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Strong Girl

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Introduction

Strength is often thought of as something you can see—a show of force, the flex of muscle, or a loud, proud declaration. But sometimes, true strength is quieter. It's a voice that cracks but does not break, a hand that trembles but doesn't let go. "Strong Girl" is a novel about a kind of strength that is forged, piece by fragile piece, in the darkness and the light that comes after.

This is a work of fiction, but the emotions running through these pages—all the doubts, the small moments of joy, the quiet triumphs—are very real. The girl at the heart of this book is imaginary, but her struggles and dreams may remind you of someone you know. She may even remind you of yourself. Her world is small—a rural town, a close-knit community—and yet her experiences reach beyond any one place. The pain of loss, the weight of expectation, and the aching need to stand on one's own: these things know no borders.

When we picture resilience, we often see the extraordinary. Yet, in the journey recounted here, strength is found in the ordinary: in friendships patched together after falling out, in whispered secrets under sycamore trees, in the stubborn act of getting up every morning even when the world feels heavy. Through heartbreak, hope, and the everyday labor of growing up, our girl learns that being strong doesn't mean never being afraid; it means moving forward despite the fear.

I wrote "Strong Girl" as a tribute to everyone who has ever been told they're too much or not enough. It's for the quiet ones and the loud ones, for those living in the shadows and those striving for the spotlight. Most of all, it's for anyone learning that real bravery comes not from outside validation, but from the steady realization of one's own worth.

As you turn these pages, my hope is that you'll root for our strong girl, wince at her mistakes, celebrate her victories, and maybe even find a piece of your own story alongside hers. Thank you for joining her on this journey. I hope it reminds you, as it reminded me, that sometimes the greatest strength lies in simply refusing to give up.

CHAPTER ONE: The Day the Storm Came

The air had a peculiar stillness that morning, the kind that precedes a bad dream or a summer storm. Elara, at twelve years old, felt it in her bones, a low hum of unease that had nothing to do with her mother's usual morning flurry. The crickets, usually a reliable chorus in the humid Georgia nights, had fallen silent. The only sound was the rustle of leaves outside her window, a dry, nervous whisper.

Her mother, Sarah, was already in the kitchen, clanking pots and humming off-key. It was a normal Tuesday, which meant biscuits, grits, and a lecture about finishing her homework before sundown. Elara dragged herself out of bed, her bare feet meeting the cool, smooth planks of the floor. The old farmhouse creaked around them, a familiar, comforting sound that had always been the backdrop to her life.

"Morning, sleepyhead," Sarah called out, her voice bright, though a faint shadow seemed to cling to her eyes. Elara knew that look. It was the same one her mother wore after a long night of worrying about bills, or when the old truck coughed too much on the way to town. Elara just grunted in response, still half-asleep.

Breakfast was a quiet affair, punctuated only by the scrape of forks against plates and the occasional chirping of a cardinal outside the window. Elara watched a dust devil spin lazily across the parched field visible from the kitchen. The sky, usually a brilliant blue, was bruised with a purplish hue on the horizon, like an old bruise blooming.

"You need to be careful today, sweetheart," Sarah said, clearing their plates. "Mr. Henderson from the co-op called. Said there's a big one brewing. Get your chores done early, and don't stray far from the house."

Elara nodded, though she secretly planned to do exactly what she wanted. There was a secret swimming hole down by Miller's Creek, just beyond the old sycamore, and the heat was already stifling. A dip in the cool water sounded much better than stacking firewood or weeding the stubborn patch of petunias by the porch.

She spent the late morning listlessly weeding, the sun beating down on her back. The air grew heavier, thick with unspoken anticipation. The leaves on the trees hung limp, no breeze stirring them. Even the birds had sought shelter, their usual chatter replaced by an eerie silence. It was the kind of quiet that made you want to hold your breath.

By noon, the sky had turned an ominous shade of charcoal. Distant thunder rumbled, a deep, guttural growl that vibrated through the ground. Elara hurried inside, her heart

beginning to thump a little faster. Her mother was already closing the storm shutters, her brow furrowed with concern.

"Looks like Mr. Henderson was right," Sarah murmured, latching the last shutter. The house plunged into a dim twilight, the outside world reduced to muffled roars and the occasional flash of lightning through the cracks. "Go get the candles and the matches from the pantry, sweetie."

Elara moved quickly, her small hands fumbling for the box of emergency supplies. The power lines in their rural area were notoriously unreliable, especially during storms. They had gone through countless power outages, some lasting days, but this storm felt different. It had a menacing quality that chilled her to the bone.

