

COBBLESTONE PRESS PRESENTS



WICKED

Melanie Atkins



Whirlwind

By

Melanie Atkins

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ISBN: 978-1-60088-416-0

Cover Artist: Bree Bridges

Editor: Stephanie Parent

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Cobblestone Press, LLC

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Dedication

To my pals June and Laura.
May you have no storms in your future.

"What are you waitin' for, beautiful? Hop in."

Emma McGraw gaped through the open truck window at the rangy, square-jawed man leaning across the torn seat and contemplated her options. She shoved a lock of wet hair out of her eyes. Rain had been streaming down for the past two hours, its steady drumbeat a humbling reminder of just how far she'd fallen. Still, she didn't trust this guy. He was a total stranger, and his worn-out red truck looked like it was ready for the junk heap.

He shoved the gearshift into park and propped his arm on the steering wheel. "Look, honey—you're soaked to the skin. I'm offering you a chance to dry off and get out of this weather. That's it. I'm single, but I don't attack women to get my jollies. Don't need to."

"Because you're so handsome?" She wanted to snatch back the words the second they left her lips. Damn her for ditching her common sense.

His sexy mouth curved into a smile. "Exactly. Now...get in the truck. A tornado warning's been issued for the area, and the storm's coming this way. I don't wanna be caught out in it. Do you?"

"A tornado *warning*?" She lifted her eyebrows.

He nodded. "I have a storm shelter at my place, only a couple of miles from here. It's one of those in-ground models, but I talked the guy into giving me a big one. I'm kinda claustrophobic and need room to move around."

"I don't know..."

"Suit yourself. If you get blown to hell and back, it ain't my fault."

Thunder boomed, as if to drive home his point, and the rain became a deluge. He downshifted and prepared to pull away. "Good luck."

"Wait—" Panic seized her, and she grabbed the door handle. Water dripped into her eyes.

He aimed his gaze at the greenish-black clouds swirling along the western horizon. Lightning glittered against the gray. When he turned back, a wry smile rode his lips. "Get in, then. I wanna get to shelter before it's too late."

"Me, too." She yanked the heavy door open, threw her backpack on the dirty floorboard, and hauled herself onto the seat. The truck smelled like sweat and pipe smoke. The engine rumbled as he started off, and she wiped her hands on her wet jeans. Water from her hair dripped down her back. She ignored it and reached for the seat belt.

He glanced at her. "There's not one on that side. Sorry. It got stuck, and I had to cut it."

"Oh." She shrank back against the seat and wiped her face with her hands.

He pushed a button to raise her window, which surprised her. She didn't think the truck was that modern. "Name's Jed," he said. "What's yours?"

"Emma."

"Yeah? I have a cousin named Emma. She's pretty and blonde, just like you."

"Oh." In spite of herself, she blushed. "Well, thanks."

"How old are you?" he asked, narrowing his eyes.

She aimed a heated gaze his way. "It's not nice to ask a woman her age."

"You look young, that's all. I'm thirty-three."

"I'm older than I look." She pushed a strand of kinky, wet hair behind her ear. "Twenty-eight, if you must know. I'm recently divorced and looking for a new start, maybe somewhere on the coast, like Biloxi. My car broke down in Meridian, and I left it there 'cause I couldn't afford the repairs."

"How'd you get on the side of I-59?"

"I took the bus, which broke down, too. Guess you could say I'm bad luck."

"Uh-oh." He laughed. "This old truck's already on its last leg. That mean you'll be finishing her off?"

"It's possible." Emma stared out at the trees bending in the wind. The windshield wipers could barely keep up with the splashing rain.

He laughed again, the rumble from his chest no match for the growling thunder.

She bit her lip. "Why are you out in this weather?"

"I'm a deputy with the sheriff's department. Just ended my shift."

"Oh. Well...you're not wearing a uniform." Her stomach lurched. *He's a lawman?* Dread filled her. *Oh, God. I gave him my real name.*

He met her eyes with a curious, even gaze. "That's because I'm an investigator. I usually wear a suit and tie, but this is Saturday."

"I see." A knot formed in the center of her chest. She curled her leg possessively around her backpack and considered asking him to let her out before they got to town. A bright streak of lightning, followed by another booming clap of thunder, made up her mind for her. She swallowed and tried not to appear nervous. "I'm surprised they didn't make you stay. I mean, with the weather so bad—"

"I don't work patrol." He twisted his mouth. "Besides, I had a tough run-in with a suspect last month, and I'm riding a desk for a while. Medical reasons."

"You were hurt?" She eyed his hard body. He looked okay. Magnificent, actually, with well-defined, muscled biceps and a broad, sexy chest. His tight black T-shirt didn't leave much to the imagination. And those soft, faded jeans that cupped his...

He cut his eyes at her, like he knew what she was thinking. "I was shot. Twice. Hit low on the left side and my right calf." He gingerly moved his leg. "I'm not quite up to par just yet."

"I'm sorry."

"Me, too. An ignorant jackass with four felony warrants didn't like me knocking on his door. Shot me point blank. Hit me in the chest too, but lucky for me I was wearing a vest."

"Oh, my God."

"He's dead."

"Good." She drew in a deep breath. "Did *you* kill him?"

"Yeah." His knuckles whitened on the wheel. "It sucked. First time it's happened to me, you know? Never had a reason to fire at anybody before, and I've been on the job eleven years."

