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Master of Disaster

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Dedication

For Jim, always

Chapter One

“What the hell are you doing here?”

Standing outside the open door to the motel room, Brita Swift barely heard the shouted words over the howl of gusting wind. She looked up into the hard, handsome face of Zeke Masters and flinched, as much from the way he scowled at her as from the driving rain that stung her face. Zeke hadn't changed a bit since she last saw him over a year ago—arrogant, stubborn, intolerant...and the sexiest man alive.

“Same as you, after a story.” Dropping her backpack off her shoulder, she tried to brush past him into the shelter of the room, but he stepped to one side to block her path as if she were the enemy invading his sanctuary. She bumped into his solid chest, the casual touch sending shockwaves reverberating through her. She refused to give in to the insufferable jerk on this occasion. The last time they were together had been a catastrophe, his temper living up to his media nickname—Master of Disaster.

Zeke snagged her arm before she could step away and brought her up close...close enough to fill her nostrils with the spicy aroma of his aftershave cologne. A common brand she had detected on any number of men, it never made her body melt unless blended with Zeke's own unique scent. If he hadn't held her tight against him, their closeness would have made her stagger.

“What makes you think I'm going to let you stay here with a Category 5 hurricane breathing down our necks?” His mellow voice had lost its surprise, but still held a cutting edge she remembered so well.

Eyes narrowed, she glared at him until he released her. As soon as he did, she moved back, out from under the protection of the narrow eave that ran the length of the building. “What makes you think I'm going to let you stop me?”

He stepped out into the stormy weather preceding Hurricane Omega, unmindful that he wore nothing on his head or over his t-shirt. The thin cotton immediately soaked through and clung to him, molding to the contours of his muscles. His erect nipples stood out in hard little peaks, and her own tingled in response as if he had swiped his tongue over them.

Standing over her, he leaned in close. Rain dripped from his hair and his long, perfect nose before splashing on her chin. “I don't have time for this, Breezy. Omega is moving in fast. If I take the time to haul your ass to safety, I might not be able to get back here soon enough.”

The use of his nickname for her made her heart thunder in her chest. She hadn't heard it in all the time they were apart, and she had never expected to hear it again. Circumstance brought them together, nothing more, and sadness stole over her. Because of the depth of what they once shared, something more should have reunited them, not the *thing* in her pack.

“All you need to do is get *your* ass back inside and let me in. I can take care of myself.”

“Yeah. Right.” His blunt words stung like sharp slaps to her face.

She smiled in spite of the heat blossoming in her cheeks and looked square into his cool blue eyes. “I've survived quite nicely without you the past year. And I survived *you*. Omega will be a walk in the park.”

Zeke's jaw bunched, a tiny muscle twitching in his cheek, and he jerked back as if she'd struck him. Brita closed her eyes. She'd hit a nerve, just as she meant to do, but she couldn't afford to do it again. Another barbed zinger might set off a real temper tantrum. She braced herself for the fury sure to follow. Emotionally, Zeke Masters' devastating temper rivaled a Category 5 hurricane.

Prepared for the worst, she opened her eyes. She searched for the tell-tale signs of his short temper—the hard glare in his eyes, the red tinge in his tanned face and the strained muscles all over his body, ready to burst out of his skin. She saw none of them and noticed that his cheek muscle relaxed, too. Instead, she caught a glimpse of tenderness in his eyes a second before he shielded them with annoyance and furrowed his brows.

“All right, you can stay because I wasn't able to document Hurricanes Katrina and Rita and I don't intend to miss this one. If I leave now to take you to safety, the road will probably be closed and I won't be able to get back through.” He spoke in a more reasonable, almost amiable, tone and took hold of her arm again. “Now, let's get in out of the rain.”

She allowed him to hustle her into the room, glad to be out of the pelting drops. She turned to face him, but he hadn't come in behind her. He stood in the rain, his head cocked to one side as if listening for a sound beyond the noise of the storm.

“Zeke,” she called to him. When he didn't respond, she raised her voice. “Zeke!”

He took a step backward, turned and came inside, shutting the door firmly behind him. He stared at it with a puzzled look on his face.

“What's wrong?” she asked.

He shook his head, brushing off her concern, but his strange behavior unnerved her. Before she could ask him again, he faced her and stepped closer to her. A more playful expression replaced his confusion. Water drizzled from his nose and chin and the thick waves of his dark, short-cropped hair. A mere few minutes outside had drenched him and his clothes.

Glancing around the room, she was surprised to see it as comfortably messy as usual when Zeke stayed in a motel. “Why aren't you packed and ready to go? When do you plan to leave for Matagorda? Omega will make landfall in about twenty-four hours.”

“Twenty-seven hours, give or take.”

“We're miles from Matagorda,” she pointed out.

“A hundred and twenty-nine as the crow flies.” He took another step toward her, and she retreated until her back bumped the wall.

She shook her head in bewilderment—to come this far only to find that Zeke had guessed wrong. “It’ll take hours driving it, and the roads going into Matagorda will be closed soon if they aren’t already.”

“I imagine the roads are closed by now, and they’re only letting traffic out of the area, not in.” He didn’t sound at all worried about missing the Storm of the Century, as the newscasters had tagged Omega.

“I don’t understand,” she murmured.

Zeke moved in even closer and pinned her to the wall without touching her, a splayed hand on each side of her head. His cologne-scented body heat rolled off him in waves. “What’s not to understand? Omega will make landfall here in Gulf Beach, not Matagorda.”

“One of your hunches?” She tried not to inhale his seductive aroma, but her breathing turned into short, shallow gasps.

He nodded. “Yep.”

“And you’re sure about this?”

He shrugged. “My hunches haven’t failed me yet. Looks like yours are getting better. How did you find me? With the Hurricane Center projecting Matagorda as the target, how did you know I was here?”

Brita almost smiled, but she didn’t want to encourage him in any way. She swallowed the smile, somehow maintaining a neutral expression. “I called your mother. You always let your family know where you are in case they need to get in touch with you...or something happens to you so they’ll know where to start searching. She was happy to tell me where you were staying.”

He rolled his eyes heavenward. “I’m sure she was. She likes you.”

“And I like her. It takes a gutsy woman to raise three sons like you.”

“No, my brothers aren’t like me,” he protested with a laugh. “We’re all as different as night and day and twilight.”

Brita appreciated the interesting twist in the conversation about the Masters brothers, but they didn’t need to travel that detour at the moment. She had to get them back on track. “You might as well back off, Zeke. I’m not going anywhere except with you.”

“Fine. But there are rules,” he explained, his voice at its mellowest. “And if you can’t agree to them, then I take you back to Houston right now and we both miss the opportunity of a lifetime.”

When he paused, Brita nodded once. “I’m listening.”

“First, you do what I tell you, when I tell you. Life or death situations can occur within seconds, and I don’t want to have to wonder what you’re doing. You do what I tell you, period. No questions, no hesitation.”

“Agreed.” She had no problems with that. She meant to survive. Zeke was experienced in how to survive a natural disaster, she wasn’t. Easy enough.

“Second, we stay together. No going off on your own, no matter what. Tell me if there’s something you want to investigate, and I’ll decide whether we pursue it. If I say no, that’s the end of it. No questions, no hesitation.”

This rule was more difficult. Brita had her own reason for braving Omega *and* Zeke in the first place, and nothing would keep her from her goal. Still, if she balked at all, Zeke would call the whole thing off. “Agreed.”

His head moved in until his warm breath caressed her skin and she thought his lips were going to touch hers. “Third, you give me a kiss whenever I demand it. No questions, no hesitation.”

Brita’s eyes widened, and she swallowed hard. Oh, that would be the most difficult of all.

Relieved to be out of the freaky wind that seemed to call his name and whisper incoherent words, Zeke looked down at Brita and held his breath. Her reaction to his third proposal—or should he call it a proposition?—wasn’t at all what he expected. Prepared for her to rip him a new one, he exhaled slowly when she didn’t right away. Her deep violet eyes opened wider, but the look in them didn’t scream anger, they whispered desire.

Then she raised her hands and pressed them flat against his chest. His cock jump-started as her warmth seeped through his wet t-shirt and heated up his cold skin. Her lips parted, an invitation to kiss her there and then. A couple of inches away, he only had to tilt his head forward...

“Are you crazy?” She snapped the question at him as if firing it from a rubber band and shoved him hard. “We haven’t seen each other in over a year and you think I even *want* to kiss you?”

He stumbled back a few steps, unable to stop the grin from spreading across his face. Her eyes called her mouth a liar.

“You think this is *funny*?” Her lips pressed together in a hard line and her jaw set, but her violet eyes remained darkly passionate.

Or maybe he only saw in them the reflection of his own need.

“Trust me, I’ve done it before and there’s nothing funny about riding out a Cat 5 hurricane.” He ran his hand through his hair, slinging water, and suppressed a shudder as his body chilled from his wet clothing. He crossed to the window and threw up his hand, pointing to it. Rain slashed across the glass pane and wind shrieked through the eaves, but he watched her instead of the storm. “Look at it. And this is just the outer edge. The weather will get worse before it gets better. I can take you back to Houston and to safety, but we have to leave now.”

Her tongue darted nervously from her mouth, leaving a glistening trail over her naturally plump lips. How many times had he seen her on her knees, her mouth damp and swollen, but not because she had licked them? Not nearly enough. His cock jerked again, and he stifled a groan.

"I'm not going, Zeke," she said, her eyes wide again. "I'm ready to ride it out with you."

He was ready to ride all right, but not just the storm. Images of Brita—her legs wrapped around him, her fingers digging into his back and her face tense with pleasure—rocketed through his mind. Not a flashback because it took place on the big bed in this motel room with the frilly-flowered wallpaper above the headboard. And it wasn't a premonition, just a wannabe daydream, the kind he'd envisioned since the day she kicked him out over a year ago.

He turned his back to the window, shutting out the images of the storm and symbolically cutting off the Brita-in-bed scene in his head. Amazingly, she stood here with him, in this room. He didn't need to fantasize anymore.

Of course, getting her into that bed might take a little coaxing.

"All right," he said at last.

She looked surprised that he gave in so easily, but it was probably more that he didn't rant and rave and throw things, his temper getting the best of him the way she remembered.

The only reason he didn't sling her across his shoulder, haul her down to his SUV and drive them to Houston was because of his gut feeling. His instincts never led him astray. He possessed an affinity for natural disasters and knew exactly when to hang tight and when to cut and run. Everything about this storm told him to move in quickly and ride it out. He would survive and so would Brita. Otherwise, he'd never put her in danger.

"Good," she said. "I brought supplies. I need to get them in before it gets worse out there."

"I'll help." He grabbed his slicker from the closet.

She went to the other side of the bed and knelt, bending over and out of sight. When she stood, she no longer held her backpack.

"I can do it." She hurried to the door. "I don't want to be any trouble."

You already are, he thought, but didn't tell her. Instead, he shrugged into his slicker and said, "No trouble at all if you brought food."

She flashed him a smile, deepening the dimple in her cheek. "And water, batteries and toilet tissue. Probably more than enough, but seeing on TV what happened after Katrina, I'd rather be safe than sorry."

He lost track of how many trips they made, bringing in case after case of bottled water, individual serving pop-top cans of tuna and soup, shelf-stable milk and microwaveable meals, crackers, jerky and dried fruit.

