. Worried about being struck, or worse, having the water around her become ignited, she fretted about drowning and leaving her boy alone in the world. All her thoughts centered on the one person who meant more to her than life itself.

Completely drenched, colder than she'd ever been in her life, she watched houses, cars, trees, and people clinging to all kinds of floating contraptions like life rafts, bathtubs, and pieces of wood float past.

One man tried to get to her with his canoe, but he had no oar and the water just carried him away before he could help. Suddenly, she saw a large tree on its side heading in her direction, its branches floating in the water and its trunk showing signs of where it must have been ripped from the ground.

Terrified it would tear her away from her perch, she prayed it would pass by. Unfortunately, it didn't. Under the water, the tree's branches got caught up by the pole and it smashed into where she clung.

Screaming her fury at God's meanness, she buried her face and hung on. Once everything settled, she saw how the tree's branches had encircled the pole, using it to brace against.

She felt the brush of the branches below her body and was actually able to lay her weight on one of the larger ones so she could rest her arms. Carefully, she let the tree do the work in keeping her head above the water and realized God had blessed her, not punished.

Relief rushed through her and for the first time since she watched her boy float away in the car, she understood she might live through the madness. Wiping the hair from her face, she braced her whole body on the branch, cuddled into as small a ball as she could and drifted off.

It was the lightning striking the tree that woke her up to her new danger. That force had moved the tree over enough that the pole no longer held it secure.

Seeing through the light of the morning, she sensed when the tree finally broke loose

and knew she didn't have the strength left in her to hold her body's weight on the pole any longer. Seeing that the rain had slowed from a hurricane downpour, she had two choices. Try and hold on, staying where she was, or go with the tree and let it take her with it. Maybe to safety.

Knowing her hands were too sore to maintain her weight safely, she listened to the small voice in her head and made the decision to take what the good Lord had given her.

She watched as inches and then feet separated her from the safety of the pole. Lying flat over the wider part of the trunk now, she prayed. When the tree finally broke loose and started on a journey up the same wide street as Justin had gone earlier, she begged with everything in her not to fall into the cold, muddy water.

Half asleep, she rested her weight on the tree and saw the destruction all around and it broke her heart. The wide street had been a beautiful residential area before this nightmare. The width between the yards was spacious compared to the newer subdivisions where houses were forced together so close one could imagine reaching across from one window to the neighbor's and pass on a cup of borrowed sugar.

These homes were built for space and seeing it looking like a lake made her heart sore. Suddenly, she came fully awake to realize she wasn't moving any longer. The tree had gotten wedged by a streetlamp and the force of the water had it starting to swing wildly. She clung but knew it might only be a matter of minutes before she could be flung off her perch.

Now wide awake, through the dawn's early light, she made out the closest house where a face appeared in a dormer window. Frantically, she waved hoping the person would see her danger and help her.

Screaming, knowing the tree was likely to twist her off and terrified to jump into

water with so much debris between her and safety, she made herself ready for whatever eventuality would befall her.

Chapter Nine

Bryce couldn't believe his eyes. He moved over to the far window and checked again. Sure enough, there was a woman in danger... terrible danger.

She must have been clinging to the tree that was now trying to fling her off in its wild behavior of twisting and being buffeted by other debris nearby. Unfortunately, the wind had also picked up and was quickly becoming a source of worry. It would have been a problem trying to swim across to get to her in the cold water but fighting against the squall would make it hellish.

No matter, he had no choice. Waking Sonja, he got her attention and showed her the plight of the poor woman outside.

"What do you want to do? We can't let her drown."

"Thank goodness you found those floaters. We've got to tie them together. Can I use the belt from your robe?"

Quickly pulling it free, she said, "Good idea. Three of those suckers will be a better raft."

Talking out loud, he planned. "We can tie the main rope to me again, but I'll need you to haul us back if you can."

"Of course I can. I'll angle it around the rafter and use it to help me."

Bryce divested himself from his warm clothing and in just a pair of trunks, he helped

Sonja tie the rope around his chest. Together, they opened the window and Bryce lowered himself and his floaters carefully into the waves, worried when the wind caught him he'd be flung around.

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Paddling for all he was worth; ignoring the cold of the water and the disgusting mess of the brown murkiness, he made his way to the panicky woman and saw her plight instantly. There was a car coming straight for her side of the tree and the weight of the vehicle might be enough to crush her.

Never having been a great swimmer, he outdid himself in his efforts to get to her. Then something seemed to grab at his leg. He felt the agony as he scraped against a pointed and dangerous unseen adversary. Wanting to reach for the painful area, he willed himself instead to ignore it and keep moving.

Almost at the tree, he saw what she was screaming about.

“Don’t come too close. You’ll be killed. Stay away. I’ll get to you.”

When she saw he had heard her, she lowered herself into the water and flung her body toward him, half swimming, and half drowning in her hurry to get away before the coming vehicle stopped her forever.

Paying no attention to her warnings, he forced himself closer, was able to reach her, and pull her to him. He hauled her up on the ballast beside him and with his body weight, he swung them around. Then he used the hood of the approaching vehicle as leverage to push them away just in time before it crashed into the tree, breaking off the section where the woman had gripped only moments before.

Clinging to each other now, he felt the rope start to tug him back in the direction from where he came. Hearing her dreadful cries of relief and pain and thankfulness all rolled up into prayers, he hugged the woman to him even tighter.

No doubt the poor lady had gone through hell and now saw a chance to survive. No wonder she thanked him repeatedly, wrapped her arms around his neck, and let the tears flow.

Once Sonja had tugged him back to the window ledge, he helped the lady crawl inside first before attempting to follow.

“Here now, you must be exhausted. Let me help you too.” Sonja reached for his hands and used her weight to bolster him into the opening. As soon as she saw the blood pouring from his leg, she slapped him gently. “You’ve hurt yourself, taking such a dangerous chance. You’re the angel, bud. Not me. Here take this towel and dry off. Then wrap up in the quilt. I’ll get the first-aid kit.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He thankfully did as she ordered and watched her retrieve the white bag with the red cross on it before moving over to the half-drowned woman lying in a heap on the floor.

Seeing the blood still oozing from his wound, he quickly put a bandage over the area, covered himself, and joined her to see if the woman needed his medical help.

“I’m – I’m fine now. I’ll be okay once I get my breath. Th-thank you for saving me. Without your help, I would have been another statistic for sure. The car smashed the tree where I held on. I-I would have been crushed.” Tears leaked out of the eyes holding shock, while her sopping hair hid half her face.

Sonja brushed it away and wrapped yet another towel around her shaking shoulders. “You’re welcome, sweet girl. Now we need to get you dry.”

He got their attention, needing to ask, “Are you injured anywhere?”

The woman shook her head and admitted, “Just exhausted, And my hands are sore

from clinging to the pole.” She opened her fists, and he saw the bruising and bloody scrapes, knowing this woman had suffered terribly.

“Once you get changed into something dry, I’ll take care of those for you.”

Seeing Sonja’s head gesturing for him to leave and knowing when he wasn’t needed, Bryce went back to the window where Justin still lay curled up in his cocoon. He wiped himself dry first and then rebandaged his gash using iodine and medicated ointment before putting his clothes back on.

Next he checked the boy and his training kicked into high gear. He found him burning with a high temperature that had skyrocketed in the short time since he’d last checked.

“Mom-my.” Tears poured down Justin’s red cheeks as he peered up at Bryce longingly, his body shivering. Bryce felt the sweaty forehead and saw the feverish need in the boy’s glassy stare.

“I want my mommy.” His voice increased in volume, no longer willing to be placated.

Chapter Ten

A scream of wonder pierced the quiet as Dena heard the sounds of her child’s cries.

“Justin!”

“Mommy.”

Not quite dressed, the shirt Sonja had leant her still undone, Dena half ran, half fell to where the boy lay. Landing hard on her knees beside Bryce, her hands trembling

wildly, she reached for the child, pulled him into her arms, rocking back and forth.

“My baby. Your safe. Thank God. Thank you. Thank you.”

Seconds later, she seemed to understand there was a problem. Holding him back so she could see his face and the rapture at the sight of her, she looked first at Bryce and then at Sonja. “He’s sick.”

“Just a little fever.” Sonja replied, “It’s a miracle that you’re his mom. We were worried about you when we found him in the car alone.”

Holding her boy close, her hand gently caressing his hair, Dena whispered. “I just went to pay for my gas. Stepped out of the car and then the wall of water came before I could get back to him. I’ve been frantic all night.” She held her boy away and saw his lackadaisical behavior, his weakness and shuddering.

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“He’s burning up.”

Sonja reached over to put her hand on his forehead. Then she turned to Bryce. “She’s right, son.”

Bryce, wanting to calm the ladies, spoke matter-of-factly. “He was perfectly fine when we first got him out of the car but the stint in the water and his worry about his mom probably weakened him. I did take his temperature before I went to get you, Dena, and gave him a bit more Tylenol. Now you’re with him again, we may see a quick recovery.”

Dena nodded and arranged Justin into her lap. Then she reached for the covers that both Sonja and Bryce helped her with. “Maybe if I hold him close and he feels me with him, it’ll help.”

Exhausted, with Bryce’s help, she lay down on the makeshift bed of quilts and let her eyelids close for just a minute. But that’s all it took. Completely wiped out, she let the exhaustion carry her away and both her and the boy slept.

Sonja gestured to Bryce to meet her at the other window. “Is it serious? His fever took off a lot faster than I’ve seen before.”

Bryce didn’t overly worry that the symptoms could be anything at this point. Not wanting to scare his new friend, he shrugged. “Not really. When you fell asleep earlier, I checked him, and it was 99.4 then. I think it’s probably a little bit higher

now but the medicine I gave him will have some affect.”

“Best remedy was finding her... his mommy. He started calling for her when we were busy, and it was like a miracle that she was the one you saved. Goodness, Dr. Sweetheart, those two sure owe you a lot.”

“Dr. Sweetheart? Now where did you come up with that?” He balked at her description.

“It’s exactly who you are so don’t pull the “aww-gosh ma’am” card with me.” She giggled at his grumpy grin and pushed against his shoulder. “It means you’re a good guy.”

“I know what it means,” he grumbled. “I just don’t deserve the title. If you only knew how much I didn’t want to go back into that water, you’d understand what a wuss I really am.”

“Ahh... but that’s just it. You did go back, and you never hesitated. See... that’s the difference. Doing something you really don’t want to do but doing it anyway. I couldn’t be prouder of you if you were my own son. In fact, I’m thinking you’re an honorary one from this day forth. Whaddaya think of them apples?”

Laughing now, Bryce one-arm hugged her and whispered. “You’re the only one I’d want to have gone through this with, Jesus Lady. And that’s the truth. I’m happy to be your adopted son.”

Sonja leaned her head against his shoulder and sighed. “What do think is going to happen to us now?”

“I have no idea. This is my first experience with this type of weather. Have you seen a storm like this before?”

“Nope. Never. What frightens the poop outta me is that this area isn’t the only place where Mother Nature is wreaking havoc. That part scares me silly. Watching the news most nights and seeing the damage around the world is terrifying. I only pray that folks wake up and make their governments do something about our climate problems in time.”

Impressed that the old woman was so in touch with the world today, Bryce nodded, not wanting to worry her further by admitting her prayers had traumatized him more times than he wanted to admit.

Together, they sat by the window where the morning light grew stronger by the minute. Observing the activity slowly begin around them, they both mentioned how fortunate they were to be inside. The tree that had given refuge to Justin’s mom had shifted and was now balancing on the balcony of a house across the street.

Car roofs could now be viewed completely underwater in some yards and the damage to many of the houses was brutal. Trees were bent over and in some cases broken and resting in odd places, one even lying over the roof of a drowned vehicle.

The one missing element was the rain. It had finally stopped along with the other storm-like features such as the higher winds and thankfully, the lightning. Now, the eerie quiet of the dawn only looked cold and dull, clouds covering the sky, making the weather seem miserable and unapologetic.

Bryce felt the weight of Sonja against him and knew the old lady had drifted off again. Cuddling her close, he let himself relax and leaning back against the wall, he drifted off.

The muffled scream coming from the other side of the attic woke him instantly.

Chapter Eleven

Laying Sonja prone on his blanket and covering her as best he could, Bryce moved over to where the woman and child were nestled together.

Using the flashlight, he lifted it just enough to have some light and saw instantly that the woman had called out in her sleep, and it must have woken her.

She looked up at him, "I'm sorry I disturbed you. I guess the nightmares have begun. I've never been so afraid in my life and reliving it was horrible."

He reached for her hand to help her move from under the weight of the boy. While she cautiously slid out, he checked Justin's forehead and was relieved to see the boy's face felt cooler to the touch.

"Are you hungry?" He spoke low but with a tenderness he used for the most terrified patients. "We have bottled water, peanut butter sandwiches, health bars, and Oreo cookies to share." So saying, he reached for their provisions where Sonja had put them in a plastic shopping bag and offered it to her.

"Thank you." She took the parcel from him and when her eyes saw his face closely for the first time, she fell back in shock.

He saw her confusion. “What?”