"Well, you survived. That's the idea, right?"

"You bet." He slid through a yellow light and entered a nondescript, dreary little town that dripped with gray. "This is Green Springs. Blink, and you'll miss it."

"It has a stop light."

"Two, as a matter of fact." He bobbed his head at one up ahead, which they caught on red. The pickup rolled to a stop. "You say you just got divorced?"

"Yes. My...My...husband and I lived in Birmingham. The divorce is final now, and I had to get out of there."

"I understand."

"He ended up with everything. The house, our good car, all our friends..." Filled with disgust, she let the words trail away. "Buck was the one who cheated, and I got the shaft."

"That doesn't sound quite fair."

"It isn't." An icy shiver wracked her, and she folded her arms over her chest. She'd gotten revenge, though, by swiping all the household cash, the antique urn containing his mother's ashes, and his diamond pinky ring. Fuck him.

Jed swung around a curve, took the next exit, and aimed the truck down a narrow blacktop road beneath a canopy of oaks. Thunder grumbled as they left the trees and entered a long, flat stretch with fields of what looked like hay on either side. The low greenish-gray clouds off to the west swirled like dirt in a vacuum.

"Look," Emma exclaimed, fear tumbling through her. "Is that a tornado?"

"If not, it's nasty straight line winds." He stomped the gas and cursed. "Hang on."

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"How much farther?" She braced herself against the door.

He scowled. "Five hundred yards, give or take a few. Get ready to jump and run."

"Okay." Emma braced herself. She hated bad weather but hadn't noticed the worsening conditions. With no radio, a dead cell phone, and no other way to get information, she'd been at the mercy of the elements. Good thing Jed had come along—even if he was a deputy.

He wheeled into a gravel drive in front of a rambling white farmhouse and slid to a stop beside a listing garage off to the right. Rain pummeled the windshield. He turned off the engine and popped his door. "Let's go."

"All right." Rain or no, she didn't have to be told twice. Lightning crackled overhead as she opened the door, grabbed her backpack, and dashed behind him through the puddles and pelting torrent. A stand of trees behind the house whipped back and forth, giving her chills.

Jed halted next to the house and opened a long, slanted wooden door close to the ground. He beckoned for her to enter the dark passageway. She skidded to a stop and stared down a flight of concrete steps leading into a black pit. Panic hit her. She backpedaled.

"No." The wind snatched the word away. She stared at him. "I-I can't."

"Sure you can." He let the door fall open and lunged for her.

She tried to evade him, but he caught her arm. "Jed, no—I hate the dark."

"The shelter has electricity. I'll go turn on the lights, then come back up. Stay here."

"Okay." She cradled her backpack and watched him disappear down the steps. Rain plastered her hair to her head. She glanced across the field at the bank of eddying clouds and realized the storm was closing in. Adrenaline spurted through her.

Hurry, she thought. The wind lifted her shirt.

"Emma!" Jed's loud shout carried over the wind.

She slapped at her blouse and found him in the slanting deluge. Raindrops, mixed with tiny ice pellets, pinged against her skin like tiny

knives. *Hail.* Her heart lurched.

He reached the top of the steps and caught her hand. This time, she didn't hesitate to follow him below ground. The air rushing up to meet her was dank and cool, yet lights glimmering at the bottom of the steps gave her hope.

They reached the bottom, and he let go of her fingers and started back up the slick steps.

Surprised, she gaped at him. "Where are you going?"

"To close the door," he said. "We don't want to get sucked outta here."

"Oh. Course not." She kept her gaze riveted to his broad back as he hurried up the stairs, trudged back out into the rain, and grabbed the heavy door. A loud pinging sound met her ears.

Jed looked toward the sky and spat an oath. "Hail's getting bigger."

"Be careful," she said, worried she'd be stuck in the shelter without him. "Hurry."

"I'm trying." His arm muscles flexed as he fought the wind.

Emma gripped her backpack. If something happened to him, she'd be shit out of luck. She had no idea where she was and wouldn't have a way to get anywhere else unless she could get her hands on his keys and take his truck—provided it remained intact, which was looking increasingly doubtful thanks to the awful weather.

"Come on, you son of a bitch," he growled, using his weight to lever the door off the ground. Something white skittered by and was taken away by the wind.

He got the door raised halfway, and a gust knocked him off his feet. The door slammed shut with him inside. With a startled shout, Jed tumbled down the steps.

"Oh, my God," Emma said, dropping her backpack and running to him. She knelt on the third step. "Are you okay?"

"Jesus." He moaned and pressed a hand to his side.

She slid her knee under his head. "Did you break anything?"

"I don't think so." He winced and tried to sit up, but he'd landed on his back with his head down the steps and couldn't get any leverage.

He made a face. "Give me a second."

"Wait." She shifted and slid both hands under his shoulders. "Now try."

"Okay." He gritted his teeth and latched on to her arm. "Go."

She shoved with all her might, her fingers digging into his taut skin, and helped him sit upright. Although she tried not to, she inhaled his enticing male scent, and a shiver rolled through her. He shot her a grateful glance, pulled away, and leaned heavily against the wall.

His breath sawed out. "Thanks."

"No problem." Pretending she hadn't been affected, she rose and retrieved her backpack. "Sure you're okay?"

"No." He laughed sharply. "But I'll survive."