"Where did you find all this?" He set the last case in place. Cartons stacked head high filled most of the space between the far wall and the bed. Her stockpile made his stash look pathetic—a grocery bag with a few bottles of water and cans of vegetable soup he'd managed to grab from the local market before the shelves were emptied a few days ago. "Every place between here and Houston has been out of water and canned food for days."

"I brought it with me from back home. Here, look in this box." She tore open the flaps and while he looked, she knelt in the narrow space beside the bed, dragged out her backpack and set it on the bed, leaning it against the headboard.

"You drove all the way?" He acted like he didn't notice her actions, but he wondered what her pack contained and why she hid it from him.

"Yeah. I knew every store in this part of Texas would probably be picked clean."

"When did you start out?"

"I left Bentley yesterday morning at dawn. I was lucky to find a motel with a vacancy just over the Arkansas-Texas state line. I caught a few hours' sleep then decided to move on."

He looked in the huge carton she had opened—a small camp stove, several dozen fuel cartridges and a set of camping dishes and cookware.

"Coffee, sugar and powdered creamer are in another box. The power will go out, but I knew you'd want your coffee."

Ah, this Brita he knew well—the Practical Brita, the Always Prepared Brita. He threw a change of clothes and a toothbrush in a bag and went off for days or weeks, making do with what he scrounged up and going without coffee if he had to. Brita needed order and to know where she'd be the next day, next week, or next year. Impulsive, she was not. The only spontaneous thing he'd known her to do was go to bed with him the first day they met again as adults.

Now, he shrugged out of his slicker, hung it in the closet and made a final decision. "You know, I have no intention of being here when Omega hits. She's projected to make landfall tomorrow around ten in the morning. I'm going to shoot as soon as it's daylight tomorrow, catching as much as I can on film, then hightail it out of here and hope the highway is clear enough to make it to Houston."

"Oh." Brita's brow furrowed, and she bit her lip. He imagined the wheels spinning in her mind, but he didn't have a clue *what* she contemplated. "You usually ride out these storms, and you said riding out a Cat 5 was no fun. Which sounded like you meant to see this one through."

"I meant to, but Omega makes Katrina look like a summer squall in comparison. I won't be sticking around for this one."

She worried her lip with her teeth. "Is that what your instinct is telling you?"

How could she know his gut screamed for him to stay put? She didn't *know*, but she took an educated guess because his normal procedure entailed

riding out a storm. Even though he always trusted his hunches, the sheer size and ferocity of Omega compelled him to listen to his head instead of his gut.

And the garbled voices in the wind...were they telling him to stay, too? He shook off the thought, not knowing where it originated. *There are no voices in the wind.*

Changing the subject, he asked, "What's a gossip columnist from a small-town newspaper nearly eight hundred miles away doing here?"

She hesitated long enough that he thought she declined to answer. Rain-damp strands of black hair near her face had kinked and separated. She brushed them back impatiently, but they eased across her cheeks again. She glanced at her pack then cut her violet eyes at him sharply. "I'm not a gossip columnist and you know it. I'm a human-interest reporter. And editor now, too."

"Congratulations. But that doesn't answer my question," he prodded.

Her slicker crackled as she pulled it off. "Maybe I'm tired of human-interest stories and maybe I'm tired of a small-town newspaper. Maybe I'm ready to take on a new challenge, grow my career, and be a storm chaser like you."

Maybe...but he didn't quite believe it. Something sounded false, all those *maybes*. He'd never known Brita to beat around the kudzu about anything, or not have a solid plan for the future.

"And how many storms have you chased?"

Her back to him, she made a great show of hanging her slicker in the closet, carefully letting it fall just right on the hanger.

"How many?" he insisted.

"Counting now?" She closed the closet door and turned toward him, her face expressionless. "One. I thought I'd start at the top, learn from the best."

His hands tightened into fists, but he released them as quickly as they formed. Brita was lying just as sure as he knew Omega would hit this small town of Gulf Beach, Texas. He refused to allow his anger to spiral out of control and return to his old way of dealing with it. He had worked too hard to be the different man he'd become today, the man Brita wanted him to be.

Chapter Two

Brita saw his fists clench once and waited for his temper to explode. Then he shook out his hands and rolled his shoulders, as if shrugging off a heavy weight.

"This isn't a game, Breezy." He spoke calmly, quietly, but the use of his pet name for her rankled.

"Don't call me that!" she snapped. Then she realized the irony of the situation. She used to criticize him for losing his temper, and now she flipped out at the least provocation. She shook her head and lowered her voice. "That nickname was from a different life. We've moved on."

But had they? From the moment Zeke opened the door, their time apart evaporated into mist and they were back where they should be—together. It took all of her willpower not to run into his arms and tell him she hadn't moved on at all and how she mourned the day she'd ordered him out of her apartment and her life.

"I know it's not a game, Zeke." She rubbed her face with both hands and fatigue suddenly surged through her. "I'm not treating it like one. I came for a story, okay? The story of the Master of Disaster taking on a Category 5 hurricane. I should have called and checked with you first. I'm sorry."

Her last two words echoed in the following silence, as bitter as unsweetened tea between them, and Brita wished for the chance to take them back. Their last big argument had centered on those two words or, more accurately, Zeke's lack of saying them. A few apologies would have gone a long way toward healing the growing rift between them, a rift that had rapidly widened into Mariana Trench proportions and become impossible to mend.

"Which is it?" he asked after the uncomfortable silence lingered far too long.

Not understanding what he meant, she frowned. "What?"

"Are you here to learn how to be a storm chaser? Or are you here to write a story about me in action? Which is it?"

Oh, she had screwed that up. When she set this plan in motion, she knew she needed a good reason to join him. She couldn't decide whether to tell him she wanted to be a storm chaser or that she was writing a story on him for the local paper. Neither was true so it didn't matter. She hadn't made up her mind which he would be more apt to believe by the time she arrived, and now she had told him both. She was much too tired to try to keep up with a bunch of lies.

"Both," she said finally. "I told my boss I was coming down here to do a story on you, but that wasn't the real reason. I wasn't ready to tell him I might change the focus of my career and leave the paper."

"You're leaving the *Star*?"

By the way he asked the question, with eyebrow cocked, he didn't seem to believe her. He was right, but she had to either keep up the pretense or tell him the truth. If she revealed the real reason for joining him in Gulf Beach, he would think she'd gone insane. She wasn't ready for the argument sure to follow. She drew in a deep breath and prepared for evasive maneuvers.

"Well, to be a storm chaser I'd have to leave, wouldn't I? Aside from tornadoes and the occasional ice storm, there aren't many natural disasters in west Tennessee."

His eyebrow relaxed, and he laughed. "You could always wait for the Big One."

Like the west coast, the mid-south experienced continual tremors from a fault centered in New Madrid, Missouri, but unlike the Californian quakes, the mid-southern shakers were rarely felt. Scientists had predicted a Big One for the area, too.

Brita shrugged. "With luck, the New Madrid fault won't rock our world in my lifetime."

When Zeke shuddered particularly hard, she realized he'd started shivering after he removed his slicker. The slashing rain had drenched him when he stepped outside to confront her earlier, and the legs of his jeans and jogging shoes still dripped water from their multiple trips for the supplies.

Anxious to steer the conversation away from why she came to Gulf Beach, she said without thinking, "You need to get out of those wet clothes."

"Yeah?" The tone of his voice dropped to a husky drawl. "You gonna help me?"

Leave it to Zeke to take an innocent remark and make it sound naughty. She shook her head. "I think you're capable of changing your own clothes, but I will get you a towel."

In the bathroom, she grabbed a towel off the rack, and when she came out she threw it at him, hitting him in the face. "You shower first. I don't want you to get pneumonia."

"I've never had pneumonia in my life. Besides, my mama raised her boys right. Ladies first." He bowed and swept his arm toward the bathroom with a flourish.

"Okay, if you insist." After rummaging in a carton where she had packed clothes for Zeke as well as herself, she threw a set on the bed for him, including pajamas, and draped hers over her arm. Then she slung her backpack over one shoulder. "I won't be long."

He picked up the t-shirt from his clothes on the bed. "Thanks. I only brought a couple of changes, and I haven't had a chance to do laundry."

Brita smirked. Laundry was never high on his list of priorities. "You're welcome. There are socks, jogging shoes and boots in there, too. They should fit."

"I'm flattered you remembered my sizes."

"Who can forget size fourteen feet?" She walked into the bathroom.

"Save some hot water for me," he said quietly.

With her back to him, she closed her eyes to collect herself. His attempt at playful humor reminded her of their past. With his comment, he tried to resurrect the good times they'd shared, all those little things that had made their relationship good.

He'd always teased her about leaving enough hot water for him even in a hotel with a sufficient supply. Showering together, their usual remedy, was not an option this time.

"I will," she replied stiffly, and shut the door. She locked it as an extra precaution to keep him at a distance. She didn't trust him not to join her in the shower. She didn't trust herself not to let him.

The hot water battered Brita's body, pounding out the tense knots in her aching muscles—a result of driving for hours against the flow of traffic of those fleeing Omega *and* seeing Zeke again. Treacherously, her mind wandered to sharing other motel rooms with him and showers that led to sizzling sex and the need for another shower.

There had never been anything wrong with the sex between them. Knowing it was the only thing near perfect in their relationship disturbed her. Not that she expected a *perfect* relationship with anyone, but she'd anticipated the time they spent together would be relaxing and enjoyable, the way it had begun, and continue to evolve into a stable, comfortable bond.

His traveling had never bothered her—much. She accepted it as a part of him and his life. When Mother Nature at her worst called, he answered. She feared for him and the chances he took, but he always came out relatively unscathed. He possessed an innate sense about the earth's upheavals and disruptions. Aside from minor scrapes, bruises and burns, he always returned safe and sound.

Their relationship had seemed somewhat perfect in the beginning. Her orderly world surrounded her, and she let Zeke in when he came home and enjoyed time to herself when he left. He invited her to join him whenever he went to the latest disaster site, but she rarely took him up on the offer...only when the location was close to home, her schedule permitted, and she had time to organize an itinerary.

He took it well when she declined to join him, but as time passed, his temper tantrums increased in frequency and scope. He didn't seem to be angry with her. He never aimed his outrage directly at her by throwing breakables in her direction, or she would have cut it off with no regrets, but the chaos surrounding his outbursts, and left in their wake, drove her further and further away.

She shut off the water and, rubbing her eyes clear, got out of the tub. The hot shower left her body warm and tingling, relaxing the tension in some areas but increasing it in others. Oh, no, she didn't dare think about having sex with Zeke again, but the warning to her id only magnified her need for him. Her nipples tightened in response. A low-level thrumming along her nerves, which had built slowly in intensity the closer she traveled to Gulf Beach—and Zeke—now became a rhythmic throbbing between her thighs.

At the sink, she splashed cold water on her face. She raised her head to look at her reflection in the mirror. Her violet eyes had darkened to deep purple, something Zeke always noticed and teased her about when she became aroused. Maybe by the time she dried her hair, they would return to their normal shade. Or maybe he wouldn't notice.