“You don’t remember me?” Had her voice wavered?

“I can’t see you.” He took the light and held it in front of her rather than himself and saw her face for the first time closely. “Okay... I do remember you. It was seven years ago, when I was still a resident. We met at a bar, right?”

Shock making her studder, she nodded, hesitating slightly, “Ye-es. R-right. Seven years ago. St, Patrick’s day, March 17th.”

“That’s right. We were drinking to him.”

“And everything else.” When she said that, her face flushed, and she looked away. “I wondered about you from time to time. Looks like you made it to being a doctor.”

“Yep. I did. I went back to that same bar a few more times hoping to run into you again, but no luck.” He watched to see if she too remembered the special night they’d shared. Between the dim lighting and her keeping her face in shadow, he couldn’t make out her expression.

Remembering how he’d worked like a trojan the day after meeting her, fretting because of the plane crash that meant he’d worked numerous overtime hours, still had the ability to make his stomach clench. Back then, all he’d thought about was finding her again – his princess.

Disgusted with himself for not being able to remember the address she’d given the

Uber driver; he'd cussed at his stupidity for not getting her real name or telephone number.

When his inner clock woke him the morning they were together, he'd known if he didn't move, he'd be late for work. He went to wake her, but she was cuddled so prettily next to his pillow that he didn't have the heart to disturb the beautiful girl.

So he'd run from the apartment thankfully seeing a Downtown bus pull up to the nearby stop. He quickly grabbed it and half slept until he saw signs of the city. Once his brain kicked in and he realized he had no idea where she lived, his fury erupted. How could he be so stupid?

He just prayed she'd be at the bar so he could find her again. Over the next few weeks, every break he had in his murderous working schedule, he went back... all his efforts to no avail. Not that he would share all that with her now. He didn't want to be seen as the pathetic loser he must have appeared to her at the time.

Her voice brought him back to their small private nook in the attic. "Right. You wouldn't have found me. I moved away from Miami shortly after we met."

She couldn't tell him the real truth. That he'd been the reason she'd turned her whole world around and became a new person... the woman she was today.

"So, how long have you been in Fort Myers?"

"A few years. I couldn't wait to come back after living in Seattle for a while. The rainy weather got to me." She looked toward the window where the slashing rain still pelted the glass. "Go figure." They both laughed at her playful sarcasm.

“You couldn’t stay away. I get it.”

She became serious and wanted him to understand. “Things were tough for me back then. I wanted a fresh chance. Then when everything began to go my way, and I got my degree, I decided to bring Justin back to Florida with me. I chose to settle in this area... this utopia. I really like it here and giving my boy a better life had become more important than anything else.”

“How long have been back?”

“About three years. Long enough to have enjoyed the lifestyle. Never would I have imagined we’d be living through this calamity.”

“No kidding. I’ve been here a lot longer and have never seen anything like it either... and hope to never again.”

Dena handed Bryce a sandwich before taking a bite from her own. “This is the best food I’ve ever had.”

“Probably because you’re starving.”

She shrugged. “That, plus the fact that last night I never thought I’d ever eat anything again.” Her voice wobbled on the last word and the tears began to fill her eyes. She dropped the sandwich on her lap and quickly covered her face with her hands... shoulders shaking from anguish.

Without hesitation, Bryce reached for her and hauled her into his arms, uncaring about his own food. He pressed her head to his shoulder, used his hands to caress her cheeks, and hold aside her still damp hair. “I understand, Dena. You were very brave, Princess. Incredible. Now you’re safe, it’s okay to let go... in fact, it’s crucial. We both know that sooner or later, you’ll have to deal with the fear you had to suppress

to stay alive.”

Chapter Twelve

Dena heard Bryce’s whispered “Princess” and knew he remembered everything about the night they had spent together all those years ago. Having his arms hold her on the most frightening night of her life seemed fitting somehow. She couldn’t have asked for a better hero.

Fighting for control, she made herself stop crying and relax against him, her face still nuzzled next to his fast-beating heart. “How did you find Justin?”

“Pretty much the same way we found you only he was floating past in the car. The water was beginning to seep into the broken window, and we knew we needed to get him out of there as quickly as possible. With Sonja’s help, I waded to the vehicle, pulled him out, and brought him back to the house to be with us. That’s when the water still hadn’t reached the second floor.”

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“I saw it rising from my pole. When I tried to climb higher, my feet found one of those big garbage cans. It must have been carried closer with the moving water and it lodged against where I hung on. It gave me a bit of respite having a platform below to stand on when I couldn’t reach the ground anymore.”

“Yet you did let go because I found you on the tree.”

“Yes. I blessed that tree. As it floated along, the branches got held up by the garbage can and the pole. Since my arms had gone numb, and my hands were useless by then, I was able to perch on the wider limb just in time.” A sob broke, and Bryce squeezed her gently.

“How horrifying. You must have been terrified.”

“All I could think of was Justin. I had to find him somehow, but I couldn’t move. Then the tree broke loose and well, you know the rest.” She looked toward where her son now lay sleeping comfortably and sighed. “How can I ever thank you?”

“No thanks needed, Dena. None whatsoever. In times like this, everyone does what they can to assist someone else. It’s what I love about this country. I’ve seen it over and over again in the hospital. Makes me feel fortunate to live here.”

“I know what you mean. I’m a caregiver and have a number of clients who I’m proud to look after. They’re all so loving and kind, those folks. Makes me happy to go to work every day. Now I’m terrified to think of what might be happening to them in this disaster.”

Bryce chuckled in a gentle way that made her feel better. “No doubt someone has stepped in to take care of them.”

“It’s what I’ve prayed for.” Dena never wanted this moment to end but she knew she had to ask. “Won’t your wife be frantic about you? Is she safe?”

“I’m not married. Never had the time when I was starting in medicine and then couldn’t find the right girl I’d want to be with for the rest of my life. It’s not easy today to find that person. How about you?”

“I’ve had the same experience. Never did meet Mr. Right.” She added the word again in her head. She felt Bryce nodding and relaxed immediately. Because of her excitement at his pronouncement, she patted his back without thinking.

As if he took that as encouragement to continue, he added, “It’s a jungle out there. Sometime I’ll share the crazy experiences I’ve had searching for a woman I’d consider normal without all that baggage everyone seems to be dragging behind them today.”

“I’d like that. After I got pregnant with Justin, I left behind my wild ways and became so ahh... goody-two-shoes, my roommates would gag.” She laughed along with him but secretly remembered the exhausting fights she’d had against the pressures the others put on her to come and let loose, live a little... have some fun.

“Tell me about your life now.” He rubbed her arm and mesmerized her with the soft tone in his voice.

And so she shared more with him than she normally would. Being a reticent soul who kept her business to herself, she felt like she’d known him forever. Plus, he was a doctor and from her experience with the good ones, mostly, they cared. “One of my ladies is almost ninety years old, and she still walks around the block every day. And

it's a long block," she clarified. "I often go with her, and it shocks me to see how many people are sitting outside on their porches, waiting to greet her. Sometimes she stops to chat, and I swear she knows every sick relative of those folks, and she enquires about them too. Maisy is her name. She's my favorite."

Knowing her chattiness might be bothering him, she looked up and saw his twinkling eyes staring down.

"Go on. I'm enjoying myself, listening. The conversation is making our situation feel natural rather than frightening. Tell me about more of your ladies."

"Oh, I don't just care for females. I have a few gentlemen that need my help too. Harold is a special fellow. He's a card player, likes to bet on the games."

His laughter preceded his quip. "Have you lost the barn yet?"

"Oh, we bet candies, and the local convenience store owner is always freakishly delighted when I'm forced to buy yet another bag of chocolate kisses."

"He knows about your gambling problem?"

"In a weak moment, I coughed up an explanation for the multi sweet purchases."

This time his laughter broke loose, and she had to shush him so he wouldn't wake the others. "I'll tell you about the others another time. You must be exhausted yourself. Maybe we should take advantage of the morning hours and try to nap a little."

He loosened his hold on her and stared down. "You're right, of course. Suddenly, I feel tired again, and you must be exhausted. Look, why don't you go and cuddle next to Justin. I'll check on Sonja. It's chilly up here and Justin would welcome your warmth."

Dena heard the affection in his voice and tenderness washed over her. A need to let him know how much she appreciated him became vital, and she turned her head so she could kiss his cheek. Unknowing of her intentions, he also went to face her, and her lips connected to his face only inches from his lips.

They froze.

For seconds, neither moved.

Then he backed away so he could see into her liquid gaze and the warmth there undid him. He moved in and accepted her caress on his lips where an explosion of need almost made him take over with a real kiss. But he controlled his instincts and let their lips join in the softest of touches... the thanks she meant her gesture to be.

Everything inside him mourned having to back off... be the gentleman. Lord, it had been so long since he'd felt the need for romance rather than just sex clawing inside. The last time he remembered feeling this particular way was the night they first met.

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Watching her scramble to where the boy slept, he saw her lift the blanket and roll in close to the small body. She turned back to him and whispered, “His temperature is normal now. Thank you.”

He gestured with a wave and a smile, not wanting to make any more noise than possible. Next he cleared away the food, putting it all back in the bag and scrambled over to where Sonja hadn’t moved. The early light through the window beckoned, and he settled himself there, a blanket wrapped around his shoulders.

The scene on the other side of the glass kept him spellbound. There were few people in his sight but those he did see were hustling on their rooftops, trying to keep warm, and obviously watching for help to come.

The neighbors across from him looked like they were freezing, and he felt sorry for their discomfort. There was a woman, a man, and two children that he could see. As he followed their movements, he saw that their danger had become extreme.

All they’d had to hold off the elements was one plastic cover that looked like an old blue tarp. They had been holding it over them as protection but now it seemed as if they were weakening. His heartbeats tripled when he saw the woman collapse and her man trying desperately to keep her from sliding off the roof.

He could almost hear the cries of the children as they too clung to the woman.

“Oh my God, Bryce. She’s going to fall.” Sonja had woken and crept close. He’d been so enthralled by the happenings across the street, he hadn’t even noticed her moving.

“They’re pulling her back.”

“But for how long? They must be exhausted if they’ve been out there all night.”

“I can’t see how they would have survived out in the open. They must have been on the other side of the roof. This is the first I’ve seen them.”

“I noticed them moving earlier but didn’t think they were in any trouble other than the obvious of course. Oh, no. She’s slipping again.”

Bryce watched the man reach out and haul her back once again to safety, but he didn’t know how long the poor guy could hold on. It was that final slide that showed her belly and made him wonder if she were pregnant.

Bryce stood and threw off the blanket.

Chapter Thirteen

“You aren’t planning to go out there again, are you?” Sonja’s voice wavered.

“There’s no choice, Sonja. You can see that, right? If she rolls into the water, she’ll never survive, and he has two kids to look out for and another on the way. I’ll take the floaters and that door I pulled off the closet.” He pointed towards the wooden barn door he’d hauled up with them. “Maybe now that the winds aren’t so bad, we can control the platform enough to get everyone back safely. Will you help me?”

“Of course.”

“What can I do?” Dena had appeared from the other side of the room. Her willingness to help couldn’t be questioned.

Sonja didn't let him argue or tell Dena just to stay with Justin. She quickly intervened, "Come help us tie the floaters on each side of this closet door. We have enough rope."

The two women helped him get the raft ready. Then he undressed to his underwear and before he could push off, Sonja took the tie off her robe and fastened it around his waist. "Tie it to the floaters so it can't get away from you. The water's running pretty fast. If you need to use your hands, you won't lose the platform."

Within seconds, he'd done her bidding and then slowly lowered himself into the water that had dropped a few inches from the night before and was a good three feet below the windowsill.

Shivering, cussing inside from the frigid cold, he pushed away from the house, clinging to the raft to keep himself afloat.

Sonja began yelling across the way to get their attention. Thankfully, the man noticed and seemed to understand that help was coming. With one arm, he waved back as did his two children. They looked to be about Justin's age, both dripping wet and obviously terrified.

Pumping his feet to propel the raft, Bryce made it to their rooftop and looked up to see the others waiting for him. He yelled to the man. "Let's take your wife first."

Nodding, the man helped his semi-conscious wife down, and Bryce saw she really was pregnant, her poor frozen belly distended. Glad that Sonja had used her robe belt to secure the raft around his waist, he used both hands to take the weight of the woman so he could lay her over the raft. He used the thumbs-up sign to let the others know she was safe and then he quickly began to paddle his way back to where he'd come from.

Both Sonja and Dena were waiting for him, and Dena leaned out the window far enough that she could guide the woman's feet while he shielded her head to move her from the raft to where the women could help her through the window. The poor woman's weakness made her pitiful attempts to assist them almost negligible.

Once he knew she was safely inside, he began the slow, treacherous journey once again, this time to bring both the children. Their trembling little bodies brought tears to his eyes, and he used his soft doctor's voice to keep them calm. "Don't be frightened my little minion friends. You'll be safe soon. We have dry clothes, warm blankets, and peanut butter sandwiches and cookies to fill your empty tummies. Promise."

The boy grinned, seeming to get the quip. He held onto his sister protectively, and Bryce saw they were identical twins.