"Hope so." For the first time since she'd entered the shelter, she looked around. It was small and oval-shaped but seemed to be outfitted with everything— including a weather radio, a small refrigerator, even a bed. She crooked her mouth. "Expecting Armageddon?"

"Not exactly." He gingerly pushed himself to his feet. "But we do have lots of tornadoes in the area. I believe in being prepared."

"Obviously." She dropped her wet backpack on the floor next to a cushioned seat built into the wall.

He winced and came down the steps. Hail continued to ping above them, and Emma couldn't help but wonder about the fate of his home and truck. He didn't seem worried, however. Just sore. He bent and rubbed his calf.

She frowned. "Did you hurt it again?"

"Just hit it on the steps. I'm okay." He looked up. "You hungry?"

"Not really." She shook her head. "I ate lunch at a diner one exit back right before you picked me up."

"Molly's Place?"

"That's the one. Molly makes a good burger."

"Yeah, she does." He lowered himself onto the seat next to her backpack and motioned for her to join him. "Make yourself comfortable. We might be down here for a while."

"We should try the weather radio."

"Good idea." He got up and plucked it off a shelf. Sat back down, turned it on.

Nothing happened.

He frowned. "Uh oh."

"Are the batteries dead?"

"Must be." He checked them, and they looked okay to Emma. But the radio still wouldn't come on. He looked up. "I lost the power cord before I ever got the thing down here, so electricity's not an option. Fat lot of good the radio does us now."

"No extra batteries?"

"I was gonna get some this week." He scowled and shoved the radio back onto the shelf. "Sorry."

"Guess we'll just have to sit tight. At least we're safe down here." She perched beside him, suddenly very aware of their forced proximity and his incredible maleness. His spicy scent unnerved her.

He plucked a towel from a box to his left and handed it to her. "Here. You're soaked."

"Wow." She took it and mopped her face. "You really do have everything down here."

"I was a Boy Scout."

"Somehow, that doesn't surprise me." She slanted him a look. "Thanks."

"You're welcome." He chuckled and stripped off his wet shirt.

Her breath caught in her throat. He was gorgeous, with well-defined pecs, a set of washboard abs, and just the right amount of chest hair. A small round bruise marred his right side. Despite the injury, her mouth watered.

She couldn't tear her eyes away from him. "Jed—"

"Take off your clothes."

"Excuse me?" She jerked her gaze to his eyes. "What?"

"You're even wetter than I am." He dug back into the box and pulled out another towel. "Take off your clothes and dry off."

"Oh. Okay."

"Unless you'd rather stay wet." He cocked a brow and reached for

the snap on his jeans.

Her mouth parted. Yes, she was wet—and he obviously had no inkling of the effect he had on her. She usually didn't react this way to a man, and she'd never wanted to fuck one within an hour of meeting him. Her heart thudded. Jed made her want to break all the rules.

He stood to shuck off his pants, and she squeezed the towel until she thought her hand might crack. Then she glimpsed the healing injury to his side and stifled a gasp.

Her train of thought shifted. "Is that where you were shot?"

"Yeah." He looked down and touched the two-inch long scar, which had an angry red tinge. "I hit it when I fell. At least it didn't break open."

"I'm glad." Unable to stop herself, she put down the towel, rose, and examined the injury more closely. There was only an entrance wound, which meant the bullet must have remained inside. "You had surgery?"

"Yeah. The slug entered just below my vest, bounced off a rib, and buried itself next to my hip bone. I was lucky it didn't hit anything important."

"I'll say." She dampened her lips. "May I...May I touch it?"

"Sure." He moved his arm to allow her access.

She gently brushed her fingers over the scar. It was hot and smooth. She half-expected him to flinch when she increased the pressure, but he remained stoically silent. His damp skin gave off a musky, masculine scent. Heat built up between her legs. She was tempted to slide her hand around front and investigate his taut, hair-flecked abs, yet she looked up and met his eyes instead. Desire flamed through her. She bit back a moan.

"Emma?" His voice was a low rasp.

She dropped her hand and straightened. He was less than a foot away from her, and heat radiated off his skin. His assessing brown eyes looked blue-black in the meager light. She struggled for something to say, but her mind went blank.

He reached for the hem of her blouse, and moisture flooded her pussy. She knew she should protest, if only on principle, yet she couldn't

get the words out. Instead, she mutely lifted her arms and allowed him to pull the garment off over her head. Cool air iced her skin, and she caught Jed staring at her lacy red bra. Her nipples came to attention. His nostrils flared, and she glimpsed a growing bulge behind his fly.

"Damn," he murmured, running his fingertip along her collarbone. "You're beautiful."

"You're not so bad yourself." She shivered under his intense scrutiny.

The pinging on the door above them increased, and he looked up. "Storm's getting worse."

"It is."

"I don't know about you, but I could use a distraction."

"Me, too." She fixed her gaze on his sexy mouth. "I hate bad weather."

"Well, then," he said, his voice smooth as silk. He dropped his hands to her hips and pulled her against him. "Let's get busy."

Emma looped her arms around his neck and met him halfway as his lips crashed down on hers. A shudder slid through her. She inhaled his musky male scent and pressed herself to him from knees to mouth. Her breasts met his hard chest, and she whimpered.

He raised his head and grinned. "You taste like a cinnamon stick."

She laughed. She'd been chewing cinnamon gum just before he'd picked her up. She studied the hungry lights in his eyes and wondered why he'd stopped for her. Yet before she could ask him about it, he kissed her again.

