



Rock^{the}
Cradle
of
Love

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A TEN RIGS TEXAS TALE

Rock the Cradle of Love

Product Sample

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CHAPTER ONE

Noah Drinkwater, number twenty-one and the star forward for the Fort Worth Rotors, trudges up the stairs to his second-floor condo. He wants a hot shower, a comfortable bed, and twelve hours of sleep. He has no plans for the next week other than to recover from the end-of-season push. To catch up on sleep and replenish a calorie or two. Or maybe a few thousand.

The last eight days have been brutal. The Rotors lost three of their last five games, and they lost the final game. Thank goodness it was an away game. A loss at home would have been even more devastating. The team had played hard, but they were bummed at losing a berth in the playoffs, and they just couldn't make the magic happen.

Noah pulls off his clothes and heads to the bathroom. He stops short when Julia's special ringtone breaks the silence, and his heart takes off like a puck smacked toward the net from center ice. It's after two a.m.

"Jules, what's up?" he asks, his heart rate spiking. The baby's crying in the background again, although it's not as loud as it was last time they talked, thank goodness.

"I c-can't anymore. I'm sorry. I held on until your season was over, and I... Noah, help me." Her voice breaks as she speaks and then she begins to cry.

Noah's heart sinks, his stomach churns, his heart rate spikes again. He's exhausted, and he can barely think straight. He needs rest so badly. *Crap. Crap. Crap.* But Jules needs him, and he's let her down way too often since he left home for hockey eight years ago. "Let me think, honey. Give me a minute."

"K-k-kay."

He can't get to her quickly enough, which means he needs someone in Ten Rigs to go to her. Who does he know well enough to call anymore? His brain whirs and whirs. He can barely process basic self-care right now, much less try to remember the faces and names of people in Ten Rigs. His eyes are heavy and they itch with fatigue. Who does he know, who can he call? He swipes a hand down his face.

No one.

He doesn't have phone numbers for anyone in Ten Rigs except his mother, but he can't call her about this. For one, it's the middle of the night, but more importantly, she'll want to get Brenda involved and that would be the worst thing for Jules. He just doesn't have the time or the brain power to make his mother understand at the moment.

But, maybe...if he can't go to Julia and Emma, they can come to him. "Okay, Jules, bring me the baby." If he gives her something to do, something to focus on, maybe she can gain some control. And he can relax, at least a little bit.

"What?"

The thought has filled his brain since Julia's revelation four weeks ago. All the calls, the sadness, Jules's crying, Emma's crying, everything had churned in his gut and coalesced into an idea. He could adopt Emma. He'd thought he'd have a week or two to recover from hockey season before discussing his plan with Julia, but that apparently isn't going to happen.

"Bring Emma to me. Pack what you can in your car and bring her here. I'll take her." Noah perches on his bed. "I'm gonna call for help, someone will be there to help you soon, all right?"

"Noah. Y-you can't. What do you mean? How?" There's relief in her voice even though she's confused, and that's enough for Noah.

"Jules, I love you, and I can do this for you. I can do it for Emma. I can do it for me."

Jules lets go a long shuddering sigh. "Okay. Okay. I'll start packing."

She disconnects the call, and Noah racks his brain on who to contact, who he

knows well enough in Ten Rigs aside from his mother. But, damn, it's two a.m. He has no phone numbers. Calling 9-1-1 would be overkill, and neither Julia nor Emma need that kind of help. Not yet. If he thought either one of them was in danger, he wouldn't hesitate, but he knows they're not. Julia's beyond upset, but she's not suicidal or anything, and she won't take it out on Emma. Who can he call though? Julia definitely needs a friend and a sympathetic ear. Noah paces his bedroom while he thinks.

The only person who comes to mind is Miss Maple. She's been like the mother of Ten Rigs forever. His mother still mentions her. Noah saw her last summer while he was home. Unless there's been some sort of tragedy regarding Miss Maple he hasn't heard about, she's going to be the best person to handle this. Everyone loves Miss Maple. Except it's still the middle of the night, and he doesn't have a way to get a hold of her. *Think, Noah, think...* God, he's tired. Bone-weary and heart-sick. Mostly for Jules and Emma, but also for himself and the team.