"There are two women waiting at our house to help you inside. Be ready to reach up so they can grab your hands. Don't be scared. I'll keep the raft from flipping."

"What about my dad?"

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“He’s my next customer,” Bryce teased and appreciated the duplicate grins he got from both his passengers.

Once they were safe with Sonja, he turned the raft around and headed back one more time. His legs felt like they were cement, and this trip took longer than the other two. Freezing now, his lips trembling from the cold, he forced himself past his endurance.

Thankfully, the man had been waiting for him and rather than lower himself onto the raft, he got into the water and with both men pushing and swimming, they got back to the house a lot quicker.

Lifting his arm to wave at Sonja, he turned to his partner and basically grunted his request. “Can you help them get you inside? Just lift your arms and once they grab your hands, lift your body as best you can. They’ll do the rest.”

“Right.” Following his directions, the fellow scrambled through the window as quickly as possible and then turned back so he could help bolster Bryce up next. Between the two of them, they hauled the raft in close enough to tie it to the windowsill and then collapsed in a heap, water spreading everywhere.

Sonja rushed forward with dry towels for each. In a fussy way, her voice filled with worry, she mothered them. “Thank goodness we brought so many of these up here, Bryce. You must dry off as much as possible.” Looking at Bryce’s companion, she added, “I’ll get a pile of warm clothes for you, Liam. Bryce, yours are over where you left them.”

Muttering, she pushed gently at Bryce’s shoulder and added, “I knew I was right to

have you bring up those old clothes boxes for the Thrift stores. Most of its gear for men but there's enough of my old stuff too. We can get everyone into dry things in no time."

Before he could get dressed in the clothes he'd left behind, Dena stepped forward and using a small hand towel, she massaged his back, chest, and arms briskly to get the circulation working again. "You must be frozen, Bryce. You were in that horrible cold water the longest."

Enjoying her mothering and liking the worry in her voice, which meant she cared, he let her carry on. When she held out his dry garments from earlier, he used the towel in front as a cover and wriggled out of the wet underwear. Then he gratefully slid on the warm sweatpants and shirt. He'd never felt so good as he did when he guided the warm socks over his ice-cold feet.

Seeing that the women and Justin were now fussing over the other man and his children, he made his way to where the woman still lay under the blankets given up by Justin, their earlier patient.

Between them, Sonja and Dena must have stripped her from her soaked garments, and she now wore old fleecy pants and socks like the ones he had. Sonja had given up her robe and it wrapped around her body. They'd covered her in Justin's bed which was the best place for her now.

Bryce went over to kneel beside the poor woman. "I'm Doctor Bryce Kelly. I work here at the hospital, and I have a clinic in the Island Health Center. How far along are you with the pregnancy?" He reached to touch her forehead and then took her pulse.

Chattering from still being cold, her lips revealing a blue tinge, she answered slowly. "I've g-got fi-ive weeks to go, Doctor."

“Call me Bryce. These last hours must have taken a toll on you. Have there been any contractions, any pain whatsoever?”

“Not until this morning. W-we pretty much just huddled together last night against the roof peak under the tarp and used our bodies to hold it over us. My husband, Liam, was diligent about us staying to-together. Poor kids were terrified, especially from the lightning and the wind.” Tired from talking now, she closed her eyes.

Bryce patted her shoulder and pulled the blankets up around her neck. “I’m in awe that you survived the way you did. At least we were inside.”

“Th-thank you for coming to get us. I was losing it there at the end.”

“No doubt. Not to worry. Everyone’s safe now. Try to get some sleep.”

Bryce saw Dena waving him her way, waiting to talk with him. Meanwhile, Sonja was playing hostess with the others, passing out sandwiches and cookies.

Once he and Dena were far enough away, she spoke with her voice low. “Sonja and I dried Rose as best we could. Poor thing was frozen and just sat there, hugging her tummy, and crying. She was soaked, Bryce, from her hair to the wrinkled skin on her feet. I doubt if she could have survived much longer.”

“That’s exactly what prompted me to make the rescue. I’m just glad it all worked out.”

“It was dangerous... truly dangerous for you. You know that.”

“Maybe. But what could I do? They were in the elements and freezing, and we were relatively warm and certainly dry, undercover from the winds that are picking up again. I couldn’t leave them there, could I?”

“No. I’m just so thankful you made it.” As if it was meant to be, he opened his arms, and she slid in, nestled close exactly the way he wanted. Thrilled, he just held her and rocked gently.

Chapter Fourteen

Through the hours of that day, most of the adults, except for Rose, took turns watching out the windows. They knew there could be others who might need assistance, and they had to be ready to help.

At times, Justin and Dena were huddled together near one window and Bryce could see their closeness was natural to them. He imagined they spent a lot of time together in such a way, joking and teasing each other... a family.

It made him happy to see such tenderness between a mother and her son, but it also saddened him to think he’d given up the option of having a family in his youth.

Following his dream of being a pediatrician had come before anything else. As a boy, he’d seen his little sister suffer from leukemia and struggle to stay alive and then lose the battle. And he’d also watched his parents die a little more each day with her... as did their marriage.

Going through his teenage years with a single mom who’s heart lay in the grave with her daughter had been sad and lonely. Eventually, she’d joined her daughter when lung cancer took her too. That’s when he’d made up his mind to do everything in his power to be the healer and not the victim.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:12 am

All those years of study, late hours with no sleep, and then working through the pandemic had taken its toll on his dating life. Oh, he'd had one-nighters and even a few romances that lasted until the women realized they came in second to his career. Then they moved on, and he kept searching.

Let's see, it had to be at least seven years ago when he'd met Dena. She had been the one woman in his past who might have made the difference. Strangely, she'd been a fleeting joy never forgotten. Other women never lived up to his expectations in the same way. They never left him reeling, his body fulfilled, and his heart peeking out to see the person who might fit inside.

Lost in his daydreaming, he didn't notice the man approach. Liam sat cross-legged and held out his hand. Coming out of his spell, Bryce automatically reached out his own to be grasped.

"Thank you again, Bryce. Looking around here and seeing my family safe, man, you can't know how much it means to me."

"I have a pretty good idea, bro. I really do. I'm glad we could help, and I mean that sincerely."

Liam accepted Bryce's words and blinked the sudden tears away. "I can admit now, I was petrified most of the time, seeing the conditions and knowing how weak Rose had become."

"No doubt. I'm still in awe that you managed to keep them all safe. The lightning must have terrified them."

Bryce purposely didn't add Liam into that group, his way of respecting what the man had suffered.

"Thankfully, that old tarp had been the last thing I grabbed as we cut through the roof. The water had begun to rise so quickly, we didn't have a lot of time to understand we needed to evacuate. With Rose's condition, I really didn't want to be forced outside, but the weather wouldn't cooperate with what the hell I wanted."

Grinning, Bryce agreed. "Same here. Once we got Justin inside, we hoped to be able to live out the rest of the storm on the second floor, but a higher power had other plans. Thankfully, we did have enough time to plan a little. Sonja, my old friend there, she piled all kinds of stuff by the step ladder, and if I didn't pull it all up, she'd have done so herself. That iron lady had her own agenda. I just fell meekly in line." The affection in his voice was clear to anyone listening.

"She's a great neighbor. My wife and I love having her visits, and the kids adore her. I'll admit to being worried about her being here alone when the craziness got worse. But I knew she was on higher ground than we were, and she had this attic space."

"Strangely, I hadn't met her before today. I'd been in the pub of all places, yakking with an old friend who owns it and was walking back to my car when I found her trying to get home with her groceries. She'd twisted her ankle and the water, just a bit of a river then, had made it impossible for her to maneuver."

"That's a few blocks away. She's very lucky you came along."

"Hey, I consider myself the fortunate one for having met up with her. Who knows what would have happened to me in the car when the levee broke. I'm relieved to be here."

"I'm glad you're here too. I checked on Rose, and she's sleeping, but very restless."

Do you think this craziness might have harmed her pregnancy?"

Bryce didn't want to frighten Liam with his own suspicions, but he intended on keeping a very close eye on the woman. Thankful that Sonja had a first-aid kit and they'd thought to bring it upstairs with them, he saw Sonja gesturing for him to come.

Excusing himself, he rose, went back to Rose and understood why Sonja had been worried. Rose's trembling had worsened, and she was in a lot of pain.

"Rose, tell me what hurts the worst."

"It's my back. It's aching. And I can't stop shaking."

"Right. This might be a delicate question but when was the last time you urinated? Your bladder could be full and that might be the cause of your discomfort."

Through tearful eyes, Rose blinked and then sheepishly admitted, "I held it in all night on the roof. It's been a long time since I went to the bathroom. Yes, you're right. I do need to relieve myself but there's no washroom upstairs, is there?"

"No, but Sonja brought a bucket just for that situation. The girls or your husband can help you. I think you'll feel a lot better afterwards, not so much pressure."

Rose called for Liam and between him and Sonja, they guided her around to the opposite side of the attic where Sonja had put the bucket. In no time, she had taken care of business, and Bryce knew she'd feel a lot better.

Leading her back to her blankets, the two women and Liam helped her lower herself and the sigh of relief came loud and clear.

Waiting for her to return, he saw that she walked easier and stood straighter. "That

help?”

“Yes, I feel much better. I didn’t realize it had been so long what with everything happening. I guess I just forced it back and carried on.”

Bryce again took her temperature and her pulse. Thankfully, there was no sign of a fever. “Looks good, Rose. Truthfully, I think the best thing you can do right now is rest. Your poor body suffered a lot more out in the elements than the others.”

Liam spoke up, still holding his wife’s hand. “You do look happier now, honey. I’m sorry I never thought to ask if you were uncomfortable for that reason.”

“I actually feel normal, or as normal as an eight-month pregnant balloon could feel.” She giggled and held her husband’s hand to pull him close. “Truly. Stop worrying. By the way, did I hear someone say peanut butter sandwiches?”

Sonja arrived with a sandwich served on a facecloth, and she passed over a bottle of water. “You eat honey. And sleep. We’re all fine now and can ride out whatever the storm hands out.”

Chapter Fifteen

Dena watched Liam and Bryce chatting and saw their handshake. She knew how Liam felt because she experienced the same overwhelming gratitude when she thought of how Bryce had saved her and Justin.

Knowing her sweet boy was Bryce's son, she became slightly terrified at the thought of telling him the truth. Looking back at her lack of options in letting him know about her pregnancy, she wondered if he would say that she hadn't searched as hard as she might have.

Problem was, she'd never looked at all. The thought of admitting that scared her silly. Yet, the facts were undeniable. How could she look? She hadn't known of her condition until she'd moved to Seattle and used up every penny she had to get there.

Plus, she didn't have a name or which hospital he worked at. All she knew about him was that he was a hard-working resident, trying desperately to get his degree.

And a coming baby certainly wouldn't have been welcome news. Especially with a stranger – a woman he'd only met once. Because it had been her choice to keep her child, she had always felt that the full responsibility lay with her.

On the other hand, she'd never expected to run into him again. Nor had she ever in a million years imagined her longing to be revived. That her body might have its own memories of just how wonderful that night had been.

They'd had sex more than once, and he'd hugged her to him the rest of the time.

Playfully, they'd talked about all kinds of silly things but not real facts about themselves.

Now she wondered what had prompted her to ever allow that one man such access to her very soul. None of the others back then had ever gotten through her shields. They'd just been ships in the night and other than the certain kind of release they offered; she wanted nothing else from them.

When she met Bryce, it had been months since she'd been with anyone else. The last man she'd allowed privileges turned out to be a loud-mouthed jerk, and she swore she'd be a lot more discriminating in the future.

Then during those St. Patrick's Day festivities, she'd met her prince. It had been different with him the moment they met. That man had sunk through her very skin, and she'd yearned for him to return. She went back to the bar the next night and then the next, feeling abandoned and knowing she had no right to be.

Furious with her neediness, she blew it off by telling herself he didn't matter... none of it mattered. But his maturity and focus on his goals made her ashamed of her useless lifestyle.

So... she didn't smoke or take drugs again. Instead, she took all her money and bought a bus ticket to Seattle where an old friend lived. She'd promised herself she'd strive hard to better herself there. A person she felt proud to be.

Once she got into the swing of things, everything began to work out for her. She got a job in a daycare center where another friend helped her get her caregiving degree. And... best of all, God rewarded her with Justin.

Chapter Sixteen

“Bwyce, come and see.”

Justin appeared at his shoulder looking upset and reached for his hand. Glad that the boy felt safe with him, he accepted his offer and went to where Justin drew him.

“Look.”

He followed the boy’s pointing finger and saw immediately what the problem was. A small dog that looked to still be a pup had somehow gotten himself up on what appeared to be a Rubbermaid tub cover. It lay in a sodden heap, shivering with cold and whining from fear. The poor bedraggled little treasure was alone and frightened to death.

“We need to save him, wight?” Justin’s voice urged him to agree.

Just then Dena moved in beside them and took in Justin’s worry immediately. “Honey, you can’t ask Bryce to go out in that cold water again. The puppy will be fine. He’s on top of the cover.”