This time, he slipped his tongue into her mouth. She welcomed it by curling hers around it and giving it a gentle suck. He groaned, and the accompanying vibration went straight to her core. She ground herself against his steely erection in hopes of finding relief.

He cupped her ass, slid his hands down her thighs, and lifted her so she could wrap her legs around his waist. Her burning crotch met his hard cock, and heat blasted through her despite the two layers of denim separating them.

"Oh, Jed," she cried, looping her arms around his broad shoulders.

She pressed her face into his neck and breathed him in. He smelled like man and sex.

He twisted around, lowered himself to the cushioned seat with her straddling him, and drew in a sharp breath.

Emma pulled away. "Are you okay? I'm so sorry." She tried to climb off his lap. "I forgot all about your injuries. I just—"

"Shh." He held her fast. "I'm all right. Don't move. Please."

"Are you sure?" She peered up into his dark eyes.

His mouth curved in a devastating smile. "I'm positive, honey. What you're giving me is the best medicine I've ever had. Now, kiss me."

Without hesitation, she leaned into him and did as he asked, twining her arms around his neck and opening her mouth. She hadn't been with a man since the night she learned Buck had cheated on her with her best friend, Helen Day—the lying, scheming bitch she'd trusted with inside information about her family, her sucky job at the university, and her marriage—only to have it all thrown back in her face. Helen had snickered at Emma when she'd confronted the bitch, but Emma had gotten the last laugh by getting Helen fired from her teaching job. Who in hell wants a lying, scheming bitch teaching their kids, anyway?

Jed ran his hands up her spine and undid her bra. "If I move too fast, you let me know."

"Too fast?" Emma shrugged off the undergarment and leered at him. "It's not possible."

"Yeah?" Thunder rumbled above them as he dropped his hungry gaze to her breasts.

She threw back her shoulders to give him a better look. "Like what you see?"

"God, yes." He grinned. "You're fucking gorgeous."

"Don't you want to touch them?"

"Sure I do." He ran his hands up her legs, searing her through the layer of denim. "Just don't want to rush things. I might go off like a rocket."

"From touching me?"

"It's been a while since I had sex," he said.

She frowned. "Because of your injuries?"

"Yeah, and because my girlfriend dumped me. She didn't like dating a cop. So lately, I've been depending on Mr. Right Hand. He's not bad, in a pinch."

Emma laughed. "It's been a while for me, too."

"Thanks to your ex?"

"Yes. Buck McGraw's a certified rat bastard." Her cheeks grew hot as she remembered how she'd gotten revenge on her former husband. "But I'm through worrying about him. I just need to get laid."

"That makes two of us." He cupped her breasts with his large, callused hands and ran his thumbs over her nipples, sending a thread of white-hot desire straight to her pussy.

Desperate to feel his incredible hardness between her legs, she threw back her head and ground herself against him. Moisture soaked her already-damp panties and jeans, and she cried out his name.

Jed chuckled and pulled her to him. His plundering kiss devastated her.

Once he finally lifted his head, breathing hard, he reached for the snap on her jeans. "We've both still got on way too many clothes."

"Damned right." She shimmied off his lap and shoved her jeans to the floor. Her heart did a quick two-step as she stepped out of them and stood poised in front of him in only her pale yellow bikini briefs. She'd never done anything like this before—getting naked with a total stranger. It was scary, yet exciting, especially with the whirlwind brewing outside.

Jed certainly seemed to like it. A crimson flush spread over his skin, and his coffee-colored irises turned black with desire. He smiled wickedly. "Panties too, honey."

"All in due time." She propped her hands on her waist and cocked a hip. "Your turn."

A dull roar rattled the door as he rose and unzipped his pants.

She peered toward the stairs. "The wind's rising. What about your house?"

"I don't want to think about it," he said. "I'd rather focus on you."

"You know this is just a one-time thing, right?"

"Nope. It's a how-many-times-can-we-do-it-before-the-storm-passes thing." He grinned.

She laughed. "I'm leaving as soon as the weather improves."

"Okay." He stripped off his jeans and boxers and posed in front of her in all his naked glory. Holy mother of God...the man was *built*, in every sense of the word. His broad chest tapered down to those delicious six-pack abs and a narrow waist, the center of which was dusted with light brown hair. Below that, his ample, engorged penis protruded tall and proud from its nest of dark curls. His thighs were rock solid and looked like they'd hold up a mountain.

Emma licked her lips to make sure she wasn't drooling all over the floor.

Jed chuckled. "Panties?"

She didn't say anything. She couldn't, thanks to her vivid imagination which had her on her knees taking his granite-hard cock into her mouth. So instead of speaking, she hooked her thumbs in the waistband of her bikini briefs and pushed them down her legs.

She'd barely stepped out of them before Jed growled and yanked her against him. She squeaked out a protest, but he only chuckled and cupped her ass.

"I know you want it, Emma." He licked at her lips. "Question is, do you want it sitting up or lying down?"

"Whatever way doesn't hurt you," she said. "You're the one still working a desk because you were shot."

"The bastard didn't shoot my dick."

"I know, and I'm so grateful."

"Everything down south is in working order, but I think maybe I'd better do it lying down...with me on top. Is that a problem?"