Everyone in town probably knows Miss Maple's number, but that does him no good since he has no one else's number. Who on earth is going to be awake in the middle of the night? Emergency services. Right. But the fire department is volunteer. Police or sheriff are the best options. He opts for sheriff, because, well, calling the police just doesn't feel right for some reason. Not that he has anything against them.

He looks up the number for and calls the Ten Rigs sheriff's department.

"Sheriff's office. If this is an emergency, please call 9-1-1. If it's not, how may I direct your call?" says a woman's voice.

"H-hi. This is Noah Drinkwater, you know—from the Fort Worth Rotors."

"Okay, Mr. Drinkwater. How can I help you?"

"You know I'm from Ten Rigs, right?"

"Of course." The "who doesn't" remains unsaid, but Noah hears it anyway.

"Okay, well. I know this is very unusual, but I need a phone number—no, no...I mean..." He shakes his head and takes a breath. "I need for you to have someone call me—I know you can't give out numbers." Noah explains the situation.

“Can you please contact Miss Maple, tell her what I told you and give her my number, have her call me as soon as possible? *Please?*”

“I’ll do my best, Mr. Drinkwater.”

“Thank you.” He still needs a shower even though sleep won’t be forthcoming until he hears from Miss Maple or he sees Jules and Emma. After putting the volume to max, he sets his phone as close to the shower as he can without it getting wet and climbs in. His pulse continues to thrum and his breathing stays short no matter how many deep, slow breaths he takes. *Please, sheriff’s office operator. Please, Miss Maple. Please.* He repeats the mantra in his head as he shampoos his hair and soaps up.

The jangle of a phone call startles him as he’s drying off. He hops into his underwear and scoops up the phone. He doesn’t recognize the number, but it’s a Big Spring/Ten Rigs area code. “Hello?”

“Hey, Noah, Marva Maple calling. Georgia told me about Julia Gilbert. How can I help?” Miss Maple sounds pretty awake for two-thirty in the morning, but he’s not going to question it right now.

Noah drops to a seat on the edge of his bed, relief making his legs weak. “Miss Maple, I’m so sorry to wake you up in the middle of the night, but thank you for calling me back so quickly.”

“Noah, honey, calm down. Tell me what you need me to do.”

Her familiar, gentle voice and calm confidence eases his anxiety even further.

“Jules is in a bad way. I’m going to take the baby for a bit, but Jules was pretty distraught when I talked to her. She’s packing up some of the baby’s things, but I’d feel so much better if someone was there. I c-can’t ask her mom or mine, Miss Maple. Will you help us? Will you help Jules and Emma?”

“Of course, I will, Noah, where can I find Julia and Emma?”

Noah gives her Jules’s address. “I can’t thank you enough, Miss Maple. Whatever I can do to repay you, let me know.”

“Honey, you don’t have to repay me to help someone in need. Now let me get going and I’ll call you if anything comes up, all right?”

“All right. Thank you, thank you so much.”

Noah crawls up his bed and tugs a pillow beneath his head. He sets his phone off to the side and closes his eyes, breathing easy for the first time in an hour—for the first time in weeks really. Thoughts about keeping Emma whirl around and around in his head, but he needs rest. It’s been a long day already, and if he wants to be coherent when he’s got a baby in his care, he needs some shuteye. He forces his mind to go blank, and he counts hockey pucks until he falls asleep.

Banging on his front door startles Noah out of his cozy sleep. It takes approximately three seconds for him to remember what’s going on and to know who’s here. He throws back the covers he’d pulled over himself at some point and rockets from his bed to the door. He smacks the wall switch, turning on the entry light above him.

Julia shoves a box into his arms and drops a pink-polka-dotted bag inside the front door before whirling around and heading back down the stairs. Miss Maple is standing on the landing holding Emma, who’s snuffling softly in her arms. Emma’s lashes are clumped together and her eyes look a little red, but she’s not actually crying at the moment. Her pudgy fingers are in her mouth and her big blue eyes peer up at him.

The sky to the east is the pinkish, bluish, purple of pre-sunrise. The street lights still glare over the parking lot.

“Well, hello, Noah.” Behind the wire-rimmed glasses, Miss Maple’s blue eyes sparkle with mischief as her glance drops slightly for a moment. “You’re looking...well.”