But Bryce knew that with the wind blowing stronger now, anything could happen to the poor soaked baby. Without thinking about what he was doing, he began to make plans to go back out into the water and didn’t see that Justin had ignored his mother’s words and had beaten him to it.

The boy had just jumped from where Bryce had opened the glass pane to see better and was now floundering, his gasp from the icy coldness penetrating. Bryce grabbed one of the floaters and followed, not worrying about anything else.

He stretched for the boy and tried to lift him upwards to where Dena leaned out to grab him, but Justin clung to his neck and fought to stay with him. “No. No. I want the puppy.” He arched his cold little body away from where Dena reached out with

her trembling hands and dread-filled eyes. “We need to save the puppy.”

Seeing that the wind had actually pushed the plastic boat closer, Bryce, with Justin entwined around his body, kept hold of the floater for balance while kicking toward the dog. Reaching out with the other arm, he was able to grip the edge of the now swirling plastic. Somehow the wind had picked it up, making it turn.

He lost hold and watched in horror as it swirled away. He heard Justin’s cry of distress and knew he had to go after it and this time grip it tighter.

Only by doing so, it tipped the whole thing and the puppy slid off into the water a few feet from them. The poor animal didn’t seem to know what to do, it just kept its little legs paddling.

Finally, Bryce got close enough to scoop the pup up from underneath and holding both the boy with the floater and the puppy, he thrashed his way back to the window.

Liam stood waiting for him to get close enough. “You need some help out there, bud?”

“No. Just grab the pup. I’ve got Justin.”

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:12 am

Dena stood close to Liam and was reaching for her child, uncontrollably shaking, crying from the fear that had to have struck her once she saw her boy dive into such danger.

“I’m sorry, Bryce. Here let me take him.”

When Bryce went to lift the boy to her, Justin wouldn’t let go. His arms wrapped around Bryce’s neck clung tight. “Don’t be afraid, son. Your mom will help you inside.”

“I want you. Don’t let me go.”

When Bryce heard the words that it was him who the boy specifically wanted, his heart burst with joy. Knowing it wasn’t fair to Dena – a mother’s worry knew no bounds – he had to respect the kid’s wishes.

So... he lunged with a herculean effort, lifting them both, and let Dena and Liam take his arms to help haul the two of them inside. Once the windowsill gave him support, he could maneuver the rest of the way. Like a snug vest, Justin still clung to his neck and his legs were wrapped around his waist.

Dena moved in and hugged both not caring that she would be soaked from their dripping garments. Sonja, on the other hand, knew how uncomfortable it would be having to live in soggy clothes and took over.

“Okay. Let’s get everyone dry now. Justin go with Mommy, and she’ll look after you. Bryce, my lad, you’re mine. Come on now.”

Justin let Bryce put him down and his first thought flew to where the terrified pup was being taken care of by the two other children and their dad, Liam. It's fearful howls called to him plainly, and he pulled away from the adults to run over to where the puppy looked so pitiful.

"I got you boy. Don't cwy. Me and Bwyce saved you." He reached for the baby, and no one was surprised to see the soaked pup gratefully go into his arms.

Chapter Seventeen

After all the excitement slowed down and everyone was dry and comfy, though their wardrobes left a lot to be desired, they perched together near Rose's bed and talked about lots of things.

The kids were in their own group with the puppy being the center of attention. From the size of the small canine, it looked to be only a few months old but would be a larger dog when fully grown.

"Liam, what breed do you figure he is?" Rose had just turned her attention away from the laughter of the children. "He seems to have lost his fear now and likes the attention."

All the adults looked over and saw the puppy rolling on his back with his feet in the air, begging for belly rubs. Justin was the first to cooperate and got his face washed for his troubles. The others thought it hilarious.

Liam shrugged. "I'm not sure, honey. Probably some poodle in there. Now that his fur is dry, it's quite curly. Maybe a mix of some sort."

"Like a Heinz 57. That's what my dad used to call a mutt." Sonja added.

Rose watched the kids and thought out loud. “I wish we could offer him a home once this is all cleared up.” She turned to the others. “I’m allergic to most animals and suffer terribly if I’m too close for any length of time.”

Bryce had watched the affection Justin obviously had for the dog and made a suggestion, not sure how Dena would feel about it. “Looks to me like Justin’s already staked claim. Can you have him with you, Dena?”

“Lord, no. We live in an apartment on the third floor and there’s a strict no-pet policy. Justin’s in way over his head, I can see it and I know it’s going to break his heart when I have to tell him it’s not his pet. He’s only six and—”

Rose finished the sentence. “And they don’t understand rules yet. Our two just turned seven. In today’s world, it’s hard for children to accept that some things just can’t be. We’ve tried hard to give our kids a good life but one with restrictions. At times they understand that things are just the way they are and no arguments. Other times we get that same old story.” In a high-pitched voice, she explained her reasoning. “But, Mommy, Ryan can do it, and Lindy says her mommy gave her a cellphone for her birthday, and...” She petered out.

“I know what you mean. Justin’s been begging me for a pet, and I finally broke down and got him a bowl with a goldfish but then I caught him trying to pet it. The poor thing must have died from the shock. Next morning we had a floater. Try explaining that to a little boy who just wants something to share all his boyish affection with.”

When Bryce heard that story, his stomach clenched in sorrow. He looked over at Justin now laughing boisterously while hugging the face-washing puppy. He saw pure bliss. And something else.

He saw himself as a child.

Suddenly, he just knew. Like a blast of pure data short-circuiting in his brain.

Shooting to his feet, he went to a quiet corner and let his mind travel back to the last time he had been with Dena, the night they'd met.

It'd been one of the few nights he'd been forced to leave the hospital in months. He'd decided to spoil himself and go to a restaurant for a sit-down dinner. He'd shut off his phone and purposely left it in his jacket pocket, deciding to just enjoy the atmosphere where other people were having a good time. No accidents or injuries urgently needing him. No stress or tension riding his back until his training kicked in and hours fled.

He'd ordered a steak sandwich and fries; his budget being stretched with even that cheap meal, and then he'd even had a piece of apple pie. The hot apples delighted his senses and made him remember good times in his youth.

He left that place feeling full, somewhat rested, and happy to be alive. In his job, he'd seen a lot of heartache from wounds too dreadful to dwell on. And tonight he'd promised himself that he'd leave all that behind until the next morning shift.

Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 9:12 am

Walking past a bar lit up like a neon sign factory, he saw the patrons through the window all laughing, some dancing, the music catchy. His feet walked him right through the door.

That's when he essentially walked into the girl who took his breath away. She'd been backing out from her chair, dropped something, and had reached down to retrieve it. He didn't see her there and stumbled into her. If he hadn't been so quick to hold her to him, she'd have ended up headfirst into a table leg.

Laughing, the female had turned to look up at him. "My hero." She'd sighed theatrically.

He could see she'd had a few drinks already but wasn't too far gone. The wine he'd drunk with dinner had loosened his tongue, and he'd had an instant come back. "Happy to be of service, Princess," he'd drawled, using a deep, silly tone. "Can I buy you a drink to make up for your fearful experience?"

"It's me who needs to buy you one for saving my life, my prince." Exaggeration had seemed silly enough that they both laughed. "Join me." She'd plunked herself back down and kicked a chair out for him to use.

The rest of their time had passed in a lot of laughing, close dancing, hand touches and eventually kissing. Taking it back to her place, they'd fallen through her door in a panic to truly be together.

He remembered wanting to slow things down and enjoy every moment. At first, his princess had tried to hurry him along but soon she got with the program.

After he'd spent a long time kissing her lips, loving her neck, and then paying the same sort of homage to her body, she'd seemed to understand. She began doing the same. Their long, sexy kisses had started a blaze in both of them.

When he'd touched her skin reverently, loving the feel of the satin smoothness, she'd arched toward him, like a devout maiden submitting herself up as an offering... willingly giving him permission to do as he wanted.

He'd never had this happen to him with any other female, and it had made him more aware that he had the responsibility for her to enjoy this moment as much as he was.

And so he found the erogenous areas on her gorgeous body that he could treat lovingly. In turn, she'd squirmed and wrapped herself around him, opening herself to his fingers and lips.

God... he'd made love to that woman using every technique he'd ever heard about, and she'd repaid him by giving herself entirely. They'd combusted during their first round.

During the second, incredible, slow time, they'd both gotten into a rhythm that only lovers reach. Because feelings are involved, it changes from a sexual encounter to making love. Their own joining suddenly reached a whole different level. They'd melded together in a sweaty, hot mass of emotions that neither had ever reached before.

"It's never been like this for me," she'd said as they slow-kissed their way from heaven back to earth.

"Me either, Princess. That was indescribable."

Afterwards, wrapped together, they'd passed out and the few hours left had flown by.

When the timer on his watch woke him the next morning, he'd had to run or at least felt he did.

Worst mistake he'd ever made. He should have woken her and got her name. Made sure to remember her address. Marked the street where she lived. Any one of those things. But as a young man who still felt the world revolved around his wishes, and that things would magically fall into place because he wanted them to, he'd been positive they'd be together again.

What he hadn't known was that it would be seven years later. And there might be a son who'd been created the night he'd never forgot.

The possibility stared him in the face. Tears suddenly struck, finding a home in a heart who loved kids. He had to blink them away before he broke down and made an ass out of himself.

Could that precious boy be his own flesh and blood? Oh, God, please let it be so. Shivers of delight struck, and he crossed his arms to hold in the shout of triumph. A boy. A father. No... a daddy. Him.

He looked over at Dena laughing at something Rose had just said, and he saw her glance his way. Was that worry? Could she be afraid of him? Of what he might say?

He nodded and then smiled, seeing her relax instantly.

As much as he needed confirmation for his suspicions, he also wanted to cling to his secret realization for just a little longer. After all, it might be a pipedream. Right?

Before he could do anything more, a thud and then screams from outside the window caught his attention.

Chapter Eighteen

Bryce moved quickly to see who needed attention and saw that an elderly man with a canoe carrying three passengers was calling for help.

He opened the window and saw that the poor people were suffering shock, all huddled around an older woman, probably the wife of the paddler.

“Can you help us? We can’t get to dry land with this storm. I’ve tried but the canoe is weighed down and the wind just keeps pushing us in circles. I see you have shelter.”

Liam suddenly appeared and they both exclaimed, “Of course.” Bryce added, “You can all come inside. There’s lots of room. Do you have a rope?”

When it was passed up, Liam took it and tied it to one of the rafters so the boat couldn’t go anywhere. Then the two men slowly helped each of the passengers into the room.

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Being that they were half frozen, and all were exhausted, they were at the mercy of the two men. Bryce actually jumped into the boat so he could lift the older woman and hand her to Liam. Then he shouted to the fellow who owned the canoe. “Now it’s your turn, my friend. I can help you.”

“No can do. I saw a number of folks still clinging to their roofs. I swore I’d go back for ‘em.”

“Look, you’re done in, man. Tell me where you saw them. I’ll go and bring them back.”

Grateful, the fellow gave Bryce the directions and let Liam haul him inside. Then Liam leaned out so he could get Bryce’s attention. “I should go, man. You stay in case you’re needed for medical services. Plus, I live around here and know the area. I can go directly to where the old guy said he saw the others.”

Bryce saw Sonja behind Liam and knew she’d blabbed about his physical condition and how he was still on leave to heal. Not that he’d paid any attention to his body over the last twenty-four hours. What had to be done couldn’t wait and though he knew he’d pay for his lack of care, it hadn’t mattered. But trying to row a canoe against the wind in these conditions would be foolish. Especially if it meant putting the lives of others in danger.

Nodding in agreement, he grabbed for Liam’s hand and let him boost him inside. Then between him and Sonja, they set Liam up with one of the flashlights, the warmest hoodie, and a jacket to block the wind. Then they helped lower him down to the bobbing canoe.

As Liam disappeared into the darkening day, Bryce experienced a small relief that this time he hadn't been the one out there in the elements.

Sonja stepped closer, her voice gentle. "Come young man. Let's get these poor souls as comfortable as possible."

Bryce put his arm around her shoulder and held her back. "Sonja, you know those boxes you had in your closet on the top shelves, what's in them?"

"Oh, Lordy, I never thought of those. They're things I promised my son I'd keep for him and his wife after they moved. They were supposed to come and get them, but never did. I have no idea what's inside but it's worth it to fetch them. Do you figure they'd still be dry?"

"Could be. Maybe the water never reached that high. I'm going to check it out. In the meantime, will you help Dena and Rose see to our newest arrivals?"

"On it, boss." Sonja grinned jokingly and kissed his cheek. "Anyone ever tell you that you're a catch. If I was forty years younger, you'd be in my sights."

"Right. Me and the man who caught you." He laughed, happy to see that she wasn't upset with having yet more folks invade her home.

He went over to the far corner of the attic where they'd originally come up and lay on his stomach, flashlight pushed in front to see how things were below. Sure enough, he'd been right. The water hadn't reached the top shelves in the closet.

Stretching out, he reached and snagged the closest box, huffing from the weight of the thing. Knowing his ribs were going to give him hell after this exercise, he looked back to see if anyone paid attention to him and saw them all in a huddle welcoming the newcomers.