"I actually prefer it that way," she said, squirming with the need to feel him inside her. A trickle of moisture ran down her inner thigh. She latched on to his forearms and tugged him toward the single bed pressed against the front wall. "Let's go."

"Whoa, honey." He quirked his mouth. "Slow down. Don't you

want some foreplay? The women I know won't spread their legs without at least twenty minutes of fingering or oral sex."

"Just looking at you has me dripping." She bit her lip. "I told you it's been a long time."

"Holy shit," he said, his eyes widening in disbelief. "Still, we need protection."

"Okay." She knew he was right but didn't like the delay. And if he wasn't prepared—dread speared through her. "Do you have anything? Please tell me you do."

"Yeah, thank God." He fished his wallet out of his jeans and dug out a condom. His hands shook as he rolled it on.

Relieved, she reached out and stroked his sheathed penis, which elicited a moan from deep in his chest. She grinned. "I want this inside me. *Now*. Once we both come one good time, we can take turns playing with each other."

"Works for me. I gotta at least touch you first, though." He slid his hand down her flat belly and dipped his fingers into her wet folds. His jaw tightened. "Oh, God. You're drowning down here."

"Told you." She kissed his neck and licked her way over his stubbled chin to his mouth. His cock jumped in her hand, and she squeezed it.

He grabbed her wrist and pried himself free. "Damn, woman. Are you trying to make me come before I even get inside you? It's been a long time for me, too."

"Sorry." She splayed her palm on his chest and flicked her thumb over one of his nipples. "I got carried away."

"Don't let it happen again," he said with a wry smile. "Or I'll be forced to use my cuffs."

"Ooh." A hot blush spread over her skin.

He laughed and walked her backwards to the bed. Rain lashed the door as he urged her down and climbed on top of her. "Hope this bed holds up," he murmured. "Never shared it with anybody before."

"Spend a lot of time down here, do you?" She opened her legs so he could settle against her pussy. The impact of his heat and weight

caused her to draw in a sharp breath.

He came up on his elbows and peered down at her with concern. "Did I hurt you?"

"No." She tugged him back down, wrapped her arms around his shoulders, and lifted her knees so that his hot cock rubbed her folds. She moaned at the hard feel of him. "You just...oh God...feel so damned good. Please—fuck me. *Now*."

"Umm." He positioned himself at her opening and then kissed her softly. The passion in his eyes added kindling to the fire within her. "I like a hungry woman."

"Well, I'm starving," she said with a purr. "Feed the kitty."

He laughed and plunged inside her.

Emma gasped at the sudden penetration. Jed's cock was long and thick, and even though he slowed his thrust and slid into her one slick inch at a time, he already filled her to the brim. She dug her fingernails into his skin and arched her hips.

He curved his mouth. "You okay?"

"Oh, yes." She matched his smile, then kissed him. Their tongues mated and curled around each other, mimicking the sex act as they moved in and out. She closed her eyes and moaned into his mouth.

He surged deeper and she wrapped her legs around his waist, which allowed all of him to slide inside her. He groaned and lifted his head. "God, Emma. You're so tight."

"Maybe because you're so huge," she murmured, squeezing her inner muscles and holding him hostage inside her body. "Now try to pull out."

"Oh, Jesus," he said, slamming his eyes shut and tightening the muscles in his ass. He tried to slide out of her so he could push back in, but she wouldn't let him. When she finally gave in and released his cock, she did so a little at a time to heighten the friction. The sensation brought a rabid growl from his chest.

She chuckled and slid her hands to his taut buttocks. "Keep moving, deputy. I'm getting close."

"Yes, ma'am," he said, slipping into a sexy Southern drawl. He

planted his hands on either side of her head and started rocking rhythmically against her, moving in and out, never taking his eyes from hers. "This okay?"

"Perfect." She reveled in the hot, steely feel of him. Moaning his name, she lifted her hips to meet each powerful thrust. The delicious friction and hard slap of flesh sent waves of pleasure rising higher and higher within her, threatening to extinguish the flames of passion he'd ignited. Desperate for relief, she pressed her face into his neck. The scents of man and sex drove her into a frenzy, and she clawed at his burning bare skin.

Sensations of hot and cold poured over her. The roar of the wind and the pinging of hail above them combined with the rush of blood in her veins to raise her hunger to a fever pitch—until she exploded in wild ecstasy, and her body convulsed around him.

Jed came right along with her, his climax even more violent than hers as he continued to thrust. Hard shudders wracked his body, and his plunging grew ragged until he eventually wound down and lay still on top of her, gasping for air.

"Holy mother of God," he whispered, the words barely audible. His chest heaved against hers. She could feel the hard pounding of his heart. After a few long moments, he levered himself up and peered down at her. "Emma? You still with me?"

"Yes," she said softly. Her body was sated. Replete. Totally boneless. She reached up and touched his cheek. "That was amazing."

"It was." He quirked his mouth and rolled off of her, pressing his back to the shelter's smooth concrete wall. Thunder echoed down the steps. He frowned and looked up. "Damn. I forgot about the weather."

"Me, too." Fear sliced through her.

He pushed himself into a sitting position. "I should go look outside...see what's happening."

"Sounds like the storm's hanging around."

"I wouldn't mind if it hung around all day. I've never had this much fun down here." With a wily smile, he winked at her.

She blushed.

He cupped her cheek and kissed her gently, then slid off the end of the bed and strolled naked to the steps. "I'll be right back."