She snatched the hair dryer from the wall holder and turned it on her tangled black curls while viciously raking a comb through them. A little pain should get her mind and body off Zeke. She couldn't be intimate with him again only to part from him once more. Her heart couldn't take it. Their time together must remain coolly professional.

With her hair dry, her wild curls tamed with gel, she looped an elastic band around it at her nape. She then dressed in loose-fitting sports wear pants, top, and jacket and thick socks. The worst of Omega wouldn't hit until mid-morning the next day, and she wanted to be comfortable to catch up on her sleep now. Later, she'd change into jeans and boots to prepare for whatever came their way.

And that brought her to Zeke's plan to leave early tomorrow morning. How could she persuade him to leave her behind? Or convince him to stay? She didn't need Zeke to accomplish what she came to do, but it would be nice not to be alone.

Even if she refused to go with him, he'd probably just pick her up and carry her to his vehicle, forcing her to leave. He was bigger and stronger. Brute force would win.

She might use persuasion...but *not* the physical kind. If she somehow made him believe his instinct told him to see it through...but her stomach churned at the thought of more deception. She'd already told him lies and hoped he'd understand why once it was all over.

With a heavy heart, she gathered her things. She left the bathroom and stopped short to find Zeke waiting, wet t-shirt off and the towel draped around his neck.

She couldn't help but stare at the light matting of chest hair that emphasized his toned muscles. His biceps bulged, and muscles and veins corded his taut forearms. His jeans rode low on his hips, his deep navel topping the narrow strip of hair that disappeared behind his waistband...and she knew exactly where the trail ended. His open snap enticed her, and a groan escaped before she stopped it.

She turned it into a cough, but the cheesy grin on his face told her he knew what she tried to cover up. Pressing her lips into a tight line, she looked away from him and heaved her backpack onto the bed.

He chuckled as he went into the bathroom, shutting the door behind him, and only then did Brita let out her breath in a rush. She concentrated on taking slow, even breaths as she reached into a paper shopping bag for a tangerine. She had brought a few apples, bananas and citrus fruit so they would have something fresh to eat for a few days in the aftermath of Omega. She tossed back the corner of the covers and perched on the edge of the bed next to her backpack. The tangerine peel came off easily, and she popped a section into her mouth.

She'd known going in how seeing Zeke again would affect her. She thought she had prepared for it and steeled herself against the reunion. Reminding herself of how he acted at his worst—insufferable, intolerant and stubborn—helped for a second or two. Then the mischievous, sexy Zeke, the Zeke she'd fallen in love with, commanded her attention, too.

When she finished the last of the tangerine, she reached across her backpack to dump the peelings into the trashcan and her elbow bumped the hard object in the black nylon bag. She stared at it and wished it away, far away, but of course it remained where it sat.

Dragging it into her lap, she slowly pulled the zipper around the curved top and put her hand in. When her fingers touched the wooden cube inside, the wind outside rose to an ear-piercing shriek. Hail clattered against the windowpanes, and she cried out in surprise. The building shuddered with the ferocity of the storm's rage.

Gritting her teeth, she grasped the cube and drew it out. The wind returned to its former dull roar, and the old motel settled back on its foundation. Shoving the pack out of the way, she set the cube beside her on the bed.

She looked at it for the thousandth time since it had come into her possession. The plain cube measured precisely six inches in all dimensions, and its outward appearance gave no hint as to what it contained. She ran her fingers lightly over the smooth but unpolished wood, bracing herself for another elemental onslaught, but the wind didn't change in intensity this time.

She traced the joints where the pieces of wood aligned so closely not even a sheet of paper would fit between them. More complicated than a puzzle cube, popular in the early 1980s, this cube bore no colors or any other decoration. The directions to opening it had accompanied the note from its previous caretaker.

The wooden cube had made a long and circuitous route before reaching her, and she brought it here to its ultimate destination. Many had died, directly and indirectly, because of its existence, and many more would perish if she didn't accomplish what she came to do. She'd have to bypass Zeke's over-protectiveness and practicality to do it.

Grabbing the cube, she stuffed it back into her bag. She zipped it tight and crammed it under the bed, near the headboard. For some reason, she slept better with it nearby and experienced fewer disturbing dreams, as if the cube *knew* she hadn't forgotten about it when she kept it near.

She stretched out on the bed then rolled to her side, facing the stack of supplies. With no other choice than to share the bed, perhaps her unyielding back would inform Zeke that physical intimacy didn't interest her...despite her body's craving to make love to him again.

Brita closed her eyes. She didn't think she would be able to doze because of the storm, the wooden cube and Zeke, but the howling wind quickly faded with her consciousness and she slept.

Chapter Three

When Zeke stepped out of the bathroom, he found Brita curled up on one side of the king-sized bed. Eyes shut, she appeared to be asleep. He eased the bathroom door closed with the barest snick. She didn't stir.

A particularly hard lash of rain drew his attention from Brita to the window. He walked over and stood in front of it. The wild wind jerked the raindrops against the pane and swayed the trees that lined the motel parking lot, first in one direction and then another.

He held his breath, listening. He almost but not quite could hear his name in the sounds of the furious elements, calling to him, luring him. He wanted to stand in the sheeting rain, blend and merge with the wind and the water and the earth and discover their secrets.

A small leafy limb slapped the window in front of his face, startling him. Gulping in air, he peeled his hands from the glass. He stared at the foggy outline of his fingers and thumbs created by his body heat. He didn't remember placing his hands against the pane at all.

While showering, he had heard the wind kick up a couple of notches and felt the bathtub under his feet vibrate with the force. Before the building settled, he had thought he heard voices, undulating with the wind, repeat his name. At the same time, others, more demanding and insistent, murmured unintelligible words.

He attributed it to his imagination. He had spent too much time alone the past year, setting aside his social life to come to grips with his shortcomings. Even after he felt ready to socialize again, he couldn't bring himself to date. No woman measured up to Brita. Where else could he find violet-colored eyes that turned deep purple when she was ready for some sweet loving?

The darkest shade of purple imaginable had colored her eyes when she emerged from the bathroom.

Zeke backed away from the window, shoving the strangeness of imagined voices to the furthest recesses of his mind. He turned toward the bed and stood at the foot of it, watching Brita. He missed having her in his bed, but more, he missed having her in his life. The past fifteen months had been empty and lonely without her. If he told her, would it make a difference?

She lay on her side facing the mountain of supplies, both hands tucked beneath her cheek. She was exhausted and he shouldn't wake her because tomorrow they would have to outrun Omega, try to make it to Houston, and ride out the storm there.

The temptation to join her in bed and put his arms around her overrode his chivalry. His body ached to feel hers again. *Okay, admit it, your cock is a throbbing steel rod. If she looked at you right now and saw the tent it made with the towel, she'd throw you that "You've got to be kidding" look, roll over and go back to sleep.*

Zeke released the towel from his waist and eased one knee onto the edge of the bed. She wouldn't hear any noise over the howling wind, but she might feel the movement of the mattress. He slowly put his weight on that knee, drawing the other up beside it.

Oh, hell. Either she would or she wouldn't. He could take an hour to sneak up on her or he could simply take the plunge.

He crawled across the bed until he lay beside her. She didn't move or make a sound. He should be on his laptop, monitoring Omega's progress, to find out when the storm made its turn toward Gulf Beach. Because if he happened to be wrong this one time, then he had holed up in the wrong place and would have nothing to show for his time spent here.

No, not *nothing*. Brita was here, and that was everything. He sensed she was concealing her real reason for coming, but he was indebted to whatever had brought them together again.

He stretched out beside her, the entire length of his body molding to hers without actually touching her. She smelled like tangy tangerines. Propped on one elbow and this close, he saw the faint spray of freckles across her nose and cheekbones and wanted to kiss each one.

Instead, he brushed back the strands of jet black curls hanging loose from her ponytail and whispered, "What secret are you hiding?"

She moved a little, rubbing her ear where his breath carried across it, before she settled again.

He placed his hand on the curve of her hip, and the familiar shape made his balls tighten. His pelvis pushed forward, his cock seeking her wet heat. Moving underneath the waistband of her pants, his fingertips came into contact with the top of her panties. He knew what he'd find if he ventured lower—her sweet pussy, tight and wet—and a groan escaped his dry mouth before he checked it.

He didn't want to go too far too fast, afraid Brita would jump and run before he convinced her making love was a good idea. Instead of exploring south as his fingers—and cock—ached to do, he headed north. His palm met with the warm skin of her belly, silken smooth except for the slight bump of her navel.

He watched her face. Just as he reached the arch of one breast, she moaned and blinked awake.

Her head turned toward him, and her eyes widened as she recognized him and his intent. "Don't, Zeke."

She rolled to the edge of the bed, but he caught her and pulled her to him until she lay flat on her back. He threw a leg over hers, pinning them to the mattress. She swung one hand at him, but he stopped it. Folding his fingers with hers, he pressed them into the pillow above her head.

Her breasts rose and fell rapidly, and her eyes became deep, dark pools of purple passion. She tried to look indignant, but her tongue wiped across her lips as if in anticipation. "What are you doing?"

"Demanding a kiss," he whispered raggedly. The sound of desperation in his voice surprised him. He'd thought he maintained complete control.

She shook her head. "I never agreed to that."

"By default," he rasped. "When you didn't leave, you agreed to my rules."

She trembled against him, not as indifferent as she tried to make him believe.

"Zeke, please..." She trailed off, leaving her plea unfinished.

"Please what?" He moved in closer. "Please kiss me, please fuck me, please hold me and never let me go? All of the above?"

Her gaze darted from feature to feature as if she searched his face while weighing all the pros and cons and deciding which fit into her orderly world. He wouldn't go any further without her permission, but he didn't know what he'd do if she refused. He might just stop breathing.

Then she nodded once, a sharp bob of her head as if she agreed against her better judgment. It was all the permission he needed, so he dipped his head. He kissed her and savored the taste of tangerine on her plump lips. She responded hungrily, her mouth working with his in a frenzy. Her tongue swept against his until he caught and sucked it gently.

Abruptly, she pulled back and looked up at him. "We shouldn't do this, Zeke," she protested breathlessly.

"Why not?" He kissed a patch of freckles on the side of her nose. "We both want it. You want me, don't you?"

"Yes, but—"

"There are no buts." He released her hand and moved the loose strands of spiraling curly hair out of the way. He pushed her thin jacket off and placed a kiss on her exposed shoulder. "Just you and me and now."

"And what about later?"

She asked about their future. The gotta-have-order-in-my-life Brita who needed to know where she was going, when it would happen, and who she would be with. He slid the jacket down, forcing her to pull her arm free.

"Later, we deal with the hurricane." It wasn't the answer he wanted to give her, but he didn't want to scare her off. If they took it one day at a time, one step at a time, that should be organized and carefully planned enough for her. "Now is for us."

Brita spread her hand in the center of his chest, but didn't push him away. His heart beat rapidly against her fingers. She wanted to trace the contours of his muscles and circle the hard peaks of his nipples, but such actions would encourage him. She needed to discourage him...didn't she? "We can't go back."

"I don't expect us to." His voice was soft and mellow, but the words he spoke nearly broke her heart.

The only way they could do as he suggested—make love now and later pretend it never happened at all—was if they didn't involve their emotions. It wasn't in her to do that. All of her emotions tangled up in Zeke. She once planned to spend the rest of her life with this man. How could she take such deep, committed feelings and distill them to a single one-night stand?