Taking off his warm sweatpants, he quickly wrapped himself in the towel he'd grabbed from where it hung over a rafter and gingerly felt for the steps he'd purposely left down below. Yep... there they were. Using them to take his weight, he grabbed the other two boxes and slid them over to the opening and then using the rest of his strength, he pushed, grunting cuss words and prayers as he got the others close enough.

Suddenly, Dena's face appeared in the opening, and she seemed to understand his predicament instantly. "Here, let me help you." With her assistance, they were able to get all three of the containers through the doorway. Just as he went to pull himself up and out of the water, the towel let go and there he was in his birthday suit, crouching now to hide.

Dena's face broke into a huge grin. "Seriously, you're going to be shy with me? I've seen you before, remember?"

"Yes, ma'am. I do. And to stop you from ravishing my body once again, I must insist that you turn your back so I can enter with some dignity."

Laughing hard now, Dena complied. "As you wish, sire. I'll take one of the boxes over to the others and leave you with your... ahh, dignity intact."

Chapter Nineteen

Dena carried the boxes and containers over to where Rose and Sonja started rifling through their contents. Laughing, they put aside the silly things that people tend to save and pulled out large plastic tablecloths, even a blanket or two they thought would come in handy.

One of the bins held camping gear and they were delighted to find a box of matches and all kinds of incense cones.

Thrilled with these treasures, Sonja and Dena went to the far corner where they'd arranged privacy for those needing it and draped the plastic around, hoping to make a shield. Then they organized a table from an upside-down bin where they left a coal oil lamp, along with the incense and matches. Lighting one, they were pleased that it helped clear the air.

Once they were satisfied that they'd done the best they could, they returned to help the others continue ransacking the containers. After they searched each one, Dena carried it to the far wall, her head in the clouds the whole time.

Chuckling, she remembered the recent interaction with Bryce, her heart filled with tenderness at his lighthearted way of dealing with what could have been an embarrassing situation. She'd never known a man with so little care for himself when it came to looking after others.

He gave and gave and didn't seem to want a lot in return. Such selflessness was rare nowadays and to be treasured. Remembering those moments when she saw his naked chest, his muscled arms and the slight patch of dark hair covering his pecs, she shivered. Her body had reacted instantly, remembering the satisfaction she'd achieved in his embrace. God, he'd been thorough, and she'd benefited from every lick, kiss, and caress he'd shared.

Remembering her reckless behavior in her younger days when she'd invite someone home, planning on a night of sex, she'd always tried to hurry things along so the fellow would leave. Usually, there'd be no buildup of real emotions other than relief from the sexual release she sought but seldom discovered. Those were the times she'd feel used and have to shake off her regret.

But with her prince, everything had been different. The moment they'd shut themselves into her friend's apartment, he'd slowed things down. His mouth had been hot and sensitized her body. She'd been forced to behave differently. Let him have

his way... with her lips, her neck, caressing her all the while... her breasts, back, and thighs.

He'd made a kind of game of peeling off her clothes, kissing each uncovered spot, consuming her with the desire to repay this playfulness. As she'd uncovered his body, he'd been busy finding the spots on hers that lit a frenzy of passion.

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His fingers drove her insane with greed when they searched and found her wet and needy. He'd brought her to a mind-blowing climax just from manipulating her lushness where aroused nerve ends shattered.

When they'd finally reached the bed, she'd lost all inhibitions. Pleasing this man had become her ultimate goal, and pleasure him she did. Just as he'd delighted her. Shuddering spasms of satisfaction had occurred and not just once. Their night had been one of passion and then fantasies.

Fantasies because when she woke the next morning, he'd left. No trace of the man. No number to call... nothing. Her body's retention of the joy he'd given her had lingered along with his body's imprint on the opposite side of the bed. She knew the meeting had been real, but the following days of waiting to hear, and eventually self-pity when she didn't, transformed her completely.

Never again would she be able to pick up just any stranger and bring him home. She began searching out new goals, a whole different lifestyle, but never was she able stop those daydreams of their time together or wipe out the memory of her prince.

The same man who she looked at across the room now. The hero who'd not only saved her, but his own son. Would he be happy to know about this bond to Justin. After all, she'd lied to him that he could make love to her without taking precautions. Maybe he wouldn't believe her beautiful boy was his descendant. She wouldn't blame him in that case.

Before she could approach him and ask to talk, Liam had returned, and everyone was needed to help his passengers. And so it continued the rest of that day and that night.

Thankfully, some of the guests had brought along bags of food they had managed to salvage and were willing to share. Plus, Sonja had two boxes of nutrition bars in the sacks her and Bryce had stored, so everyone indulged in those, especially the children.

By the next day, the waters had receded to where adults were able to walk through the stream rather than swim to safety. A few of their rescued guests thanked them for their hospitality and decided to head to where the land was higher, and they could be picked up by friends and family.

Others like Rose and Liam decided to give it a bit more time before venturing out in the chilly air. They all worked hard at trying to keep each other warm and calm. That night, after the children and most of the adults were cuddled into blankets and quilts, sleeping, Dena lay awake.

When she noticed the form of a man going to the window, she left the warmth of her companions, wrapped her own blanket around her shoulders, and followed.

Thankful it was Bryce who she'd seen, she stepped closer to where he sat. "Can I join you?"

Bryce seemed to sense her there and smiled. "Of course. Glad to have company. I couldn't settle."

"Yet you must be exhausted. You haven't rested all day. Between helping Liam with the rescues and checking some of the poor patients lucky to have you, it's been pretty much non-stop."

"You noticed?"

"Yes. And I also noticed that when you moved a certain way, you'd grimace from the

pain and even clutch your chest. Were you hurt in the storm?"

"No. It's reaction from another injury, one that I was still healing from when the storm hit. I'd been hiking, took a fall, and cracked a few ribs."

"And now you're back where you started, having to let them mend again."

"Pretty much." His rueful grin didn't cover his distress.

"Can't find a comfortable way to relax, can you?"

"Not really. I just took a couple of those Tylenol, and they should kick in soon. At least tonight I'm not afraid to sleep in case someone is in trouble. Most of the folks around here have gotten to safety, and they'll be sending help for the others tomorrow."

"How long do you think it will take before the water recedes to where it's back to normal?"

"I'm surprised it didn't clear more today. I'm guessing it's that late rainfall that's the problem."

"Me too. Just when I thought the wind was finally going to ease off, the rain began to get serious. Let's hope tomorrow is better."

"My cell is gone, otherwise I'd be checking."

"Mine too. Oh well, we're safe and sound, thanks to you."

"Don't forget our superwoman, Sonja." He added cheekily.

Laughing softly, she agreed. “I could never forget that wonderful soul. Justin’s in love with her, especially when she agreed to keep the puppy for him in case no one claims it. We had a talk... well, actually, he did the talking and said we need to move to a ground floor place that will take his dog.”

Bryce laughed. “I never met a kid so single-minded about being absolutely sure that dog will never be claimed. Well, other than by him.”

They both looked over at the mound she’d left and saw Justin with his arm around the sleeping furball next to him. The two had cuddled together as if it were meant to be. Dena’s heart dropped at the thought of having to find another place to live and go through another move. Yet how could she say no to a boy who never asked for anything.

“You can see that too? His single-mindedness?” Suddenly relaxed, she realized how much enjoyment she felt from their whispered communication. “This seldom happens, but when his heart’s involved, he can be a determined little man.”

“Kind of like I was as a boy. He reminds me of myself.”

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Dena felt his eyes digging holes into her soul, and she reached out with her hand to feel his fingers clasping hers.

Before she could confess her secret, another voice broke into their little tête-à-tête and the moment was lost.

Sonja, who found it hard to sleep a whole night through, saw two adults at the window and decided to join them. It wasn't until she got closer that she realized who sat there. Her approach had broken up a warm atmosphere, and she wished she'd just stayed away.

Now that it was too late to turn back, she sat next to Dena and leaned in close. Funny how she felt so comfortable with this woman and her son, Justin. With her own family, ever since her wonderful son, Jamie, had married and brought back his wife Charlene to meet her, she'd tried really hard to be welcoming and affectionate, but it never quite seemed authentic.

Growing up as a single child, her son had enjoyed a very loving relationship with his parents, always appearing to be happy when he came home to spend weekends and vacations with them. And that happened often when he'd been alone or even with his various girlfriends.

Then he'd married and everything had changed. Her daughter-in-law either didn't know how to share her personal space or didn't want to. The only person she appeared to welcome close was her husband and later on her two kids. But for Sonja,

there was a huge distance she could never seem to bridge.

Oh, not that it was obvious. Neither woman let it show. Sonja cared too much for her son and grandkids to ever let the constraints in her relationship with the female in their life create any tension. She kept the stress she experienced inside, always tiptoeing on pins and needles. Always worrying she would overstep, never feeling quite welcome to give a hug that held any real warmth.

She'd have cut her tongue out before saying anything though. She liked to think she had more class. Yet she'd give all the money she had to be able to relax in the same way with Charlene as she could with Dena... the girl she'd only spent two days with and yet felt as if she'd known her for years.

Funny how strangers could become so important in such a short time whereas family could still feel like strangers after how many years. Moments ago when she'd approached Dena and Bryce, they'd both held out hands of welcome to guide her close so she could snuggle into their circle. They'd been pleased to see her and happy to be together.

Her insides twisted with regret.

Why couldn't situations be the same with everyone? God knows, she'd tried and would continue to give her best to her family, thankful that at least her grandkids loved her even if it did take some time for them to relax in her presence.

Maybe now with this storm happening in her neighborhood, and her being in the thick of the danger, they might come to the realization that she mattered. How sad was that to be thinking in such a negative way? And yet, one could dream.

Recently, she'd come to dread the empty years ahead on her own after Hank, her fun-loving, affectionate husband had passed. Living alone so much of the time and with a

family only willing to be with her out of obligation sucked. She breathed a little prayer.

Please God, let them discover they care about me.

Chapter Twenty

Once Sonja had joined their little group, they carried on a conversation, mostly about what each thought would happen the next day. While Bryce and Sonja discussed what they hoped would happen, Dena let them talk and she reminisced about their present predicament.

A sadness came over her. If only they'd been alone. And yet she understood this wasn't the right time or place for the confession she owed him.

She knew they'd meet again under better circumstances. And when she looked at him chatting with Sonja and the gentle way he treated the woman he obviously held in high esteem, she relaxed. They would have their moment.

Watching the two other adults and seeing Sonja giggle at something silly Bryce had said on purpose, she felt a rush of affection for the woman who'd been so kind to first her boy and then herself. She'd acted more like a mother than Dena ever remembered experiencing from her own.

That woman had worked hard, she'd give her that. She'd also kept their home together when her dad had become ill. But Dena didn't remember any real love or even mild affection during those hard years. It was all about surviving the best they could.

By the time her dad passed, her mom had given up on looking good, and only her jobs seemed to matter. Then she met another man, and the whole world changed. She

began to care again and started spending money and time on herself. Weeks into their romance, she took off. It happened so fast; Dena sometimes swore the woman had left skid marks on the floor. Dena did get a birthday card most years and kept in touch, but she sensed nothing there other than a mild interest.

It had been different with Dena when Justin arrived kicking and squalling, the cutest baby on the hospital ward. She'd felt instant love pouring from her for her precious baby boy. Nothing could have stopped those prideful emotions flooding into her heart.

Glancing at Sonja now, she knew one thing for certain. If Dena ever held out a hand or even her arms, Sonja would accept either of the gestures in the way they were meant... with love and gratitude.

Just to see if she'd imagined all this, when they stood to go back to their beds, Dena did hold out her arms, a little shy, a little worried she might have overstepped or had the wrong impression. But a second later when Sonja had welcomed the hug and even bestowed a warm kiss on her cheek, she knew she hadn't gotten anything wrong. This little old woman was a huge heart on two legs.

She decided then and there, she'd never lose touch with the older woman. Her and Justin would keep this happy soul in their lives for as long as the universe allowed.

Bryce finally settled in his place and his mind wandered back to those moments before Sonja had joined them. Warmth flooded at the memory. In those few seconds, it felt like they were back in time, when they'd been alone in the world.

Thrilled, he'd been certain that Dena would reach out. In fact, she had with her hand, and he'd been delighted that she'd felt comfortable enough to do so. He just hoped

she'd also be as certain about his reaction when telling him the truth.

Please, God. Let it be what he wanted to hear. That Justin was his son.

Chapter Twenty-one

The next day, Bryce was relieved to see how fast things happened. Early in the morning, they were roused by the noise of motorboats close by. Sure enough, the National Guard were now coming to help those still stranded.

Most of the folks had taken the first few boats and left them with hugs of gratitude and written exchanges of addresses and phone numbers, happy to be moving on.

Liam and Rose, with their kids, were the last holdouts and had finally gotten through to his parents who would be picking them up at a drop-off point. Everything seemed to happen so fast that midway through the day, Sonja saw that only Bryce, Dena, Justin, and Justin's furry shadow were left.

"So, my dears, what happens now? The last fellow who picked up Liam and his family gave me a charger for my phone. Once it's working again, I guess we can call and try to make reservations at a motel in town."