"Be careful." She chuckled. "You're in your birthday suit."

He laughed and climbed the stairs.

She heard a thud, and then a sharp curse. Worry ate at her nerves. Unable to stand the suspense, she got up and wandered over to the steps. Jed stood at the top with his shoulder against the heavy door. He had it open a few inches and was peering outside.

"Well, the house is still standing," he said, seeming to know she was there. "But looks like there's some roof damage. It's still raining hard, and the wind's swirling."

"Has the hail stopped?"

"Seems like it. But it's all over the ground. And the sky still has the same weird, greenish tint. I think we should stay down here for a while."

"Wish the weather radio worked."

"Me, too." He let the door thump shut. "At least the generator kicked in, and we still have electricity."

"I'm glad," she said, rubbing her arms. "I'd hate to be down here in the dark."

"The generator should stay on for a while." He started down the steps.

She remained at the bottom, admiring his sturdy physique as he descended toward her. Her mouth watered at the sight of all that delicious male skin.

He halted with his hardening cock level with her eyes. "See anything you like?"

"Maybe." She bit her lip and shot him a coy look. "And...maybe not."

"I think you do like it, beautiful." He slid a lock of hair behind her ear. "Want a taste?"

"Only if you promise to return the favor." The idea of his mouth on her made her quiver in anticipation.

He grinned. "Oh, I'll return the favor. You can count on that."

"Well, in that case..." She let the words trail away and focused on

his now-erect penis. Moisture pooled between her thighs.

He dropped his hands to his sides and stared at her mouth. She wet her lips, aware that the act would get him even more excited, and took his dick in her hand. It jumped against her palm. His skin was hot and velvety smooth. She stroked his shaft, and he moaned. A grin tipped her lips. She was in control now.

He put his hands on her shoulders. "Taste me, Emma. Don't be shy."

"I've already proven that adjective doesn't apply to me." With a smirk, she took him in her mouth and swirled her tongue over the head of his cock until he drew in a sharp breath.

"Sweat heaven." He closed his eyes and swayed against her. "That's spectacular."

"Hang on, deputy." She lifted her head and stared at him until he reopened his eyes and focused on her. Then she grinned at him. "I'm just getting started."

With that, she sucked him back into her mouth and slid her lips down his shaft, taking him deep into her throat. He moaned and tangled his hands in her hair. She worked him over, using her tongue, her lips, and the interior of her mouth. Drawing on him, making him writhe.

"Holy shit, Emma," he said with a groan, widening his stance on the steps.

She wondered if he might lose his balance and fall, especially with his calf being on the mend, until he slid one hand out of her hair and braced himself against the wall. He kept the other on her head and moved it in time with her questing mouth.

Emma slid her hands up the backs of his thighs before working one around to his balls. She gave them a gentle squeeze, stroking them over and over. Jed released a string of four-letter words and thrust hard into her mouth. She continued to suckle him, alternately kneading his balls and running her free hand over his taut ass.

Then she sucked him way down in her mouth and hummed, and the vibration skittered beneath her own skin. With a sharp cry, Jed tightened his hand in her hair and came deep in her throat, spurting his

hot seed so far she had no choice but to swallow. She kept her mouth moving, draining him of every ounce of cum. Once he was done, she met his eyes and swallowed again.

"Oh, my God," he murmured, leaning heavily against the wall. Tremors wracked his hard frame. "I've died and gone to heaven."

"I believe you said you'd reciprocate," she said, wiping her mouth and stepping away from him. Her pussy was so wet, she was surprised her juices weren't dripping onto the floor.

Thunder rumbled ominously as he grinned. "Oh, baby—I love going down on a beautiful woman. Get ready to spread your legs."

"I'm ready now." She winked at him and strutted back to the bed, making sure she wiggled her hips to draw him in.

He hopped off the steps and sauntered behind her, his hot gaze burning into her back—or rather, her ass. She knew he was looking at it. She could feel it like a physical touch.

Once she reached the narrow bed, she lay down and motioned for him to join her.

He certainly didn't waste any time. In only seconds, he strode to the end of the bed, dropped to his knees, and pulled her to the edge of the mattress. She gasped when he urged her legs apart and kissed her intimately. His tongue delved inside her, and she rose off the sheets.

"Oh God, Jed." She fisted her hands in the covers and moaned.

He lapped at her, licking her folds and sucking on her clit. A glorious tingling sensation danced up her spine. She bucked and twisted, stopping only when he splayed a hand over her belly. A whimper slipped from her lips.

He raised his head and grinned at her, his lips glistening with her juices. Her breath came out in harsh pants.

"More," she begged, desperate to feel him on her again.

He laughed and ran a finger through her slit.

She gasped. "Jed, please!"

"Relax, beautiful." The words rumbled from his chest like the thunder rolling outside. Low, deep, and sexy. A grin curved his mouth. "I'm not done with you yet."

He slid one large finger inside her and pumped it in and out. The rub of his callused digit against her soft tissues sent fresh prickles over her skin. He added a second finger, and then a third. Moments later, he bent his head and circled her clit with his tongue.

"Oh, my God!" She sifted her hands into his short hair and pressed his mouth to her.

Her hips gyrated off the bed as he sucked on her bundle of nerves. An arc of electricity shot straight to her core. Brilliant lights flashed inside her head, and waves of pleasure lapped over her. Seconds later, she came in a rush. Her juices poured into his mouth, and convulsions skittered over her damp skin. She couldn't stop moving. Her mind spun in crazy circles, and all she could focus on was Jed.