Her fingers trembled on his skin, and Zeke wrapped his hand around them, his thumb massaging the center of her palm. He bent his head and brushed kisses over her knuckles. Before she could stop herself, she ran a fingertip along his bottom lip. She shuddered when he pulled her finger into his mouth and suckled gently.

By the time he released it, she was breathless.

"Mmm..." he murmured. "Your fingers taste like tangerines, too. Do you taste like tangerines all over?"

"No, I—" She took a deep breath to be able to speak. "I ate one before I lay down. I brought a bag of fresh fruit, too."

He smiled and made a short sound, a cross between a chuckle and a snort.

"Don't laugh at me." She tried to sound offended, but failed. The look in his eyes made her want to giggle. "If I hadn't brought them, you wouldn't be enjoying their flavor right now."

"I'm not laughing *at* you, Breezy. I'd never laugh at you."

Using the fruit as a distraction, she stretched out her hand for the bag beside the nightstand. Barely within reach, she would have tumbled from the bed if Zeke hadn't weighted her down.

She grabbed a tangerine and stuck it in his face. "Here, eat this."

He took it, but he looked at her. "I'd rather eat you."

Embarrassment warmed her face, but she'd asked for it. She needed to remember how Zeke could take the most innocent comment and turn it into a sexual innuendo that heated her cheeks as well as her breasts and made her writhe with need. Damn, but she had to be careful of what she said.

She snatched the fruit away from him and dug her thumb in. The fresh, tangy scent filled the air as the peel fell away. She broke off a two-section piece and put it to his lips. "You'll enjoy this more."

He laughed out loud, and she popped it into his open mouth.

“Sneaky.” He tucked the piece into one cheek. “But for the record, I’d take you over a tangerine any time.”

His hand rested on her bare midriff, and now he slid it underneath her top. She watched in fascination as he uncovered one of her breasts and then the other. Her hard, peaked nipples jutted out as if they expected to be sucked. She held her breath. Zeke glanced up at her, chewing the tangerine section. Then he took a nipple into his juice-filled mouth and swished the liquid over and around it.

She gasped as the sensation jangled along her nerves, straight to between her thighs. She lost control of her hips, and they squirmed against him, rubbing her pussy against his long, hard cock.

Zeke raised his head, his blue eyes dark and sparkling with the knowledge of what he did to her. Before she could bring her shattering mind together enough to pull away and cover her breasts, he dove for the other one. This time, he tongued the tangerine pulp and membrane over her nipple.

The rough texture, so different from the juice, created the same effect. Her hips undulated, stroking his cock with her mound and labia. She knew she should protest when he moved his knees between her legs and spread them. And she shouldn’t raise her arms when he hooked his fingers under the soft elastic of her top and sports bra and pulled them over her head.

She certainly shouldn’t raise her hips as he lowered her pants and panties, lifting her legs one at a time into the air to tug them off. She should stop herself from sitting up to touch his thick erection, but its heat drew her. When her hands wrapped around it a satisfied sigh escaped her lips. She had missed him, missed their lovemaking. Leaving him had broken her and, more than a year later, she still hadn’t healed enough to consider sleeping with another man. Zeke hadn’t been her first, but from the first time they made love, she’d wanted him to be her last.

Kneeling between her open thighs, he closed his eyes and seemed to enjoy her massaging fingers. She pumped him in long, even strokes from the bulbous head to the thick base surrounded by short, curly hair.

Then his hands slid up her arms and cupped her shoulders. He pushed her back into the pillow and stretched his body along hers. His chest pressed against her breasts, his hips nestling into her throbbing pussy.

“That feels good, but I’d rather be inside you,” he murmured, sprinkling kisses over her cheek and jaw and lips. His hand slipped between their bodies. “Did you think to bring condoms with your supplies?”

She gasped as his fingers entered her slickness, and shook her head. Her hips tilted up, burying his fingers deeper. She had thought about it, but decided not to. Having them would be too tempting. Yet here she was, giving in to temptation anyway.

“I’m still on protection,” she whispered. “Have you had unprotected sex the past year?”

“I haven’t had sex with anyone else at all.” He groaned as his thumb swirled her clit.

A shudder raced through her, but her heart soared. “Neither have I.”

He let out a deep breath. “Oh, Breezy.”

His hand left her wet center and lifted her leg. He moved his thighs snug against her bottom, and his cock plunged into her. He fucked her with long, deep strokes, and her hips rose and fell to match his rhythm.

Zeke... The part of her mind that remained coherent hardly believed she was making love with Zeke again, even as her body undulated with his familiar tempo. He touched her in all the right places, shifting his hips with a little twist so he bumped her clit each time.

He knew her, knew what she needed and what she wanted. Knew when to ease up to prolong the sensations cascading along her nerves. Knew exactly when to increase his thrusts and crush into her even before her mind hazed over and the soft mewling sounds started in the back of her throat.

He knew her inside and out, and as the torrent of ecstasy sizzled through her, she bucked with each successive heat wave. He held her close and whispered love words between more random kisses.

When her body relaxed and her mind cleared, his strokes shortened and deepened. She framed his face with her hands and moved with him. He pounded her with a jackhammer frenzy, his body tensing more with each quick thrust. Then he strained into her and stiffened, and his sound of release, a guttural, primal groan, vibrated from deep in his chest. She felt his warmth shoot into her, heating her from the inside.

He collapsed against her, his lips caressing hers. The sharp, crisp flavor of tangerine still clung to him, and she savored it mixed with the taste of Zeke. Tears burned her eyes, but she blinked them back. She missed him more than he could ever know, but this had been a mistake...even if it didn’t feel like one. How could she ever part from him again?

He was probably still too resentful of the way she ended their relationship. Her need for order puzzled him, and her reaction to his chaos confused him. She could never figure out how he met her physical needs so easily, yet didn’t have a clue about her psychological necessities. The incongruity added more upheaval to her orderly world.

He slid off her, his cock leaving her, and again she wanted to cry. Somehow, she held the tears in check. She focused on Zeke’s warm, smooth body next to hers instead.

Then he sat up, moving to the end of the bed, and she bit her lip to keep from protesting his sudden absence. He came back in seconds, a damp towel in his hands. He cleaned between her legs in careful strokes, knowing how sensitive she became right after making love, then wiped himself down.

He tossed the towel, pulled the covers over them, and snuggled against her backside. She lifted her head so he could fit the crook of his shoulder beneath it. He put his free arm around her waist, bending his elbow so his hand surrounded one of her breasts.

They fit perfectly together. They were so good together. She sighed in satisfaction, but then drew in a deep breath.

"We can't let this happen again," she said softly.

"I know." He raked his thumb over her nipple. "But I'm not sorry it happened. Are you?"

"No." She struggled with her need for Zeke and her need for order and peace in her life. "But we have to forget it did. I can't go back."

"You don't have to."

His answer reassured her. He seemed to know what she meant without having a long, drawn-out discussion about it. Their physical needs out of the way, they could now concentrate on why they were here. She relaxed against him and went to sleep to his soothing caresses.

Chapter Four

Brita woke to a series of fast pounding knocks. She opened her eyes to find Zeke crossing from the window to the door, and looking seriously sexy with sleep-rumpled hair and wearing nothing but the loose, low-riding pajama bottoms she had brought for him.

He swung open the door, sucking every bit of warmth out of the room with cooler damp air swirling in to replace it. A short, husky man stood at the threshold, the hem of his long slicker flapping and billowing in the wind. He carried a sheet of plywood taller than himself. Zeke motioned him in.

As the stranger stepped inside, a gust of wind blew back his hood to reveal dark salt-and-pepper hair with crow's-foot balding, creating a deep *M* of his hairline, and a bushy graying mustache to match. He rested the bottom edge of the board on the floor and spoke loudly to be heard over the eerie howling of the wind. "Wanted to make sure you know the hurricane's supposed to hit Matagorda in the morning, but we'll get some high wind and heavy rain here in Gulf Beach."

Not wearing a stitch, Brita scooted deeper under the covers to search for her clothes. As she slid under the edge of the comforter, she glanced at the clock on the nightstand beside Zeke's side of the bed. The red numerals indicated four in the afternoon. She had slept the day away. Then she froze.

"I told you when I registered, Mr. Mendoza, that I'm here to film the storm." Zeke's voice quivered with the damp chill of the cooler air. "I'm a freelance photographer, and I'll be here until the hurricane passes through."

"I remember that." Mr. Mendoza sounded puzzled. "Now, my wife went to San Antonio to stay with our daughter and her family just in case. Them things can turn at the last minute like they got a mind of their own. But all the excitement's down in Matagorda."

Beside the clock sat the wooden cube. Brita clearly remembered putting it safely back in her pack. Anger infused every cell when she realized the only explanation. How dare Zeke? Furious he had rifled through her things, she yanked on her pants.

"All the major news outlets have crews in and around Matagorda," Zeke was saying. "I'm working a hunch that a little farther north along the coast might be the place to be."

"I hope all the excitement stays in Matagorda." Mr. Mendoza sighed, sounding tired. "You two are the only guests left, and I boarded the windows in all the other rooms. I can board yours now."

"I can do it if you have a hammer and nails," Zeke said with a shiver. "I'd rather wait, but I'll make sure to do it before it gets real bad."

Brita glared at Zeke from under the edge of the comforter even though his back was toward her. She couldn't wait for the motel proprietor to leave so she could tell Zeke exactly what she thought of him.

Mr. Mendoza produced a hammer from one pocket and a paper sack from the other and handed them to Zeke. "Thought you might."

Zeke set them aside, and the two men moved the board inside, leaning it against the wall near the window.

"Would you like some coffee before you go?" Zeke offered. "I just made a fresh pot."

"Thanks, but I got some waiting for me. If you need any help with that, give me a call. I'm going back to the office and hole up till this is all over."

Mr. Mendoza replaced his hood and stepped outside. What else they said was lost to the wind and Brita's rising anger. She dove under the covers again, fishing for her socks. She located them and jerked them on. She had found all of her clothes except her jacket. When she heard the door click shut, she flung back the covers and grabbed the cube.

"I called Mr. Mendoza earlier and told him someone else was here wi—"

"How dare you?" She rolled across the bed and pulled out her pack.

"What? He needed to know because he charges extra for each person in a room." Zeke came around the foot of the bed. "What does it matter if he knows you're here?"

"Not that. *This!*" She shook the cube at him before setting it down to unzip her backpack.

"What is it?" He sounded genuinely curious, and she looked up at him. "I found it next to my pillow when I got up. I thought you left it out when you went to bed."

He didn't have a guilty or shifty look on his face, and her anger deflated. "I didn't."

"Well, I didn't see it when I came to bed." His eyes softened, and he grinned crookedly. "But then, I had other things on my mind."

He sounded and looked sincere, and Brita frowned. "You—you didn't go through my backpack while I was asleep?"

He scowled at the accusation. "No, of course not. I wouldn't go through your personal stuff without asking you."

They had always respected each other's boundaries, and she'd never even suspected him of snooping through her things during their two years together. It wasn't like Zeke...but what other explanation could there be?

She scooped up the cube and let it fall into her backpack. She pulled the zipper shut.