Bryce laughed disparagingly. "Right, like that's going to work. I bet every place is booked solid after this storm."

Sonja grimaced at his teasing. "Of course, you're right. I wasn't thinking clearly."

Bryce thought out loud. "My place might be safe. Not sure about the water levels in that neighborhood though. If it's clear, we could all go there. You'd be more than welcome."

Dena spoke up. “My apartment is on the third floor of the building but close to the gas station we were at where it flooded, so I’m thinking it’ll be impossible to return there anytime soon. I’m sure our suite will be safe enough, but the first floor probably sustained some damage.”

“One thing’s for certain, we can’t stay here any longer. Our facilities are beginning to make my eyes water, and we’ve run out of food. Next boat that comes along, we’ll grab it and head for the nearest drop-off.”

Justin sat close to his mom, the pup cuddled in his arms. “What about my dog? Can he come too?”

Both Bryce and Sonja beat Dena in answering. “Of course he can.” Bryce went a step further. “We stick together, right?”

Happy now, Justin chimed in with the others. “Wight.”

“Okay, let’s clean up as best we can and gather the stuff we want to take. Once everything has settled down and things return to normal, I’ll come back and help Sonja clear the space.”

“We’ll be happy to help you with that too,” Dena offered. “Won’t we Justin?”

“Yes, please. Then we can visit with puppy at the same time.”

“Right. I forgot you cajoled Sonja into keeping him.”

“Just until we get a new place. Wight?”

“We’ll see, honey.”

Justin's face dropped. "You pwomised."

"No. Be fair now. I just promised we'd discuss it. And we will. Right now, we need to take things one day at a time."

Bryce had listened to their conversation and couldn't help himself from adding, "My place is just a condo. But for now, we'll make do. They allow small dogs and mischief here won't be fully grown for a while." Bryce grinned at the puppy, growling... trying to wrestle an old sock from Justin's grip. "I'm sure the city will work fast to put things back to normal... well as much as possible. It takes time to recover from a flood like this one."

Sonja added, "Seems like I'll be needing all new furniture and my house dried out and repaired. So even though I offered to keep the puppy, I have no idea how long the repairs will take, honey. Could be months. Everything is a mess right now. Truth to tell, I have no idea where I'll be staying myself."

"You never did tell us what Jamie said when you talked to him. It was nice of the rescuers to lend us their phones."

"Right. I meant to share. He said he and Charlene were on their way. He was beside himself that I had to go through the emergency without him or his dad. I spent most of the time reassuring him I was fine and with friends."

Bryce saw how affected the woman was and reached out to put an arm around her shoulders. "Of course he was worried, darling. Imagine him thinking you were all alone going through this nightmare. I hope you gave him my home phone number like I suggested."

She looked up at Bryce, her lip quivering. "I did. It really shook me to hear how upset he was. I hate to worry him. Or to be a nuisance."

“You could never be a nuisance, my friend. Never. If they’re too blind to see your worth, that’s their loss.”

Dena quickly added, “You’re welcome to come stay with us, Sonja. Anytime and for as long as you want. We’d be happy to have you.”

“Me too,” Bryce added. “In fact, we should all stick together for now, and like Dena said, take things one day at a time.”

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Soon, Bryce had waved over a boat and helped the others to get inside. He looked back at their living quarters and saw how sad it all appeared now. Yet at the beginning, both he and Sonja had been thrilled with their good fortune.

With everyone pitching in, they'd cleaned the place as much as possible, piling most of the blankets and other material things into the empty bins and boxes. They'd done the best they could and would do much more when it was safe to return.

Taking the clothes they knew they would be needing and their personal belongings, Justin clinging to his pup, they were finally transported to a dock where there were volunteers waiting to give them whatever they required.

After scarfing down a wholesome meal and hot drinks, they were able to find a willing driver to take them to Bryce's condo. Assured they'd be safe there, the fact it had been one of the higher areas and sustained no damage turned out to be a bonus.

Within a short time, they were inside the condo, and Bryce saw his place through the eyes of the others. He'd been right when he said it was small. An all-white kitchen with the dining room and living room surrounding it seemed to be the focal point of the place, a modern yet comfy atmosphere with plush chairs and a wrap-around sofa that faced the large screen TV mounted on the wall over a fancy fireplace.

The home had two bedrooms, two baths, and an office. When he'd bought the joint, he'd imagined the modern place would be the perfect living quarters for a busy doctor who liked his privacy, could make use of the shared pool and spa facilities, yet didn't have the time or energy to keep up with a yard.

Sparsely decorated due to the lack of time, interest, and female input, nevertheless, he'd come to like living here and having this solitude to come home to after a busy and oftentimes harrowing, disheartening day at work.

His small patio was the only outside space that gave one privacy, as the manicured lawns were common area and part of the over-all luxury complex. Perfect for a busy man who wanted a home of his own with no upkeep, he admitted the distant views of gorgeous green lawns from a golf course with palm trees and small water features that looked like little lakes soothed the exhaustion he carried from working long hours, especially during the pandemic. He hated to even remember those days; they were so bad. Thank goodness, he'd had this little paradise to hide away in.

Attacked by weird nerves Bryce knew materialized because of his need for Dena to like his choices, he popped around like a mother hen, trying hard to make everyone feel at home.

At least, Dena and Sonja teased him for behaving that way and they were also soothed that their comfort really did seem to matter.

"Everything is beautiful, Bryce. Quit worrying." Dena's happy expression proved her words were sincere.

Sonja pointed out with a grin. "We have proper facilities, two of them, and with showers. Son, trust me, we'll be very comfy here for now." Finally after he'd showed them where he kept most things and urged them to help themselves to whatever they felt they needed, he calmed.

Suddenly, he seemed to notice the flashing lights on his message machine and began listening to the comments. Wanting to give him privacy, they moved out on the patio.

The fact that they could hear most of what was being said didn't seem to faze him and so they stayed, looking at the garden.

Dena made out that most were emergency calls from the hospital, all wanting him to come in as soon as possible. But the last two were from a sexy female voice commenting about how excited she was for their forthcoming wedding and begging him to return her calls as soon as possible so she could stop worrying.

Dena felt Sonja take her hand, sympathy welling in her eyes. Oh, my God. Bryce had a fiancée? Heartsore, she accepted the consolation, gulped back the threatening tears, and shook her head. She couldn't talk about it yet.

When Bryce didn't place a return call but began shuffling around, changing clothes, gathering belongings to head into work, they just stayed out of his way. Unable to blame him, Dena figured he'd decided to return his fiancée's calls in private.

Pulling out a wad of bills from his wallet, he assured them that though he had little food in the fridge, they could call any of the restaurants in the vicinity for delivery. Rattled, he beseeched them to understand why he had to leave them. "I'm sorry to run off on your first night, but I really need to get to the hospital. Look, there's a good selection of menus in the drawer by the fridge. Grab whatever you feel in the mood for. I'll try and get back later tonight."

Sonja stepped up and warned him in a motherly voice, "Don't overdo things, Bryce. You're still healing and even more so after these last few days. Please be careful."

Smiling at her fussing, he nodded. "I promise to be good, Mommy."

Before she could admonish the teasing retort, his Uber arrived, and he rushed out. But not before hugging Sonja and Justin, patting the dog, and when he approached Dena, his look of confusion stayed with her. She'd wrapped her arms around herself,

effectively stopping him from getting too close.

When his shocked expression betrayed his hurt feelings, momentary guilt attacked. But how could she allow him any privileges when he'd be marrying that sexy-voiced woman next month?

Chapter Twenty-two

Dena knew Sonja tried to keep her mind off the messages by bringing out all the menus to the patio where they were enjoying a glass of iced tea and watching Justin play in the grass with an ecstatic puppy.

Chattering a blue streak, she made a game about what they should order for dinner that night.

When the phone rang, and she heard the caller ID announcing it was her son on the line, she disappeared inside to answer.

Still in a funk about Bryce's coming marriage, shock battling with hurt, Dena tried to concentrate on how she could gracefully get her and Justin away. She knew from the rescue team that there was a number they could call to get an update on their homes, and she was determined to do it as soon as possible now.

Not willing to stay here any longer than she needed to, making this decision helped. If it weren't for Justin and Sonja, she'd have left already. Hells bells, she'd rather sleep on the sidewalk than under the same roof as the man who'd let her down so wickedly and broke her heart twice.

Sonja came back outside, her face appearing shocked. Dena snapped out of her own funk to prod, reaching for Sonja to sit next to her on the swing. "What's wrong, Sonja? Aren't they coming after all?"

“Actually, they’re almost here, just asked for the address. I guess they flew from Los Angeles and left Charlene’s mother in charge of the kids. Jamie was so upset, he kept asking me how I felt and said that he and Charlene were frantic, apologizing for not being here sooner.”

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“You sound surprised.”

“I am. I’ve always thought Charlene didn’t like or trust me and wanted to keep my son as far away from home as possible.”

Stunned, Dena questioned, “Why would you think that? Has she said anything?” Not wanting to come across too harshly, Dena prickled with fury that anyone could treat Sonja unkindly and make her question her worth. “I’ve heard of crazy-assed mothers-in-law, and knowing you even for this short time, I could never imagine you fitting into that role. She must be the one with a problem.”

Sonja jumped to her feet and started prowling around the small space. “I don’t know. I’ve rarely had the chance to talk with her or get to know her very well. Whenever I came to visit, and that was only when Hank was alive, she seemed fine with him but always shied away from spending any time with me. I guess my feelings got hurt, and now I’m so uncomfortable in her presence, it’s sad.”

Before they could continue with their conversation, the doorbell rang. Both going to the door, Dena stood back when a younger man rushed into the room, heading straight for Sonja. “Mom,” he pulled her into his arms and buried his face in her hair. “I was terrified for you. I’m so glad to see you looking so well.”

“Honey, I told you on the phone I was fine.”

“I know you did but you have a way of making things seem less traumatic than they really are. Charlene warned me that you’d most likely be trying to make me stop worrying when in actual fact we were both going crazy. You were stuck alone in a

house with water up to the attic, Mom. God, no wonder we were terrified.”

Dena stood back while Jamie and his mom carried on their greeting. She watched the woman hovering in the background and got an eyeful. Charlene’s whole manner had been one of worry until she saw Sonja, and then relief had covered her expression like a veil of softness.

Probably thinking no one watched, Dena saw her shaking hand reach forward and then be quickly pushed behind her back as a wall slowly descended around her earlier body language. As much as she might want to, this girl had no courage or self-confidence to move toward Sonja.

Eventually, once Jamie had been reassured, Sonja made the first move and turned to Charlene. She smiled warily. “Thank you for coming with Jamie and for being here, Charlene. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate it.”

Charlene nodded. Her fixed smile obviously in place to hide her true feelings. “I’m glad you’re okay, Sonja. Jamie was frantic and so were the kids. Did he tell you that he’s arranged a crew to get here today? Jamie tell her.”

Doing just that, he took his mother’s hand and began to lead her toward the sofa until she held back. “Let’s go enjoy the garden. It’s such a beautiful day, one might not believe the earlier weather we’ve just suffered through, right Dena?”

Dena laughed and agreed. “It’s been like a nightmare. Without video proof, many might question our sanity.”

Sonja laughed and pointed toward Dena. “This is one of my new friends and attic companions, Dena Low. Please meet my son Jamie and his wife Charlene.”

While chuckling softly, Dena reached out to shake hands with them both and

corrected Sonja at the same time. “Our last name is actually pronounced Lore. I’m afraid my son Justin who’s around here somewhere doesn’t say his r’s correctly. They all sound like w’s.”

As if she couldn’t help herself, Charlene stepped forward, breaking into the conversation. “Please don’t be angry with him. He can’t help it. I had a huge speech impediment as a child, and it took me years and good teachers to finally get me to speak properly. It’s a terrible handicap.”

Dena saw the authentic worry in a mother’s eyes and reached out unthinking to pat her hand. “No, no. I never make him feel bad about it. I correct him if others don’t understand what he’s saying but only when he wants me to. The teachers in his first grade class are working wonders with him.” She glanced around when she heard the puppy’s feet tapping against the hardwood floor. “Here he is now. Honey, come and meet Sonja’s family. This is Jamie, Sonja’s son, and this lady is Charlene, her daughter-in-law.” She put her arm around Justin’s shoulders to keep him snug beside her and said, “This is my brave son, Justin. He dove into the water to save this lost little monster puppy. Now they’re best buddies.”

Justin giggled and shook hands the way he’d been taught. “My puppy isn’t scarwed no more. He wants to stay with me and Mommy and Sonja. Wight, Sonja?”

Laughing, the older woman swept him in her arms to give him a squeeze. “That’s true, my lad. He’s a fine pup but remember, we need to make sure someone doesn’t already own him.”

Justin’s face fell at the reminder. “I know. I wemember. But maybe nobody wants him as much as I do.”

“That’s a possibility for sure.”

“And Bryce said he’d help me find out.”

“That’s true.” Dena hugged him to her side and began to urge everyone to the patio. “Why don’t you come and help me get some iced tea for Sonja’s family, okay? Then we can take-out for dinner.”