Before she could recover, he withdrew his fingers, wiped his face on the sheets, and urged her higher on the bed. Bewildered and still jittery, she obeyed. Elation overtook her as he quickly climbed on top of her, put on a condom, and drove into her with one hard, steady thrust.

The moment he was seated deep inside, another amazing orgasm crashed over her. Just the feel of his hard cock made her spasm. She grabbed his shoulders and cried out his name. Never had she come apart like this. Not even once during her ill-fated six year marriage.

Jed rode her hard, his grunts and moans music to her ears. He was a big, strong, sexy guy, and he knew how to use her body. She came a third time before he went rigid, called out to the heavens, and spilled himself deep inside her.

A deep roar fill the air as he lay on top of Emma. She frowned, then suddenly realized the storm had intensified. Was that a tornado?

"Jed?" she said, shaking his shoulder. Was he asleep? "Jed? Wake up."

"Hmm?" The noise vibrated against her neck.

She shook him again. "Do you hear that? Is that the wind?"

"Huh?" His eyes blinked open, and he lifted his head lazily.

She put a hand on his chest and tried to shove him off her body. He didn't budge. She scowled. "Damn it, Jed. Listen!"

"Okay. Relax." He cocked his head and went still.

Fear shimmied through her, and she shook off the lethargy of afterglow. Not an easy task after coming four times in less than half an hour. "Is that a tornado?"

"Holy fuck." He pushed himself upright, disposed of the spent condom, and turned toward the steps. "Might be."

The lights flickered.

Emma grabbed Jed's arm. "Please tell me you have a flashlight down here."

"I do, but I'm not sure where—" The lights blinked again, and he broke off with a curse. He looked at Emma just as they winked out all together. "Damn it."

"Oh, my God." She squeezed her eyes shut as childhood memories assailed her. "I hate the dark. My mom used to lock me in the closet just for spite—and always in the dark."

"Jesus." Jed put a hand on her cheek and awkwardly kissed her forehead. "Stay put. I'll find that flashlight."

"Hurry."

"I will." He slid away from her and stood.

She didn't hear him move but figured he had, because she no longer felt his warmth. All at once, she was freezing. She scowled into the darkness. "I need my clothes, too."

A loud thud echoed through the shelter.

"Shit!" Jed snapped. "Goddamn it."

"What is it?" She grabbed the sheet and clutched it to her bare breasts. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, just stubbed my damned toe on your backpack." He cursed again. "What do you have in there, anyway? Bricks?"

"No." With a sudden gulp of fear, she drew up her knees and hugged them to her chest. If he rooted through her bag and found the cash and Buck's ring...

A distinct thump brought another string of oaths from Jed. "Son of a bitch. And before you ask, I hit my fucking head this time."

"Sorry," she said softly. Her gut twisted itself into an intricate knot. He chuckled. "It's not your fault. Hey—well, I'll be damned."

"What now?" She held her breath.

A glare of yellow light suddenly blasted through the darkness. "I found the flashlight."

"Thank God." Thrilled beyond words, she threw off the covers and slid her legs over the side of the bed. The second she focused on Jed, however, her stomach clenched.

He stood over her backpack, shining the light on the eight bundles of cash she'd swiped from Buck when she left Birmingham. Next to it lay Buck's engraved pinky ring and the antique gold urn containing his mother's ashes.

Holy fucking shit.

He trained the light on her face. "Care to explain just what the hell this stuff is?"

"Not right now." Emma spotted her panties next to the backpack and jumped up to retrieve them. Jed kept her in the spotlight every damned step of the way.

She ignored him, snatched up her underwear, and stepped into them. Her bra lay against the far wall. She retrieved it as well and put it on. Her hands shook as she fastened the hooks.

His hard gaze burned a hole in her chest. "I think I deserve an explanation."

"It has nothing to do with you."

"I'm a law enforcement officer," he said gruffly. "So it has everything to do with me. Did you steal this money?"

"It's none of your business." She turned away and plucked her wet jeans off the floor.

Jed grabbed her elbow. "Emma, *it is* my business. We just slept together, for God's sake. I'm a detective. Are you on the run from the law?"

"I'd rather not say." She shook him off and stepped into her damp jeans. They were cold, but they were all she had. A shiver rippled over her skin as she pulled them up. The rush of wind above them had faded, and all she heard now was the gentle splash of rain. Good. *Have to get out of here. Need to put miles between us.* The idea froze her heart, but she had no

choice.

I'll never see Jed again.

He aimed the pool of light on her waist as she fastened the snap on her jeans, then dug her damp blouse from beneath her backpack and held it out. "I need you to talk to me, Emma."

"I can't." She snatched her shirt from him and pulled it on over her head. The chilly material clung to her skin.

He sighed heavily. "After all we just shared...*Christ*." The flashlight cast odd shadows on his rugged face. "I don't wanna have to take you in."

"Nobody knows you picked me up." She brushed the hair out of her eyes. "And why should they? Drive me to the edge of town, and you can pretend I was never here."

"Emma—"

"I can't stay in Green Springs, Jed. I wouldn't do that to you." She smoothed her wrinkled blouse and then met his eyes. "I also don't want to go to jail. Yeah, I took some things from my ex—but he hit me, so I figure I'm due. The asshole can burn in hell for all I care."