"What is that thing?" Zeke asked. "It reminds me of one of those puzzle cubes that were popular when we were kids, except it looks a lot more

complicated and it's made out of wood."

She shrugged. "I'm not sure what it is."

"Where did you get it?"

Since he knew of its existence, maybe she should tell him about it and the part it played in her presence in Gulf Beach. She opened her mouth, but something stopped her. She had the feeling it was too soon, that if she told him her insane story now, he wouldn't believe her and might even sacrifice filming the storm to get them away. Her own instincts, fueled by what little she knew about the cube, had led her this far. She couldn't ignore them now.

"I'll tell you about it later, okay?" She crammed her pack under the bed again. "I know I didn't leave it out."

"And I swear I didn't go through your stuff," Zeke added, his voice still carrying the ring of truth.

And if neither of them did it, how did the cube get from her backpack to the nightstand?

"I believe you, Zeke. I apologize for accusing you. I guess I was more tired than I thought and left it out." She shifted the blame to herself. Otherwise, Zeke would think she really didn't believe him. She didn't want to create an additional barrier between them when another explanation existed...no matter how bizarre.

Of course, it was possible, just barely, that she'd been so tired she'd only *thought* she put it away.

"What else do you have in that bag?" Zeke nodded toward her backpack. "It looks like it weighs a ton."

"More emergency gear." Brita forced a smile. "You can never have too many supplies."

Zeke chuckled and shook his head. "Yeah, *you* would think that."

Relieved he didn't pursue the other contents of her backpack, Brita continued the light banter. "Hey, where would you be after Omega hits without me and my supplies?"

"If all goes according to plan, we won't need them."

The warm fuzzies turned into an icy chill running along her spine. She took a deep breath and tried to keep her voice steady. "Do you still think Omega will make landfall here?"

His cheerful expression turned grim, and he ran a hand through his hair. "I'd bet money on it, but the NHC hasn't announced a shift in direction yet."

"NHC..." Brita repeated absently, her mind spinning. Seventeen hours before Omega's estimated landfall meant plenty of time for the storm to change course, but Zeke seemed worried. Additionally, she had to consider that he might be wrong this time. If he was mistaken—and she had made an error in judgment for trusting in his instincts this time—then Omega would land at Matagorda, and she would miss the opportunity. She had no idea what would happen then.

"National Hurricane Center." Zeke raised an eyebrow, and a half-smile curved one side of his mouth. "You want to be a storm chaser and you don't know what the NHC is?"

"Of course, I know what it is. I wasn't asking, just repeating what you said." She grabbed the covers on the messy bed and began straightening them. Zeke walked around to the other side and helped.

Soon, all outward signs of what had happened between them vanished. Even as she once more promised herself it couldn't happen again, all the inward signs still lingered—the hot flush of satisfaction, the warm glow of remembrance...the deep thrum of anticipation because she certainly *wanted* to make love with Zeke again.

She went around to the foot of the bed, but Zeke blocked her way at the far corner, his broad chest almost touching the tips of her breasts. He ran his hands up her bare arms then cupped her shoulders, moving her even closer to him. His mouth touched hers, his lips sliding into place. He tasted delicious, warm and good.

She reveled in the flavor, scent and texture of Zeke for a few moments, pretending everything between them was as it had been in the beginning. She allowed the kiss to cleanse away the anger and frustration and again experienced only the passion, desire and love.

Common sense intruded too soon, snapping her back to reality. They had parted over a year ago for a reason, and as far as she knew the situation remained the same. She pulled back from Zeke, breaking the kiss just as he tried to draw her into his embrace. She raised her hands between his arms and pushed them away.

"We should do this now," he said huskily. "Before the night is over we'll have to prepare, and in the morning we'll be lucky if the building isn't blown away as Omega moves in. We should do it now while we can take our time and really enjoy it. I missed y—"

"Stop it!" Brita backed away from him and turned. She didn't want to see the brewing anger after he realized she *meant* it. She spied her jacket on the floor, bent to retrieve it, and tugged it on to give herself something to do.

"But I thought—"

"I told you after we—afterwards that it couldn't happen again." She tensed, waiting for his outburst, but when he remained silent, she faced him. "I didn't come here for—for that."

“Exactly why are you here, Brita?” He moved back a few steps, putting even more distance between them. His voice held an edge she couldn’t quite define, but he didn’t explode into one of his infamous rages. Yet.

“I’m here to learn how to be a storm chaser like you.”

“Bullshit,” he growled. “I don’t believe it for a second. I’ve never given you any reason not to trust me, have I? Don’t worry, I’m not going to hassle you. You can tell me when you’re ready, but don’t even try to convince me you want to document natural disasters like I do. Don’t lie to me anymore.”

“Then don’t ask.” She closed her eyes and rubbed the bridge of her nose. “It has nothing to do with not trusting you, Zeke.”

“I hope not.” Disappointment clipped his words short.

She chewed her bottom lip. How could she even begin to tell him everything without sounding crazy? Or worse, that she was lying again by fabricating a fantastic tale to avoid telling him the truth?

She searched for a reasonable explanation, but he began to pace the small clear space not taken up by the bed, his equipment around the desk, the overstuffed chair or the small dining set. He rolled his shoulders and head as if loosening his muscles. She decided not to say anything more. She didn’t want to provoke him. She already expected him to pick up the nearest object and hurl it against the wall.

Instead, he strode to the desk and dropped into the waiting chair. “I’m going to check on Omega.”

For a moment, she was at a loss. Tropical Storm Zeke had dissipated without reaching hurricane force—the analogy made her shake her head. She quietly crossed the room and poured coffee from the pot into a mug. Sugar and creamer made it almost palatable.

Studying the images and information on his laptop screen, Zeke didn’t respond until she’d asked him twice if he wanted more coffee. She emptied the pot into his mug and made more.

As she curled up on the bed with a spiral-bound notebook and pen, she glanced at Zeke and listened to the sounds of the storm. Even with the wind pummeling the window, the scenario comforted her—immersed in their own work, the silence bringing them closer together instead of widening the rift between them. She sipped her coffee and grimaced. Zeke threw grounds in the basket and hoped for the best. She always precisely measured them. Another example of their differences.

She put pen to paper and continued recording her experiences from where she last left off. She hadn’t come to Gulf Beach—and Zeke—for a story, but she decided she might as well get one out of it anyway. Hurricanes and their devastation were virtually unknown in the town of Bentley and all of west Tennessee, and the *Bentley Star’s* readership might find her adventures interesting. Or boring. Something for her boss to decide.

Brita also included in her journal the real reason why she came to Texas, the strange episode with the cube, and making love with Zeke. She would use none of that in her article for the paper, of course, but she wanted to have a complete account of her time with Zeke. When all of this ended and they parted ways, she’d be able to refresh her memories of her last few precious days with Zeke.

The only disturbance came when the storm worsened briefly. The wind screamed through the eaves and the building shuddered as it had while Zeke showered and she’d brought the wooden cube out of her backpack. She looked at the window. Heavy rain sheeted against the glass, blurring and graying the world outside. The intensity lasted a few seconds then receded again. She glanced at Zeke, but when she saw he hadn’t stirred at all, she returned to her writing.

Some time later, Zeke got up from his chair and stretched. Brita straightened up and shook out her cramped fingers. She had left her laptop back home because they’d eventually lose power and she’d have to use pen and paper anyway. If she needed to research anything, she knew Zeke would have his. She zipped her notebook into a plastic bag to protect it from water damage in case the worst happened.

“Here.” Zeke walked to the bed and dropped something beside her. “You left it on the desk when you refilled my coffee.”

The wooden cube bounced on the bed as Zeke crossed to the coffeemaker. Brita stared at the cube, unable to believe her eyes. Then she rolled off the bed and dragged out her backpack. She unzipped it and spread it open. Of course, the cube wasn’t in there. She reached for it, stretching across the bed until her fingers closed over it. Once more, she put it in her pack and pulled the zipper shut. She then shoved the bag under the bed.

“I never could figure out those puzzle cubes either.” Zeke started to pour more coffee, but set his mug aside. “There was a guy I went to school with who could work them in minutes. He couldn’t tell us how he did it, but he could do it no matter how we mixed up the colors. He wasn’t book smart and barely passed, but his hands just flew while working the cube. I always thought he’d be a rocket scientist or something, but he’s still in Bentley, pumping gas at the same service station where he worked part time in high school. John Moseley. Do you remember him?”

Brita shook her head and cleared her throat. “No, I don’t.”

“No reason you should, I guess. We were a few years ahead of you in school. But you might think about doing a story on him. Not many people can solve a puzzle cube.” Zeke snapped his fingers. “Hey, when you get back, ask him if he can work that cube of yours.”

Brita stood, but her legs wobbled, nearly giving out from under her. She sat on the edge of the bed, trembling in amazement and fright. She hadn’t gone near her backpack after putting the cube away when she found it on the nightstand. She didn’t dare tell Zeke that *she* hadn’t left it beside him on the desk. He’d think she believed he went through her things again because no one in his—or *her*—right mind could possibly consider what she was thinking: the cube moved itself.

She rubbed her damp palms on her pants legs. “I have the directions.”

“Great!” Zeke said enthusiastically. “If you want, we can work on it after we eat. I like the design on it, but I’m anxious to see what the other one is. I hope the directions you have are for the other pattern.”

Design? Pattern? The only thing she saw on the plain wooden surface that could be called a design were the lines where each piece of wood abutted the next. They didn't form any kind of ornamental "pattern". What did Zeke see that she couldn't? And why?

Chapter Five

Zeke frowned. Brita's jaw had dropped open, and she stared at him as if he'd suddenly sprouted horns or grown another head. Maybe he needed another head, one with a better brain, because he'd certainly fucked up earlier when he kissed her.

And now he was butting in on her personal space again. "Hey, it was an offer. If you want to work the cube yourself, that's cool. I—uh—need to keep an eye on the hurricane anyway."

Zeke sat at the desk and refreshed the latest images from the National Hurricane Center's website. Yeah, she'd ruled they couldn't make love again after the first time, but he'd thought surely she'd change her mind after sleeping on it. How could she not be aware that their being together again, and not just the lovemaking but spending time with one another, was so *right*?

He shook his head, blew out a deep breath and turned his attention to the screen. Still no change in Omega's direction and no change in the predicted landfall at Matagorda. He rummaged for one of the laminated maps he carried and spread it out in front of him. Concentrating on Omega, he stared at it and was drawn unerringly to the tiny dot on the coast of Texas, a little southwest of Galveston and northeast of Matagorda.

Gulf Beach, Texas. His instinct hadn't changed. Omega would land here at Gulf Beach. He folded the map and put it away.

"Hungry?" Brita called from where she stood beside the stacks of supplies.

"Yeah." He watched her move a carton and open it, and his cock let him know he was hungry for more than just food.

He wanted Brita. From her response during their lovemaking, he knew she wanted him, too. They had issues, but nothing insurmountable. He had worked to change during the fifteen months of their separation. Didn't she notice he hadn't broken one object since her unexpected arrival? He certainly had good reason to, the way she showed up out of the blue with a Cat 5 hurricane charging toward them across the gulf.

"What do you want?" She picked through the cartons, setting aside some containers and grabbing others. "Soup, tuna, chili, lasagna—"

"Lasagna sounds good." He stood and adjusted the crotch of his pajamas to be able to walk across the room. "Might as well use the microwave while we still have electricity."