The wind began to howl, a mournful wail that sounded like a living thing. Rain hammered against the windows, a relentless assault. The old farmhouse groaned, protesting against the unseen forces battering it. Elara huddled on the worn armchair in the living room, a book open on her lap, but her eyes kept darting to the flickering candlelight, and her ears strained to hear above the din.

Then came the crack. It was a sound like a giant splitting wood, impossibly loud and terrifyingly close. The entire house shuddered, and a framed photograph of Elara and her father, taken years ago when he was still alive, toppled from the mantelpiece, shattering on the hearth.

Sarah gasped, rushing over. "Are you alright?" she asked, her voice tight with fear, not for the broken picture, but for Elara.

Elara nodded, her throat suddenly dry. "What was that?"

Before Sarah could answer, the front door, despite being latched, burst open with a violent gust of wind. Rain lashed into the living room, soaking the rug and the antique wooden chair. Sarah cried out, struggling to push the door shut against the immense force of the wind.

"Elara, help me!" she yelled over the roar.

Elara scrambled to her feet, her small body pushing against the door alongside her mother's. But it was no use. The wind was a living, breathing monster, tearing at the wood, trying to rip the house apart. A huge gust ripped the screen door clean off its hinges, sending it spinning into the yard.

Then, a sudden, blinding flash of lightning illuminated the front yard. Elara saw it for only a split second, a swirling black funnel cloud, impossibly wide, tearing through the tall pines at the edge of their property. The air filled with the terrifying sound of

splintering wood and crunching metal.

"Tornado! Get to the cellar!" Sarah screamed, her voice raw with panic. She didn't wait for Elara to respond, but grabbed her hand and pulled her towards the kitchen, where a trapdoor led to the root cellar beneath the house.

Elara stumbled after her, her mind reeling. Tornadoes were rare in their part of Georgia, something people talked about in hushed tones, almost like a myth. She had only ever seen them on television, distant, abstract threats. Now, it was here, roaring just outside their door.

They fumbled with the latch, the old wood swollen with damp. The house was screaming now, a symphony of creaks and groans and shattering glass. Just as Sarah finally wrenched the trapdoor open, a violent crash came from above, directly over their heads. The ceiling of the kitchen buckled, and a shower of plaster and dust rained down on them.

"Go, Elara, go!" Sarah yelled, pushing her daughter down the narrow, wooden steps. Elara half-fell into the dank, earthy darkness of the cellar. She heard her mother scramble down behind her, pulling the heavy trapdoor shut just as another deafening roar shook the entire house.

They huddled together on the dirt floor, amidst jars of preserved peaches and dusty old tools. The darkness was absolute, broken only by the occasional flicker of light from the narrow gap where the trapdoor met the floorboards. The sounds from above were apocalyptic: wood splintering, glass exploding, a high-pitched shriek of wind, and then, the sound of something impossibly heavy being ripped away.

Elara buried her face in her mother's side, her small body trembling. Sarah wrapped her arms tightly around her, murmuring reassurances into her hair, though Elara could feel the tremor in her mother's own hands. The storm seemed to rage for an eternity, each passing minute stretching into an hour, each new crash a fresh terror.

Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the roar began to recede. The high-pitched shriek of the wind faded into a distant whine. The sounds of destruction lessened, replaced by the persistent drip of water and the creaking of damaged wood.

They stayed in the cellar for what felt like forever, listening, waiting. Finally, after an agonizing silence, Sarah slowly, cautiously pushed up on the trapdoor. A sliver of grey light filtered into the cellar, revealing dust motes dancing in the air.

"Stay here," Sarah whispered, her voice hoarse. "I need to see."

Elara clung to her mother's leg, but Sarah gently untangled herself and climbed the

steps. Elara heard a choked gasp, then a muffled sob. Her heart sank. She knew, without seeing it, that things were very, very bad.

When Sarah finally returned, her face was streaked with dirt and tears. She didn't say anything, but her eyes held a look of utter devastation. She just held out her hand, and Elara, her own fear a cold knot in her stomach, took it.

Together, they climbed out of the cellar and into a world utterly transformed. The kitchen was open to the sky, a gaping hole where the roof had been. Rain still dripped steadily through, creating puddles on the floorboards. The familiar furniture was scattered, broken, and soaked.

Beyond the kitchen, the rest of the house was a ruin. The front porch was gone, ripped away as if it had never been there. Trees that had stood for a hundred years lay toppled, their mighty trunks snapped like twigs. The fields were a desolate landscape of debris, twisted metal, and splintered wood. The old sycamore tree, the one that guarded her secret swimming hole, was nowhere to be seen.

Their home, the safe, familiar haven of her childhood, was no more. It was a skeleton, exposed and broken. And amidst the wreckage, a profound silence had fallen, broken only by the steady drip of rain and the distant, mournful cry of a lonely bird. The day the storm came had taken everything.

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