Once everyone was settled and Jamie and Charlene had fussed enough over the puppy who now had collapsed in a curled-up nap under the table, Sonja explained what had happened to her over the last few days and how they came to be staying here with Bryce.

Relieved, and more so as the story progressed, Jamie told her his plans. “It’s probably a good thing, Mom. I expect the crew will be arriving later... after dinner. They’re driving a couple motor homes we rented, but it’ll take time to set them up. We’re bringing one for the men, and the other for me and Charlene to use while we’re here. Of course, your welcome to stay in there with us.”

Charlene piped up, “After what you just went through, having to shelter in your attic, I’m sure Bryce’s home is like paradise. I’m in awe that you’re taking the flood situation so well.”

Jamie spoke up. “Charlene fretted the whole time until you called. She made the reservations for the plane saying it would take too long to drive and since the crew was coming anyway, they could bring along both motor homes. She was like a dynamo, Mom. Organized it all. I’m only glad we’re here and everything is fine except for the house.”

Charlene spoke up. “And that will be fixed as soon as possible for you, Sonja.”

Dena felt Sonja flinch and immediately understood her reaction. She’d taken Charlene’s remarks to signify that we’ll get you fixed up so you can stay here, and we

won't need to be around any longer than necessary. Then we'll be off the hook and can get back to our own world... the one without you in it.

Yet something in Charlene's tone belied that meaning. Watching her closely, Dena saw the anxiety in her eyes and for some reason got the feeling that she was only trying to please... to make Sonja happy.

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Hmm? Was she the crazy one? The woman Sonja had described had nothing in common with the real-life person in front of them. The two images she now had didn't compute at all.

Chapter Twenty-three

Once Jamie and Dena took over ordering their meal, things happened so fast that Sonja just sat back, stayed out of their way, and spoke less and less except when a question was directed at her.

She noticed Dena staring from time to time, obviously wondering why she had changed from the outgoing, playful woman to this mousy person who shied away from saying anything.

Filled with relief that Dena and Justin made things less awkward, her comfort zone still lay with her being in the background. When Jamie got the call that the crews had arrived and they needed help getting everything set up, she again stayed silent.

After he slid his phone back into his shirt pocket, her handsome son turned to his wife, his expression surprisingly gentle. "Honey, I promised the guys I'd give them a hand with the motor homes at the park and to find a place to store the truck with the equipment. I'll come back later to pick you ladies up and take you to the campground, okay?"

Nodding very slowly as if the comment alarmed her, Charlene spoke up tentatively. "Can't I help?"

“Not really. There’s five of us to deal with this. Maybe you could just stay here for now, keep Mom company and finally relax. It’s been a harrowing day for you.”

Sonja had no idea why Jamie should think it had been so harrowing for Charlene, but before she suggested he should let Charlene do what she wants, Dena spoke up.

“Of course, she should stay with us. After getting everything organized at home, then the flights, I’m sure a bit of girl-time is just what she needs. In fact, we could all use it.” Dena glanced at Charlene and smiled encouragingly. “I noticed a big bottle of margarita mix in the fridge and tequila in the pantry. I’ve no doubt that Bryce would be more than happy to share.” She nudged a sleepy Justin who’d curled up in her arms and pointed at the puppy. “I say we get these two adorable young mutts settled in their bed and have a little relaxation party of our own.”

Jamie laughed. “Perfect. That’s the one drink Charlene actually likes. Crunched ice and salted rim. Right honey?”

Charlene smiled, this time without any hesitation. “Yep. It’s my secret weakness. And I’d love to help get them ready.”

With a kiss goodbye for his mom and wife, Jamie gave Dena a warm smile that Sonja knew so well. It was gratitude for stepping into an awkward moment.

As the sun went down, the ladies were finally able to relax back out on the patio with their margarita glasses filled and even a big bowl of salted chips to go with.

Sonja took a few gulps, hoping to relax. She didn’t often drink anymore, especially after losing Hank. She missed those sundowners they’d both enjoyed so much. This moment felt a little like what she’d known in the past.

Waiting for Dena to finish readying Justin and getting him settled, Sonja looked over

at Charlene who appeared bored. She racked her brain for something to say.

“How was the flight, Charlene?”

“Good... good. We were lucky to get the tickets because a lot of people were heading this way to check on their families or find out if their properties were affected. One could feel the tension as we flew in and saw the devastation. I thought Jamie was going to hyperventilate. He was terrified for you.”

Sonja felt shocked at Charlene for elaborating on the subject. Usually their conversations were short sentences until they ran out of subjects and then awkward silence would ensue.

Rather than put her off by pretending things hadn't been so bad, she decided to tell a bit of what had actually happened. So she started from the beginning when she first ran into Bryce.

Charlene seemed transfixed and kept nodding or making comments of awe yet with a clear indication for Sonja to carry on. Before she realized it, Dena had returned. She'd brought along the replenished pitcher of liquor, refilled the glasses, and sat to listen.

When Sonja got to the part about Bryce saving Justin, she felt the tears fill her eyes and it seemed fitting to see a similar reaction in Charlene's expression. What did shock her was when Charlene seemed unconscious of her hand reaching to offer comfort.

Gladly accepting the support with a squeeze, she felt better for the moment of sympathy and thrilled from who shared it.

“That must have been terrifying, Sonja. Having to wait inside and just watch this

happening. Seeing Bryce in that rushing water trying to save a child and knowing he relied on you to haul them in would be so stressful.”

Sonja sat back in her chair, relaxing against the cushion, and smiled. “You know... between us girls, it wasn’t bad until they were climbing inside, and I could see how painful it was for Bryce.” She turned to Charlene and added, “he was still recuperating from an earlier injury where he’d sustained cracked ribs. I heard him groan in pain and prayed he’d be able to hold onto the boy and haul him up so I could reach him. Thank God, it worked out. Once we were all back inside, it seemed like the good Lord had smiled down on us.”

Dena chuckled. “No doubt.” Then she remembered. “Until the water began to creep higher.”

Charlene gasped. “How frightening.” As if she couldn’t stop herself, she added, “I almost drowned as a child. To this day, I’m absolutely terrified of water.” Once she’d finished her sentence, she seemed shocked for sharing her story.

This time, Dena patted her hand, reaching easily because they were seated side by side on the swing. “That must have been horrible for you, Charlene. I can’t imagine living with that fear. How has it affected you with the boys?”

Charlene seemed to hesitate, took a huge breath, and lowered her head in shame. “Jamie had to be the one to teach them to swim while I sat on the sidelines. At one point, I actually found the nerve to sign up for lessons, hoping to overcome the fear enough to at least play in the water, but it’s so stressful, I can’t relax and make it fun. It’s better to just stay out of everyone’s way altogether.”

Sonja’s mind sped back to the number of times that she and Jamie would be in the pool with the boys, and Charlene had refused to join them. She’d always thought it was because Charlene didn’t want to be with her or was just a party-pooper. Hearing

this, it finally made sense.

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“My goodness, Charlene, why didn’t you tell me? I feel terrible now for the number of times I urged you to come in the pool and made a big deal out of your refusal. I’m so terribly sorry, honey.”

Charlene looked at Sonja, seeming shocked at the woman’s tender words. Then her eyes filled before she lowered her face again. Tears glinted from the patio lights which bored a hole right into Sonja’s conscience. Why hadn’t she given this girl a chance?

“I’m a grown woman who’s a big wuss. I hated to admit I was terrified. And... I find it ridiculously hard to share my wretched past. I’m sorry. Please don’t feel bad. It’s my own fault.”

Sonja moved quickly and found herself crouching beside her daughter-in-law. “Hey, don’t fret. I should be shot for not seeing there was more to the story.”

Charlene’s shock at being the center of attention wasn’t faked. She sincerely didn’t seem to know what to do and appeared to turn to Dena for help. Instinctively knowing it was her proximity that had started the discomfort, Sonja tried to rise, until the liquor turned her knees to rubber, and they refused to hold her. Over she tumbled onto her butt.

Instantly making a joke so as not to upset the other two, Sonja grumbled, “Damn knees. As soon as they’re built and on sale, I’m getting me a muscley robot dude to help me stand up.”

First, Dena cracked up and then Charlene joined in, leaving Sonja sitting on her

backside wearing the fake frown. When she saw her joke had been taken in the way it was meant to be, she flipped over to clutch the table and using it for balance, tried to hop up but didn't quite have the right position and plopped down again.

"Sure, go ahead and laugh you pretty young things. It'll be your turn soon enough."

"Are you putting a spell on us you old witch?" Dena's quip came at the perfect time to start them all laughing again. "Listen, before you fall again, could you tell us more about the storm."

Charlene went to rise as if she needed to help Sonja get up, but Sonja waved her away. "I'll just stay here for now, honey. It's less far to fall when I have another refill." So saying, she crawled closer to the table, picked up the half-full pitcher, and topped off all three glasses again.

When Dena threw her a pillow, she made herself comfy. "Right, let's see. We had Justin tucked into the bed, and I was keeping him amused. By then, Bryce had finished his shower and used that old sweatsuit of my husbands. He never minded that the arms and legs were too short, or the writing was washed out. That made me adore him more."

Without knowing why she added the next sentence, she was glad she did after seeing Charlene's reaction. "You'll love him honey when you meet him. He's a peach."

"A peach!" Dena's laughter came in gales, and Charlene doubled over. "A peach?" When they're hands began waving at the joke, they clutched each other's, saying the same line over again as if they'd never heard anything so funny. Understanding that the margaritas were doing their job, Sonja pretended anger.

"Oh, stop it you two. What can I say? He's handsome, intelligent, sympathetic, has a good sense of humor, and... he's a doctor. What more could a woman want? In fact, I

warned him if I'da been forty years younger, I'd go after him myself. So, I stand by my adjective... he's a blasted peach. Or is it a noun?"

That broke the girls up again and more laughter resonated.

"Stop that moronic giggling." Sonja pretended more anger but all the while smiling cheerfully. She'd never seen Charlene so relaxed or happy. For the first time, she understood what her son saw in this woman.

And if she'd been a little less insecure herself, a lot less judgmental, she'd have seen it too. Disgusted with her previous behavior, she swore there and then to try harder to get to know this fairy-like creature who had flaws in the same way as everyone else.

Finally, Dena composed herself and started in on the story once again. "Okay... tell us what happened after you saw that the water was rising to take over the area you were in?"

"Well, it was Mr. Peachy who began to set things in motion. Before I knew what was going to happen, he had me packing everything I thought we might need into the closet where the opening to the attic was. He hauled most of the gear up there himself. Again, never a complaint though I knew it had to have been misery for him. Finally, we brought Justin up with us and not a minute too soon."

They all calmed at the idea of how fortunate they were that there had been the safe attic area to depend on. "We were thrilled to have that space and with the windows. Both if us blessed Jamie and Hank for installing them and laying the flooring. You know, many others weren't so lucky."

"Like Liam, Rose, and their twins."

Charlene piped up, "I know them. They introduced themselves the last time Jamie

and I came to visit. Wasn't she pregnant?"

"Oh yeah, she still is. Eight months."

While Dena picked up on the story of how Bryce saved her and then the neighbors, Sonja rose quietly, took the pitcher with her, and came back with a refill and the rest of the bag of chips.

If it took liquor and junk food to get through to her daughter-in-law, she'd be happy to comply. She'd never had so much fun with the mother of her grandkids and was determined that before the night ended, they would be a lot better friends.

Chapter Twenty-four

Charlene hadn't gotten a minute's respite from the fear for Sonja's safety until she actually saw the woman with her own eyes. Even though Sonja had assured them on the phone she was fine, Charlene kept telling Jamie, "Your mother would never complain if she wasn't fine... especially then. And think about it. Her whole life is upside down now. I'd be frantic myself, and I'm a lot younger."

Jamie wrapped his arms around his soft-hearted wife and nodded. "I know. But you don't understand. I've told you before that my mom is a fighter, and a winner. She doesn't crumble over things that could bring others to their knees. She just gets on with whatever she can do and figures in time the rest will be okay."

"Like her son. Fine and good, Jamie. But this isn't a fallen tree or a broken-down car. It's her whole existence. Her house is underwater. Thank God, she isn't too."

"Calm down, baby. Look, we'll go together. She's a fighter... you'll see. The fact that she got up in the attic and took shelter speaks for itself. And remember what she told us. She wasn't alone going through the flood. She had others with her."

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“I know. But they weren’t her family. You need to be there now.”

“You mean we need to be there now.”

Charlene hid her face in his chest. “She could care less if I was around. It’s you she needs.” Before he could argue, she looked at him earnestly. “I get it. She doesn’t like me. It’s fine. As long as she cares about you and the boys, I’ll be good with that.”

“Charlene, you’re such a darling, foolish girl. If you’d only open up to my mom, she would be as much in love with you as I am... and the boys. I’ve heard her brag many times about what a good mom you are.”

“See... I wish I were around when she said it.” Before he could correct her, she added, “Oh, I believe you. Of course, I do. It’s just that I think she says that to make you feel good. Whether she truly believes it or not, I don’t know.”