They nuked their meals and squeezed around the small dining table. They ate, and the tenuous silence between them irritated Zeke. He wished he could think of something to say to make it comfortable for them again. When nothing came to mind, and Brita didn't seem inclined to make small talk either, he finished in a hurry, disposed of his trash and returned his chair to the desk.

Refreshing the NHC web page again, he scowled when it showed no change. His agitation escalated, but he dealt with it as he'd learned to do. *Take deep, even breaths. Why didn't the damn cyclone do something? Shake out your hands. Why hadn't it already turned toward Gulf Beach? Roll your shoulders.* Could his instinct be wrong for the first time, losing him the chance of his career? *Count to ten in Spanish: uno, dos, tres—*

"No change?" Brita stood behind him, her breath tickling his ear.

In the old days, he'd swing her around into his lap and kiss her until their lips ached. Even though they'd made love, he didn't feel comfortable doing that now. He didn't want to feel her tense with apprehension or see her frown in disapproval. He'd rather gaze at her half-closed eyes, her parted lips, and her body flushed with arousal.

Oh, damn, don't think about that. He shifted in his seat, to find a comfortable position for his hard-on. It wasn't easy.

"Has Omega changed course yet?" she asked again and handed him a banana. "Dessert," she added when he looked up at her.

He watched as she slid her full lips over the tip of the long shaft, and a strangled groan rumbled deep in his throat. Her eyes widened, and he knew by her expression that she understood what caused his reaction. Sadistically, she chomped off the end of the banana and raised an eyebrow at him while she chewed. He winced, but it didn't make him lose his erection. He wanted her so badly he'd take his chances.

She shook her head as if acknowledging him as a sad case. "I take it there's no change."

"No." The word came out hoarse, and he cleared his throat. "No change."

Worry furrowed her brow again. "If you don't mind, I'd like to sit here with you and watch."

"Sure. I don't mind."

He watched her carry her chair from the table and set it beside his. She finished the banana without any more suggestive moves. He had no appetite for his and laid it on the desk. She tossed her peel into the trashcan and leaned closer to study the screen.

Her scent teased his senses, a delicious aroma of her natural musk and fresh fruit. He wanted to loosen the band on her mane of untamable curls and let it tickle his skin as it did when they made love.

She nodded toward the satellite image of Omega. "Looking at it like this, a hurricane is beautiful—the perfectly round eye surrounded by a fluffy swirl of clouds. It reminds me of cotton candy at the fair and how it looks in the vat while they're making it."

"Yeah, it is an awesome sight," he agreed. "And an awful sight, knowing how much destruction it can cause. No deaths have been attributed to Omega yet, but she did some damage in Cuba and the islands when she passed through as Category 1 earlier in the week."

The tip of her tongue ran over her bottom lip as she contemplated the image on the screen. "Don't hurricanes slow down when they make landfall?"

Her unintentional tongue action nearly sent him over the edge. Blood pounded in his tightened balls, and his cock tented the crotch of his pajama bottoms. He leaned back in his chair and propped one ankle on his other knee to hide the evidence of his lust for her.

Clearing his throat, he focused on answering her question. "Usually. Official landfall is when the center of the eye crosses land or a barrier reef. By then, half the hurricane can be over a landmass. When it enters the gulf, the warmer gulf water turbo charges the storm, but after it starts moving across land, the uneven terrain acts like a buffer and slows it down."

"So a lot of things can factor in?" she asked. "Like how fast the storm is traveling, the velocity of the wind, and even the type of landscape."

Zeke nodded. "Even so, a few hurricanes have made landfall at Category 5. There's no sure-fire way to tell exactly how a hurricane will act. After the experts studied the data, they determined that Hurricane Katrina made landfall as a Category 3, and look at the destruction she caused. Today's state-of-the-art technology and guesstimates based on experience will only get them so far. Mr. Mendoza is right—it's like the storm has a mind of its own."

"The cloud area is huge," she observed. "No wonder Omega is so strong."

"The two don't necessarily go together." Taking a deep breath, he refrained from asking the obvious. She planned to change her career to documenting natural disasters, but she didn't have a basic knowledge of hurricanes? As thoroughly as Brita prepared every move she made, it just didn't add up.

Zeke shrugged. Brita would explain everything eventually. He had to be patient and use this chance to show her how he'd changed. He went into detail with his answer instead of criticizing her.

"Even after they launched the first weather satellite in 1960, meteorologists thought the larger the cloud pattern, the stronger the storm. Hurricane Camille disproved the theory in 1969. Camille's cloud pattern was small and compact, and they didn't realize how intense she was until reconnaissance planes flew in and measured wind speed at Category 5." He grinned and jiggled his eyebrows at her. "Which proves size really doesn't matter."

Shaking her head, she cracked a smile and rolled her eyes. "Sure, that's what they all say."

He laughed out loud. "You never complained."

She dropped the smile, her expression turning serious. Only her eyes gave her away. Like amethysts at midnight, they sparkled with humor. She shrugged. "Well, y'know, it's not polite to complain after—"

He cut off her teasing jibe with a kiss. He moved so fast, he wasn't aware he planned to kiss her until after he lowered his leg and leaned forward. When his lips slid over hers, he knew it was the right thing to do. He watched her eyes widen through the blur of his lowered lashes and felt her start to pull back, even raising her hands to push him away. Instead, she closed her eyes and slanted her head, once more giving herself to him.

He again took advantage of her momentary lapse and ravished her mouth, hoping to keep her suspended in the moment this time and not seeking answers for the future. His cock throbbed a demanding pulse at the prospect of burrowing deep inside her wet pussy.

Her legs spread in invitation. As much as he wanted to touch her there and she seemed ready to be touched, he couldn't rush and risk spooking her. He captured her breast instead, thumbing her nipple through her shirt. With each circular stroke, she mewled a sound of helpless surrender.

Her hips shifted restlessly, and he couldn't hold off any longer. He sent his other hand between her thighs, easing his fingers underneath her ass. His thumb slid up along the hot indent of her pussy. When he reached the top of the hollow, he pressed into her clit.

Her hands fell forward to grip his shoulders. She rocked backward, her ass rising off the seat. She threw back her head, her panting breaths escaping through parted, kiss-swollen lips.

He removed his other hand from her breast and placed it at the small of her back. Kissing down the column of her throat, he moved his hand from her pussy only long enough to dive into the elastic waistbands of her pants and panties. By the time the tips of his fingers touched her thatch of curls, his mouth reached her breast. He nipped her taut nipple with his teeth at the same moment his fingers touched her moist, swollen clit. Her hips rose into the quick circling action meant to bring her to a fast, hard climax.

He'd rather be rocking the bed, but he'd take his Breezy any way he could get her. He briefly dipped his fingers into her slick cream to lubricate then continued the vibrating motion. Her pussy gyrated, rubbing her clit counter to his movement. He felt her body tense, and her grip on his shoulders tightened. She was almost there. He shifted his fingers a little and slightly decreased the tempo.

Her soft moans gave way to a louder groan as her pelvis jerked against his hand. He tongued her nipple, caught carefully between his teeth, and she came, crying out her pleasure.

Then her body melted, slumping down into the chair again. Zeke released her nipple and watched her face. He wanted to strip off her pants and panties, lift her and bring her to him until she straddled him and her soft, wet pussy sheathed his cock. He drew a ragged breath and let her enjoy the afterglow as he gently stroked her.

He didn't know if Brita would return the unexpected favor. If she didn't, a raging case of blue balls was a small price to pay to be able to touch her sweet pussy and hear her soft sounds of passion one more time.

Flush and sated, Brita remained still with eyes closed and head leaned back while Zeke continued to caress between her thighs. She was mad not to have stopped the kiss, but he tasted too good and her nipples and clit had caught fire with the passion he stirred in her. She'd kept telling herself just a few more seconds and she'd pull away...just a few more...but he slipped his hand into her pants and she was lost.

Now, she didn't know how to raise her head, open her eyes, look at him and tell him it didn't change anything.

If Zeke wanted only *now* and was unwilling to work toward a new relationship with her, she never should have let the situation get out of hand—*twice*. She frowned at her own weakness. How many times would she let him break her heart before it crumbled beyond repair?

“Oh,” he murmured.

He must have seen her frown and thought he was chafing her sensitized flesh because his hand slid up to her belly, across her navel, and rested at her stomach.

She had to do *something*. The floor wasn't going to open up and swallow her whole to save her from embarrassment. And the thing she wanted to do, she shouldn't. She wanted to give Zeke as much pleasure as he gave her.

Brita sat up, but she didn't open her eyes until she bowed her head and loose strands of hair screened her from his gaze. His erection made a tent of the front of his pajama bottoms. Hands on his shoulders, she pushed him back into his chair and edged forward into the V of his thighs. She pulled down his waistband and freed his long, thick cock.

“Brita.” His voice was low and hoarse. “You don't have to—”

“I want to,” she murmured and wrapped both hands, one atop the other, around his rigid length.

He sighed, and his hips pushed his cock through her hold. He felt like warm silk over steel, and she matched her movements to his rhythm, her palms absorbing his heat. When his slit oozed clear pre-cum, her thumbs caught it and used it as lubrication. She looked up at him through the veil of her hair.

His face screwed in intensity, the dark slashes of his brows knitted over tightly clenched eyes. If she didn't know he floated along the border of ecstasy, she might think excruciating pain held him in a terrible grip. Did she look consumed with suffering while waiting for passion to seize her? No wonder some called it “the little death”.

She increased the tempo of rubbing his shaft and regretted she hadn't given in to him again. They could have spent the time in bed fucking instead of substituting hands for what they really wanted and needed. The pounding beat of her heart echoed in her clit at the thought. All she had to do was pull off her pants, sit astride his lap and let his cock fill her up—

A groan began deep in his throat, and his body shuddered then stiffened. His erection grew even harder until thick, white cum spurted from his slit and coated her thumbs. His groan ended on a heavy sigh as his shaft pulsed with the release. She milked him until no more released and his whole body sagged in relief.

Before he had a chance to open his eyes and tempt her further, she jumped from her chair and ran to the bathroom. She heard him call out to her once, “Breezy!” She shut the door without answering and leaned back against it. Tears filled her eyes and splashed heavy drops on her cheeks. Twice now, they'd been intimate. How could she have fooled herself into thinking she'd be strong enough to resist him?

She scrubbed her hands clean in hot water then rinsed her face with cold. She hadn't cried enough to make her eyes red and swollen, but he would know. He always knew when she cried even if he didn't always understand *why*. She took down her ponytail and refastened the band around her thick mop of curls, but a few strands sprang free before she opened the door.

She was relieved to find Zeke sitting at the desk with his back to her, but she didn't know what to do. She finally opened a carton, pretending to hunt for something, and called over her shoulder, “Bathroom's free.”

She heard him shuffle across the room. When he closed the door behind him, she sank onto the edge of the bed and buried her face in her hands. How could she meet his gaze again? It would be too awkward, too unnerving, too much. She searched for a distraction...*the TV*. She bolted across the room.

She turned it on and surfed until she found a national news channel with continuous coverage of Matagorda and the hurricane. She rotated her chair toward it—away from Zeke's—and sat, her back ramrod straight. Neither of them spoke when Zeke returned to his chair.