"So you admit you did steal it."

"Buck took everything in the divorce. I needed the cash so I could get out of town. Don't you see? It was my chance to put my past behind me and start a new life. Then my car broke down, and I didn't want to use half the money to fix it. That's why I was hitching."

Jed opened his mouth like he wanted to say something, but instead snapped his jaw shut and just stared at her. His laser-sharp gaze burned right through to her soul. Measuring her veracity, calculating her guilt. Finding her lacking.

She quailed beneath his close scrutiny and ducked away. Tears filled her eyes as she dropped to her knees and shoved everything back into her bag. The backpack seemed heavier than usual when she hefted it onto her shoulder and stood.

His face solemn, he continued to watch her.

She bit her lip and turned toward the steps. "I don't hear the wind anymore."

"Let me get dressed," he said finally. "If my truck's intact, I'll drive

you to Caper's Grove in the next county. You can catch the bus there."

"You aren't taking me in?"

"Don't tempt me, Emma."

"I-I'm not." She jerked her gaze away from his and swallowed around the lump in her throat. "I just...just...*thank you.*"

"Why don't you wait on the steps?"

"Okay." She turned away and wiped a tear from her cheek. Her brain turned to mush as she traipsed up the stairs and waited for him beneath the big wooden door. She pictured him dragging on his jeans and pulling that damp shirt over his brawny chest. A swirl of need spun to life within her, but she tamped it down.

Forget him, damn it. She gritted her teeth and stared at the door. *It's for the best.*

Moments later, she heard him climbing the steps behind her. His movements were plodding and heavy, where earlier they'd been much faster. Her heart skipped a beat.

He pushed past her and shouldered the huge door open. Misty rain dripped inside. He blew out a shaky breath. "Well, the house is there. More roof damage, though. And the truck looks okay. But the garage—"

"What happened?" Curious, she mounted the steps behind him and peeked outside. The old white clapboard structure lay in a pile of rubble. "Oh, my God. Good thing you didn't park inside."

"Guess that's lucky for you, huh?" He cut her a hard glance.

Her face grew hot. "Jed, I don't think—"

"Give me your hand." He held his right one out, palm up.

She narrowed her eyes. "Why?"

"Just do it," he said, exasperation evident in his tone. "Please?"

"All right." She put her hand in his, and an electric pull zinged up her arm. She shuddered and riveted her gaze on the sky.

He started up the last two steps and, without saying a word, gave her hand a sharp tug.

She followed him out of the shelter and into the cool, misty air. The heavens were painted with layers of light gray clouds, a welcome change from the swirling dark mass they'd seen when they'd first arrived. She

was happy to see how well his house had survived, but off to the west, she saw the rubble of several that hadn't.

Jed saw them too and frowned but still didn't speak. She squeezed his hand. Both of them remained silent as they climbed into his truck. He put down the windows, and cool, damp air funneled into the vehicle as they left the drive and toiled along the road toward the interstate. Trees were down in many places, and they had to go around a few. The biting odor of fresh pine hung in the air. Emma prayed they wouldn't find the road completely blocked.

Finally, they were on the highway headed out of town.

"I wouldn't take anything for what happened in that shelter," he said.

Her heart hitched. "Me, either."

"You know, if you ever get back this way—"

"I'll come by," she said, although they both knew she wouldn't.

Twenty minutes later, they entered Caper's Grove, and he drove her straight to the bus station. It was in a tiny, nondescript, red brick building on the edge of town.

"You got money for a ticket?" he asked, draping his arm over the steering wheel.

She nodded. "Yeah, thanks. You saw the proof of that."

"Guess I did." He smirked. "Take care of yourself."

"I will. You be careful on the street." Fresh tears filled her eyes. She jerked her gaze away and put her hand on the door handle.

He reached out and caught her chin. "Hey, look at me."

"Why?" She reluctantly turned around. "So you can rub in the fact that I'm a thief?"

"No." He rubbed his thumb over her bottom lip. "So I can do this."

He bent his head and kissed her, forcing his way inside and fusing their mouths. She tasted both of them on her tongue, and the resultant jolt to her senses dredged up a moan from within her chest. She looped her arms around his neck and hung on for dear life. The kiss went on for what seemed like forever. Until Jed finally broke away and lifted his head.

"I could fall in love with you, Emma," he said.

Whirlwind by Melanie Atkins

His murmured words broke her heart. She didn't even try to stop the tears streaming down her cheeks. "You're better off without me, Jed. Really. H-Have a good life."

She kissed him one more time.

Then she grabbed her backpack and jumped out of the truck before she could stop herself. Lucky for her, a bus was waiting to leave for New Orleans right away. She bought her ticket and climbed aboard. Her heart thumped until they were out of town and on their way south, heading toward a bank of roiling clouds.

A storm of emotion welled up within her, and she knew deep in her heart that she'd never look at a thunderstorm the same way again.

The End

Author Bio

Melanie Atkins a multi-published author of romantic suspense, a fan of crime dramas, and an avid reader. Writing is more than an escape for her—it's a way of life. She grew up in the Deep South listening to tall tales and penning stories about her cats. Now she writes gripping stories of love, suspense, and mystery with the help of her furry little feline muses. You can learn more about Melanie and all of her books at www.melanieatkins.com.