“Trustmethen. Mom doesn’t say stuff she doesn’t believe.”

The call he’d been waiting for came then, and when he moved to the office to take it, Charlene went over all her earlier arrangements. Getting the flights arranged, making sure their suitcases had everything they’d need, and settling the kids took time.

Then she made extra certain the house was properly shut down. All the while she watched the updates on TV and prayed that Sonja, the woman she secretly admired more than any other female in her life, was truly fine.

And here she sat, hours later, laughing along with the same Sonja who'd frightened her more every time they were together. This perky person holding her hand, making jokes, and teasing her was the one everyone else got to be with. Now, for the first time since they'd met, she felt as if she belonged too.

Chapter Twenty-five

By the time Jamie returned, the women were blitzed... happy, giggle-pusses. Dena recognized the relief on his tired face when he saw his mom and wife, their arms around each other dancing the jitterbug that Sonja tried to describe and ended up teaching. When neither Dena nor Charlene took her word that she knew how to dance it, damned if she hadn't gotten up and proved it.

Singing an old tune off key, she'd dragged Charlene up, making her learn the moves and it had made the three of them hysterical. That's about the time Dena saw the two Jamies near the back fence.

Only one slinked over to her in the dark, careful to stay in the shadows so he didn't stop the high jinks. "I'm thinking they had more than one margarita?" His tone was filled with wonderment, and a happy smile lit up his face.

"Oh, yeah. We finiched three pitshers. I was on my way to make another. But my legs don't work. I couldn't get up. Can't dance either." She twisted in her seat to look at him and felt the earth spin. She made out both his silhouettes and hoped she addressed the right one. "Could you flixit us another one?" Had she slurred her words?

When she zeroed in on his smile, she decided he'd understood her. Unfortunately, he didn't agree with her request. "Dena, girl, I think you've all had enough flixits. Both Mom and my wife are toast. I better break this party up and get them home. Will you be alright here?"

“Shure. I’m fine really. Jus a slight problem with my eyes. I’ll jus lay on the couch.”

“Probably a good idea. It’s closer to the toilet.”

Dena laughed at that and didn’t know why she thought it so funny. Once Jamie had gathered both his ladies together and got them into his vehicle, he’d come back to make sure she had settled on the sofa, a blanket over her, and an empty wastebasket nearby. Before she’d passed out, she told him in no uncertain terms, “Yous a shentleman shir.”

Two hours and four trips to the bathroom later, she still didn’t feel in control. Thankfully, every time she looked in the bedroom and saw Justin, it calmed her. Giving up on her plan to leave, opting to wait until the next day, she went back to her little nest on the couch.

The next time she woke, Bryce was there, sleeping on the couch too with his feet on the coffee table. She recognized him instantly and her heart thumped with glee from seeing the man who rocked her world. Careful not to disturb him, she rose and went to the kitchen, glancing at the time and saw it was just a little after three in the morning.

Not sure whether to wake poor Bryce to tell him to lay down properly in his own bed or just go to join Justin in the spare room and leave him to settle himself, she drank a glass of water in a few gulps along with the Tylenol she saw on the counter and went back to the living room.

When she looked at the man, she could see instantly that he wasn’t sitting comfortably. He must have returned home, expecting everyone to be in their beds, knowing he’d promised earlier to sleep on the couch.

Now that Sonja had gone with her son and Charlene, Dena had put Justin in the spare

room and intended to slip in next to him. Therefore, Bryce had his own bed. Going to the room to make sure it was ready, she came back and decided to wake him.

“Bryce.” Tentatively, she shook his shoulder.

Instantly, he woke, his eyes taking in the surroundings. When he saw her, he reached up and before she knew his intentions, he pulled her down on his lap and hugged her to him. “I’m so glad you’re here, Dena. My God, it’s been a brutal night. You can’t believe the heartbreak we had to deal with from the storm. So many wounded. It’s the kids that bother me the worst. I’m just so happy Justin survived without any injuries.” He kissed her head and laid his face against her hair, cuddling her so close, she could barely move.

Without thinking about anything but being held by the man who made every pulse in her body thrill with glee, she reached up to stroke his cheek gently.

“I’m sorry it’s been such a nightmare for you and on top of what you went through in the storm.”

“Honey, hearing the various stories tonight about the ravages from the lightning and the floods, I feel fortunate beyond belief. We were all saved from the worst of the weather and none of us were injured. How lucky that we survived so well.”

He leaned down and kissed her lips, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. And she accepted his gentleness as if she had the right to be with him.

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Being held in his arms like this, as if he needed her as much as she craved to be with him, meant the world to her. How wonderful life could be if this was a normal situation.

Yet that voice from the message machine rang in her memory, and she knew she couldn't play this game. So she pulled out of his arms, her head still a bit weak. She slid over beside him, and his groan of despair kept her from running from him altogether.

“What’s wrong, Dena?”

Deciding to be honest with him, she said, “Earlier tonight, before you left for the hospital, I heard two messages from your fiancée about how much she looked forward to the wedding next month. You never shared that bit of news with us. I guess congratulations are in order.”

“What?” He didn’t try to disguise his shock.

“Look, it’s terribly late. Time for me to crawl in beside Justin. Goodnight.” As she stood to leave, still a bit wonky on her feet, he hauled her back down beside him and made her look into his face.

Though the room was dark, the moon shone through the patio doors enough for her to see his expression clearly.

“Honey, you heard my nurse on the phone, that’s all. She asked me to walk her down the aisle when she marries my best friend. The girl is so excited, she likes to keep me

up to date with all the wedding plans.”

Dena stopped struggling. “Your best friend is marrying her?”

“Yes. I hope you’ll meet them soon and come to the wedding with me.”

Dena knew exactly what he was saying. He wanted to keep her in his life. Heart bursting, she knew what she had to do. Now was the time for her to tell him about Justin. It couldn’t be put off any longer nor did she want to.

Putting her hands together, crossing her fingers, and holding them near her lips, she blinked back the tearful relief. “I have something to tell you... something I tried to share earlier but we never seemed to get the chance to be alone long enough for me to say the words.” Her eyes beseeched him to be nice to her.

As if he couldn’t help himself, Bryce gripped her arms, hands caressing, and his eyes dove deep. “Please put me out of my misery and tell me that Justin is my son.”

Filled with immense pleasure, Dena cried, “Yes. Yes, he is. That’s what I had to tell you. Oh, I’m so glad you feel this way, Bryce. That you’re not angry with me for keeping him from you. I never knew how to contact you. It’s the truth. I swear.”

“Honey, I do believe you. I tried to find you also. I even went back to the same bar as often as I could. Unfortunately, it was days after we were together because I’d been trapped in the hospital during a crisis.”

“I went back too. I looked for you there many times. I never did know what hospital you were doing your residency in, or for that matter, your real name. Finally, I accepted that I was just a one-nighter for you and gave up. By the time I found out I was pregnant with Justin, I had changed my life completely. After meeting you, I stopped drinking, something I thanked the good Lord for numerous times because of

the baby. Then, I moved to Seattle to live with a friend and got a job in childcare.”

“Then you weren’t a student.”

“No. I lied. About a lot of things. I was pretty screwed up back then.” Fear seeped in until he seemed to accept her regret and move on.

“Yet you live here now.”

“I couldn’t stay away from the sunshine and the memories if the truth be told.”

“I’m so glad you made that decision, or we might have never met again. I would never have known about the boy... who I’m thrilled to have in my life. I love kids. My only frustration is that I missed out on all his early years.”

“I’m sorry about that too. We could have been together back then. Yet, I knew you were tapped out for time and working hard for your medical license. I told myself it was for the best that we didn’t interfere in your world. After all, we really didn’t know each other then.”

“In a way, we still don’t. Yet I feel as if I’ve known you for years.”

“I’m a much better person now than I was then. Could be it’s worked out for the best. Don’t think you would have liked me much in those days... me or my choices.”

“If you say so. Yet I remember being totally enchanted by the girl I’ve never been able to forget. The one every other female I’ve met since couldn’t live up to. I want you and Justin in my life so bad; it hurts to think you might not feel the same. If you’ll say the word, we can have a chance to be a family. First, we’ll get to know each other properly, and in time get married and have more little Justins. Trust me, darling. that would make me a happy man forever.”

Dena threw herself into his arms and let her lips do the accepting.

Epilogue

It was their wedding day and Bryce had never been happier. Justin joined him in the bedroom to get ready for the wedding, both males wearing identical tuxes and both as handsome and happy as the other.

With the help of Sonja and her family, they planned the wedding to take place in her newly repaired back yard. After many months and a lot of hard work by Jamie and his crew, her home and most of the others on the street were either fully repaired or close to it.

They'd spent the day before arranging the large tent, setting up the flowered altar, and organizing everything from the caterers to the music and minister. All was ready, and he couldn't be more excited. All his life, he'd wanted to marry a woman who rocked his world, and he thought he'd lost her after their one night together.

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Now, instead, they were joining together as a family.

Justin's young boy's voice rang with frustration and brought him back to earth. "Storm, stop that." He was wrestling his shoe from the now almost fully grown pup who no one had retrieved. Even though they'd listed the lost canine with the animal shelters in the neighborhood, online, and in the local stores, no one had stepped forward. Thankful they were able to adopt him as theirs, both the naughty puppy and the ecstatic boy were now an inseparable team.

Bryce cut off the mischief-maker at the side of the bed and made him stop running with the dangling shoe hanging from his mouth. "Drop it, brat."

Tail wagging, the midsize doodle-type fluffball did as he was told and jumped up on Bryce to get his pat for following orders. And of course, he got one. "Good boy, Storm. Are you ready now, Justin?"

"Yep, all set. I still have to put Storm's tux on though."

"Maybe best to wait until we get in the car to wrestle him into it."

"Right. He doesn't mean to be bad, Dad, you know that right?" Justin's face wore a frown of worry.

Bryce understood his son hadn't quite gotten used to the knowledge that this doting man was actually his real father and loved him. For a boy who'd only had a mom to rely on, this often seemed too good to be true.

The more time they'd spent together over these last months of helping Jamie fix his mom's storm-ravaged house and finding a new home for him and Dena close to Sonja's, he noticed so many small similarities and odd mannerisms in Justin that reminded him of himself. No man could ignore the pleasures they brought him.

And since Bryce had asked Justin to be his best man and stand beside him at the altar, the boy had been fretting that he'd make a mistake.

Stopping the rush, Bryce scooped the boy into his arms and hugged him close. "Today is the best day of my life, Justin. I'm with my wonderful son getting ready to wed his mom, the woman I love. And... I have a canine groomsman too. How can life be better?" He hugged the boy and the returned affection had tears starting to build. Knowing he couldn't give into those kinds of feelings, he swallowed and pretended to be in a rush.

"Okay, men. We're ready and it's time to move along. Let's get the show on the road."

Justin nodded, the happiness on his face a memory to cherish.

When Dena's successful search for her wedding dress ended, she couldn't have been more in love with the world. With the help of two ecstatic assistants, Charlene and Sonja, they'd made the event into a day she'd never forget.

Now, her white satin gown with ruffles of silk flowing to the floor made her feel like the princess Bryce insisted on calling her. Looking into the mirror, the dream of a lifetime faced her. She'd always wanted to be a bride. Now here she was, her hair all piled up with the white blossoms she loved so much. Beside her, the other two women outfitted in beautiful long flowered gowns looked beautiful.

Her bouquet of red roses was huge and smelled like a handful of heaven. “Lady Dena, you do look like a princess.” Sonja came close to wrap an arm around her shoulder. “I’m so glad you allowed me to put the wedding on here for you and Bryce. After everything you’ve done for me, it’s the least I could do in return.”

Charlene linked arms with Sonja, knowing she’d be welcomed, and added, “Jamie and I were thrilled when Mom told us you were willing to hold the wedding here. It’s given us a date to work towards. I can’t believe how much we were able to do in such a short time.” She reached her hand out to gently touch Dena’s flower-filled curls, tucking one back into place without hesitation.

Dena thought about how close all three women were and how much Charlene and Sonja cared about each other now. Things had fallen into place from the time they’d gotten drunk on margarita’s on Bryce’s patio... and they’d reenacted that night a few times since.

In fact, they’d become the family she’d always yearned for. Sonja was like a surrogate mom for her, and Charlene like a sister.

Sonja looked at her fancy new watch Charlene had given her for her birthday and the thrill came again. Then Sonja zeroed in on the time. “Oops, we need to move. The guests are all here and the boys will have arrived a few minutes ago. Not fair to keep them waiting. Are you ready?”

“I’ve never been more ready in my life. Let’s do this.” Dena softly kicked at her skirts and moved forward.

When she appeared at the wide-open doors leading to the patio where the altar sat, she saw her men waiting for her... all three of them. One a tall, dark-haired man wearing a huge smile, eyes glinting, filled with loving tears as soon as they saw her.

The boy next to him, dressed like his father and wearing the identical grin looked

proud to be a part of the proceedings.

And who could forget the tail-wagging poodle-pup, his tux lopsided and his tongue hanging within the silly grin, happy with his world.

~*~*~*~