Heat suffuses Noah’s face and chest. He’s only wearing his underwear. *Crap.* “I wasn’t expecting you, Miss Maple. My apologies. I’ll be right back.” Noah sets the box down and hurries to his room. He drags on a pair of basketball shorts and a tee shirt before returning to the living room. The wrought iron table lamps are now on, illuminating the mostly tidy room.

Miss Maple is perched on the edge of his oversized green corduroy sofa, Emma on her lap. If Miss Maple sat back, she’d probably get lost. His friends are

mostly hockey players, and he'd bought furniture to accommodate their large frames.

Julia dashes in with another box braced against her hip, a tote bag slung over one shoulder, and grasping some sort of thing made of metal poles, plastic, and mesh in one hand. She stacks the box she's holding on top of the one he'd set on the floor, sets the bag alongside them, and then pulls at the metal poles of the thing, and a moment later there's a baby bed standing in the living room.

"That's her travel bed," says Julia. Her light brown hair's in a messy ponytail, and she's wearing a gray over-sized Rotors hoodie and baggy dark blue sweats. Her brown eyes are tired and over-bright, red-rimmed. "She'll be fine sleeping in there for a while. All the furniture I have belongs to other people, I have to return it."

The implication is clear. Julia's giving him Emma. There's no question that he's taking her. He and Jules will have to talk seriously, officially, about him adopting Emma permanently. He'll put his cards on the table later, in a few days, but he doesn't think Julia's going to have any objections. He'll have to buy baby furniture.

Noah nods. "I'll come get the rest of her stuff in a few weeks maybe?"

"Okay, yeah," says Julia, twisting her hands in the kangaroo pocket of the hoodie. "That works."

Julia leaves again, and Noah looks at Miss Maple. "You came with her?"

Miss Maple nods. "I didn't want her to drive three and a half hours alone with a possibly crying baby. I sat in the back and tended to Emma and let Julia drive distraction free."

"Okay. Good, good. Thank you so much." He slides his fingers through his hair and sits on a bar stool. "I really appreciate this. If I can't do something to repay you, let me buy you dinner when I come home, at least?"

"You're on, Puck Daddy."

A smirk twists his lips. "Puck Daddy? That's new." She'd always called him Rinky Dink when he was younger.

Miss Maple chuckles. "Seems fitting."

“Maybe so.” Noah’s gaze sidles to the open door. “Is there a lot more? Should I help her?”

She scans what’s already been brought in. “There’s a bit more. I’ll sit here with Emma.”

With Noah helping, it turns out to be the last trip. They set the bags and boxes down and look at each other. He’s not sure how he should be feeling. Relief is his dominant emotion because she made it safely and because he’s taken her biggest stressor off her hands. Until they can have a frank conversation, sadness and worry for Jules will continue to lurk.

Julia gloms onto him and squeezes so tight, he almost loses his breath. “Thank you,” she murmurs, before disappearing out the door.

“I guess it’s time to head back.” Miss Maple rises and slides Emma into his arms. “She’s been fed and changed, so she should be fine for a couple of three hours.”

He looks down into Emma’s sweet little face, his heart lurching hard. “Okay. Thank you.” Emma blinks and reaches a tiny hand toward his face.

“You’re going to need help. Find some quickly. You’re doing an admirable thing here, Noah, for both of these girls.”

“I’m doing a selfish thing,” he says, running a finger down Emma’s round cheek. He wants this little girl more than he should, but taking her feels right for all three of them.

“Depends on one’s perspective.” Miss Maple pats his arm. “I better scoot. You take care, Noah. I’m still at the other end of a phone call if you need anything.”

“Just...keep an eye on Jules?” Noah wants to give her space, at least for a few days. And he still has end-of-season things to do before he’s free to officially start his off season.

“I will.” She winks and closes the door behind her.

Noah walks to the window. Julia’s pale green, mid-size car turns left out of the parking lot and is out of sight within moments. The sun crests the horizon just then and golden-orange shards of light make him squint. He blinks and glances

down. It's just him and Emma now. He lets out a breath and tries to let this new anxiety dissipate. It's been a while since he's held a baby. There's no giving this one back to its parents. He's the parent now.

Noah settles into his dark green massage recliner and turns Emma to face him. Her blue eyes, so like his own, meet his again. "Hi Emma. I'm going to be your daddy."

Emma's face scrunches and tears trickle from the corner of her eyes. Her tiny pink lips purse once, then twice. Her mouth opens and she begins to wail.