The moderate volume of the TV provided a steady drone of background noise. She heard Zeke punch a key to refresh the web page, and each time, he jumped to his feet and paced the room, sometimes pausing in front of the large window. Apparently, Omega's path never changed.

Brita remained facing the TV screen, but she watched Zeke with sidelong glances when he turned away from her and stood at the window, pressing his hands to the glass.

By now, she'd expected the room to be in shambles with half the breakables in shards, his temper having got the better of him. Instead, he walked off his frustration or shrugged it off, rolling his broad shoulders to relieve the escalating tension. Now and then, he counted it off. Several times she heard him repeat numbers in Spanish and French, and once they sounded like Latin.

How could she blame him if he lost his temper? She'd appeared without advance warning, someone from his past whom he probably never expected to see again. She barged in and demanded he let her stay. She let them be intimate twice after protesting they shouldn't. And now, the instincts he relied on to do his job and make his living had seemed to fail him. So where was the ranting, raving Zeke, who broke anything within reach and turned the air blue with the foulest of language, including colorful phrases she'd never heard before or since?

He paced, he rolled his shoulders and shook out his hands, he counted to ten in foreign and dead languages. He substituted less drastic measures to release his anger. Did it mean that he...?

Sudden comprehension stunned her. She openly stared at him and the rippling muscles of his bare back as he shrugged and stretched.

He actively controlled his temper.

Chapter Six

Did Zeke do it for her? For *them*?

She'd noticed from the moment she showed up at his door that he hadn't gone into a rage about either her surprise arrival or his possible wrong location for this disaster. Her presence confused and annoyed him, and Omega's continued path toward Matagorda bewildered and frustrated him. He had a right to express his feelings, but the mild way he now handled them astonished her. Between dealing with the cube's bizarre behavior and wrestling with her desire for Zeke, she hadn't had time to analyze the way he managed his temper or exactly what it meant.

He jerked away from the window, drawing back his hands as if the pane of glass had suddenly become too hot or cold to touch. Breathing hard, he snapped the drapes together.

"I think it's time to nail that board over the window," he said between gasps.

"I'll help you." Brita stood and grabbed her slicker from the closet. She pulled it on, tightening the hood around her face, then slipped her feet into the still-damp shoes she'd worn when she arrived.

After Zeke pulled on t-shirt, shoes and slicker, he opened the door. The wind, wild and fierce, whipped around them, dashing them with cold rain. They carried the sheet of plywood outside and set it against the window frame. Brita leaned into the board, holding it steady, while Zeke pounded nails all around the edge.

She hurried inside, but Zeke held back, standing with his face to the wind. When she called his name, he didn't respond at all. She stepped back outside, grabbed his sleeve and pulled him with her. After he stumbled in, she closed the door.

"Zeke, what's wrong?"

He shook his head. "I thought I heard something."

Brita shivered from the chill of her soaked pants and shoes but also from the tone of Zeke's voice. He sounded dazed and confused. This was the second time he'd stood, as if mesmerized, in the stormy weather while the wind wailed around him.

Did Zeke play a greater part in her reason for being here? From the beginning, she thought his role was to show her the way, and everything after would be left up to her. Now, watching the confusion clear from his face, she wasn't as sure. Zeke's own odd connection to nature might be the key.

Satisfied he had recovered from his stupor, Brita hung her slicker in the closet, snatched a set of dry clothes and boots from a supply carton and went into the bathroom. It was time to prepare for whatever happened in the next ten hours or so...if Omega co-operated. When she'd finished changing into jeans, t-shirt and boots, she pulled on her lightweight jacket again. Ready as she'd ever be, she returned to the other room.

Zeke had already dressed in dry clothes and the boots she'd brought for him. Now they'd done something together that didn't involve intimacy, she found it easier to face him. She looked up at him and smiled.

He grinned, too, and handed her a cup of steamy coffee. "Thought you might need this to warm you up."

When she took the cup, their fingers touched briefly, and other ways to warm up flitted through her mind. She brushed the thoughts aside. She shouldn't think about that, not until this ended and they talked. Not until she learned if Zeke actually wanted a future with her again.

"Thanks." She took a sip of the coffee, strong and hot but sweetened and lightened with creamer the way she liked. She was touched as well as surprised he remembered after they'd been separated more than a year.

She took her seat again in front of the TV, but she couldn't keep her attention on the screen. Her mind replayed images of Zeke entranced by wind and rain, and the significance, if any, eluded her. And other thoughts interfered...the prospect that Zeke worked to tame his temper for another chance at a relationship with her.

Her mind spun dizzily from one to the other and back again, searching for answers to both. Only time would prove the former, but to resolve the latter, she had to ask Zeke. She glanced at him where he stood in the center of the room, sipping coffee.

For all she knew, he might not have a clue what she meant. Perhaps his temper had merely evolved, mellowing with age. Perhaps he had no desire for them to be together again, their two lapses of intimacy simply fond echoes of the past. She couldn't bring herself to confront him and have him confirm that possibility.

Too frightened to hope for the best, she watched him set his cup aside and swing around to start pacing again. He might wear a path in a carpet, but she could deal with replacing carpet every few years.

Oh, what was she thinking? That they might have a chance? But Zeke had said just before they made love that he only wanted *now*. Or did he mean that? She bit her lip, trying to recall his exact words...

The lights blinked, a steady succession of on-off-on-off so rapid that she covered her eyes against the strobe effect.

After several long minutes, the sounds from the TV stabilized and Zeke announced, "It stopped."

She removed her hands from her face. Zeke now sat at the desk. He refreshed the page on his laptop then tapped a few more keys. The printer jumped to life and produced a printout of Omega nestled against the west side of the gulf coast. The massive hurricane's swirl of clouds obscured much of southeast Texas, Louisiana, and southern Mississippi and Alabama.

"I'm shutting it down." Zeke began the necessary steps to turn off the laptop. "There's nothing here we can't catch on TV or the radio. I'm using a surge protector, but the way the electricity is fluctuating, I don't want a power surge to fry the motherboard."

The lights blinked a few more times then held steady. While Zeke packed up his gear, Brita found the carton with flashlights, emergency kits, radios and batteries. She set some of each, and extra batteries, on the table. She made a fresh pot of coffee and topped off their cups. By the time she dropped into her chair, he had finished placing his equipment on the desk in a neat pile.

She yawned and glanced at the clock. Almost one in the morning and nearly nine hours until Omega's predicted landfall. She picked up the printout and studied it. If Omega didn't turn north in the next few hours, she'd have to carry that damn cube back home to Tennessee and wait for a sign telling her how to proceed.

And Zeke? He'd never been wrong. Always in place before a natural disaster occurred, he traveled the world covering earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, volcanoes, floods and wild fires. He knew exactly where to be and how close to get to film award-winning documentation of nature at its most violent and destructive. News stations, magazines and newspapers paid top dollar for his amazing footage and stills. He couldn't be wrong this time, could he? How could his innate sense, this incredible if uncanny gift, suddenly go sour?

Brita rubbed her tired eyes. It couldn't. She had to trust in it, even if Zeke had begun to doubt. The elements set this stage, and she and Zeke were but tiny pieces of a much larger whole. Important pieces, yes, but still no more than blips on a radar screen. It would all come together in its own time. All Zeke and she could do was wait.

"Hey, why don't you try to get some sleep?" Zeke suggested. "It'll be hours before anything happens."

She nodded. "I think I will."

She wanted to add, *Come with me*. She needed to curl up with his arms around her, keeping her safe and secure. And why not? They'd already made love and given each other physical pleasure. If holding one another led to something more, could her heart be any more devastated if she discovered he truly didn't want a future with her?

She stood and looked at him. His gaze met hers, and he grinned affectionately. She licked her lips and mustered the courage to speak. "You must be tired, too."

Before he could answer, the room went pitch black and dead silent—except for the sounds of the wind moaning through the eaves and the creaks and groans of the trembling building. The sudden blackout left her off balance, and she grappled for the back of her chair.

"Stand still," Zeke ordered. "I'll get a flashlight."

Something tumbled and rolled across the table, and Zeke swore under his breath. A few seconds later, a bright beam crossed the room. Zeke used the flashlight to find the switch on the emergency kit, a heavy case with different types of lights and an ear-piercing siren. When he turned it on, the blue-tinted broad light illuminated the entire room in ghostly twilight.

Zeke handed her a flashlight and snorted. "With this lighting and the sounds of the storm, I feel like we're in a bad horror movie."

You have no idea! Brita walked over to the bed and set her cup and flashlight on the nightstand beside the darkened clock. She looked around, but didn't see the wooden cube anywhere. That didn't mean it wouldn't pop up when she least expected. When she turned around, Zeke stood there, holding his flashlight, coffee cup, Omega printout and the radio.

He placed everything but the printout on the nightstand. "Is the offer still open?"

She wasn't going to make it easy for him. "I never made an offer."

"Well," he drawled, a cute half-grin curving his lips, "you sounded like you might make one just before the lights went out."

She arched an eyebrow. "Did I?"

"Yeah, you did. But all right..." He shrugged. "Do you mind if I join you?"

Brita sat on the edge of the bed, leaned back against the two stacked pillows and put up her feet. "For resting only, I don't mind."

"Resting only." He held up two fingers. "Scout's honor."

As he climbed over her and sank against the pillows behind her, she laughed. "You were never a Scout. And I think you're supposed to hold up three fingers."

"It's the thought that counts," he murmured huskily and curled his arm around her shoulders.

She snuggled into him, the curves of her body matching his, and sighed softly. Whatever their future held—together or apart—she decided to enjoy the time she had with Zeke. His warmth and musky scent engulfed her. She laid her hand on his arm and relaxed against him. He pressed a kiss to her temple, but she didn't scold him.

The printout of Omega fluttered from his other hand into her lap. She lifted the piece of paper and looked at it. "Omega's still a Category 5."

"At the time I made the printout, yes."

She ran the tip of her fingers over the swirls of Omega's clouds. "That's winds of over a hundred and fifty miles an hour, right?"

“Wind speed of a hundred and fifty-five or more,” Zeke corrected. “Technically, Omega is a Cat 4 as well as a Cat 5.”

“How can that be?” Brita asked to nudge him into information mode. She loved listening to his smooth, mellow voice as he spouted facts and statistics. Otherwise messy, impetuous and chaotic, when it came to his work, he meticulously researched and studied each situation. He never went in unprepared.

“Remember, the storm center around the eye moves counterclockwise. When Omega turns north, anything to the east will bear the brunt of the storm. Everything on the west side—well, it’ll be only slightly less catastrophic.”

When Omega turned north, not *if*. Maybe Zeke had decided to just trust it would all turn out, too.

On the printout, he traced a path from the eye of Omega north to approximately where Gulf Beach would be if the clouds didn’t hide the coastline. “They calculate wind speed to determine the category by adding or subtracting how fast the storm is moving to the velocity of the wind in the eyewall. If Omega keeps to the same speed when she turns north, then she’ll move about twenty miles an hour. The eyewall wind is a hundred and fifty-five. On the east side, the forward motion boosts the wind, so you add. That makes a wind speed of a hundred and seventy-five.”

“I get it.” Brita glanced up at him, grinning, and pointed to the west side of Omega’s eye. “Here, you have to subtract because the forward motion of the storm decelerates the wind making the wind speed a hundred and thirty-five. That’s a Category 4. So the west side will be the easy side.”

“Yeah, but that’s still a Cat 4. The difference between a Cat 4 and a Cat 5 is the difference between cracking a nut with a sledgehammer and a wrecking ball.”

The implication sobered her. “You destroy the nut either way.”

“Exactly.”

“There have been so many hurricanes this year.”

She felt Zeke nod against the top of her head. “Enough to use up the English alphabet and reach the end of the Greek with Omega. But not all of them became hurricanes. A cyclone is named when it strengthens into a tropical storm. A record number of cyclones became tropical storms, but most of them never reached hurricane intensity.”

She laid the printout on the nightstand and leaned her head into the crook of his shoulder. “It was so strange. After Hurricane Katrina finished chewing up the Gulf Coast, she moved north and crossed Tennessee. Hundreds of miles from a large body of water, but we were under a Tropical Storm Watch that night. Katrina still had enough power to cause damage in the area.”

“Yeah, it was strange. I was there, remember?”

“Yes, I remember, but that was just before we met.”

Zeke drew in a deep breath. “For the longest time, I resented like hell that a broken leg kept me from the Gulf Coast with the double punch of Katrina and Rita. But one day, I realized if not for the broken leg and recuperating at my parents’ house, we never would have come together.”

She smiled at the sentiment, but the coincidence intrigued her. Zeke’s broken leg had prevented him from documenting the two most catastrophic US hurricanes until that point in time, allowing them to meet. Then nearly three years later, the wooden cube had come into her possession. And now, they had reunited, waiting for a hurricane to turn and fulfill both their agendas. Maybe not a coincidence at all, but a long-term plan which included manipulating them, moving them into place with the shrewd calculation of a game of chess.

“You never did explain how you broke your leg. Did it happen while you were working?”

“Not exactly.” He squirmed uncomfortably behind her and then settled. “Okay, not at all. My brothers and I came home for a few days for my parents’ anniversary. We were horsing around and I fell.”

Stifling a giggle, she finally looked up at him. “That must have been some fall.”

“Yeah, off the roof of the shed.”

“You were horsing around on top of the shed?”

He shrugged. “You know Zack’s the youngest. Well, Zane and I used to dangle him off the shed roof and threaten to drop him. We never actually did it. We just liked to hear him scream. When we tried it that time, I wound up with a broken leg and Zane a black eye. And Zack didn’t scream.

“Serves you and Zane right for picking on your poor baby brother all those years.”

“That’s what Mom said.” He reached around her for the radio and pushed the special button for the National Weather Station.

They listened to the dry monotone of the announcer reading the latest weather bulletins, but nothing had changed. Omega still headed toward Matagorda. Zeke didn’t say anything, but she felt his body tense around her and his hands fidgeted.

In an effort to keep him talking instead of brooding over Omega’s path, she asked, “Why do you think there’ve been so many hurricanes lately?”

“Well, except for the last couple of years. They were relatively quiet, disaster-wise. But there are several theories. One is that global warming is causing a rise in ocean temperatures and creating the conditions for more cyclones to develop and stronger hurricanes to form. Another is that nature has cycles, and we’re in an active phase.”

“You get up close and personal with nature. What do you think?”

“Hey, I’m not a scientist.” He stretched his arms over his head. “But I guess I lean toward both. Weather and the Earth have their cycles with the stuff we spew into the atmosphere just making it worse. After all, we all have our mood swings.”

“That’s certainly true. Do you think...do you think there might be something else?” she pressed.

He brought his arms down and wrapped them around her. “What do you mean?”

“Well, it’s not just the increase in the number and intensity of hurricanes.” She folded her arms around his and wished she had the perfect words to tell him all about the wooden cube and why she had come to Gulf Beach. Easing into it was the only way she knew to do it. “Flooding and drought are on the rise, too, like last year. The southeastern US had drought while other areas and countries were flooded. Other elemental forces are increasing, such as earthquake and volcanic activity. In 2005, for the first time in recorded history, an Atlantic hurricane reached Spain. Odd things, too, like the mudslide that covered a village in the Philippines and the mud volcano that buried half a dozen villages and twenty factories in Indonesia in 2006, the steam vents off the coast of Japan in early 2005, and the tsunami in the Indian Ocean the day after Christmas in 2004.”

“There hadn’t been a tsunami in a hundred years. They were overdue.”

“But why now?”

“Cycles,” he insisted. “That’s all it is, cycles.”

“You mean, every kind of—of natural disaster is cycling into a highly active period at the same time?”

“Sure. If each type of natural occurrence has a cycle, the highly active part of them all would have to coincide at some point over the millennia.”

“But why now?” she asked again.

“Why not now? Just because we exist at this moment doesn’t make it any more special than any other time period.”

“I don’t mean that. But if you think of the earth as a living entity, then couldn’t you say she’s trying to get our attention?”

“Hmph. You don’t believe in that New Age mumbo-jumbo, do you?”

Brita picked at her jacket sleeve with one hand. She knew explaining wouldn’t be easy, but she had no idea Zeke would be so close-minded.

“I believe there are lots of things we don’t know. I wouldn’t call it mumbo-jumbo. My friend, Holly, she—” Brita cut herself short. She had kept Holly’s secret while growing up until Holly herself went public a few years before.

“Oh, I remember your friend Holly.” Derision gave his voice an edge. “She and Zane went head-to-head this past summer.”

“Yes, Zane, your ghost-hunter brother,” she frostily reminded him.

Zeke gave a short laugh. “Zane disproves ghosts exist. He’s been doing it for years and can always find a logical reason for any phenomenon.”

“And Holly is a gifted psychic and medium. She’s proved herself to me again and again since we were kids. Why your brother doesn’t find ghosts, I don’t know. But none of that is the point.”

“All right, I won’t argue. What is the point?”

Brita sighed. Time to stop hedging and tell him the truth about why she had come to Gulf Beach and to him.

Chapter Seven

“The point is the wooden cube,” Brita began her outrageous explanation.

He drew back and frowned. “What?”

She left the security—and sanity—of his arms and stretched across the bed. She pulled out her backpack, brought out the cube and gave it to Zeke.

He juggled it from one hand to the other. “You keep leaving it out.”

“No, I don’t. And I know you don’t get it either,” she added before he could object.

“There’s no one else here except you and me. Unless you think Mr. Mendoza is sneaking in here and moving it. Or you think the cube is—” He cut off sharply. “Don’t tell me that’s what you think is happening.”

She pushed aside her backpack and, tucking her feet under her, faced him. “Nearly a year and a half ago, I did a human-interest story on the oldest person in Bentley, Mr. Aubrey Stanton. He’d turned a hundred and four and lived in a nursing home at that time.”

“I remember him. You’d written an annual piece on him for several years.”

She nodded. “He died a few months after—after we broke up. He didn’t have any surviving family, so he left the cube to me in his will.”

“Nice of him to remember you.”

She scraped loose strands of hair from her face and scooped them behind her ears. “It wasn’t nice of him, but I don’t think he knew what else to do with it. And he had to pass it on.”

Zeke’s brow furrowed. “I don’t get it.”

“Neither did I, at first. I thought it was a sweet gesture, but the note that came with it was a little cryptic.” She quoted from memory, “‘Miss Swift, I am sorry to burden you with this, but there is no one else. I am in hopes you will find the answer. Cordially, Aubrey Stanton’.”

“But didn’t you say before that you have the directions for the other pattern?”

“I don’t know what you mean by pattern. All I see is plain wood. The directions are to open it.” She rubbed her eyes with both hands. “For a while, nothing happened. Then I began to dream about the cube. I kept it in the living room on a shelf, but one night the dream was so disturbing that I brought the cube into my bedroom. After that, as long as I kept it on the table beside my bed, the dreams weren’t as frequent or vivid. Or frightening.”

“Wait a minute.” Zeke sat up and held out the cube to her. He ran a finger over an elaborate design invisible to her. “You’re saying you don’t see that?”

She shrugged. “No, I don’t. The only markings I see are the lines where the individual pieces join.”

His eyes narrowed. “What game are you playing, Breezy? Does this have something to do with Holly and Zane? Are you trying to get back at me because Zane made Holly look like a fool?”

“That doesn’t even make sense,” she snapped. “Why would I try to get back at you for something your brother *thinks* he did to my best friend?”

Zeke tossed the cube into the air then caught it. He let out a slow stream of air through his pursed lips. “You’re right. You wouldn’t. But we were talking about hurricanes and natural disasters and now this cube. I don’t see the connection. And I can’t figure out why you can’t see the pattern on the surface of the cube. It’s right *there*.”

“I don’t know why. Maybe we can figure it out together later.” She didn’t want the strange phenomenon to distract them from what she needed to tell him. “Anyway, the dreams continued, even if they were more subdued. The funny thing is I never recalled exactly what they were about. I just remembered the sense of urgency that overwhelmed me. Then Holly called me a few days ago. She had dreamed about me and a wooden box and had the feeling that something was wrong.”

“And you had never told her about the cube?”

“No. At the time I received it, we didn’t see each other for a while. Our schedules kept conflicting, and I didn’t think about it the few times we talked.”

Zeke didn’t say anything, but the look of skepticism in his eyes spoke volumes.

Brita shifted her legs underneath her. “I went to see her and took the cube. As soon as she touched it, she went into a trance.”

“And?” Zeke prompted.

“You won’t believe me.”

“Try me.”

“I didn’t believe it, and neither did Holly, at first. While she was in the trance, she whispered, ‘*Release me!*’”

His skeptical scowl turned into a puzzled frown. “That’s all? Did you try to open it?”

She shook her head. “Holly and I talked it over and decided if it was as simple as opening the cube and freeing whatever is inside, Mr. Stanton or

anyone could have done it.”

“That makes sense.”

“Holly said she would meditate on it. The next day, she called me. She had a dream the night before.”

Zeke ran his hands over the wooden surface, his fingertips tracing out the pattern only he could see. He was watching her and seemed unaware of what he was doing.

She cleared her throat. “Holly said she saw me with the cube in an extremely windy place. She was there, too, but as an observer, not a participant. She couldn’t feel the wind, but it was strong enough that I could barely stand upright. The cube broke open and something rushed out and into the wind, mingling with it, becoming one with it. And after that, the wind calmed to a soft breeze. That night, I dreamed of you. The next day, Omega formed in the Atlantic. Everything clicked into place.”

Zeke continued to fondle the cube, turning it over and over in his hands. “You think you need to open the cube in a hurricane?”

“Not just any hurricane. *This* hurricane,” she clarified. “You told me so in the dream. I thought my subconscious put you in the dream because of what you do, but now, I think there’s more to it.”

Zeke grinned. “Like what?”

“Your empathy for the chaotic side of nature.”

He looked completely oblivious to what she was suggesting. “C’mon, Breezy. You can’t seriously think that something beyond the normal is at work here. There’s nothing supernatural about it. I study weather patterns, seismic and volcanic activity and other types of natural events. It all sort of comes together in my subconscious and when I look at a map, I know what’s going to happen and when and where.”

“Don’t you find that a little strange? You said it yourself, that it’s still an inexact science. Meteorologists with all of their specialized education, sophisticated equipment, and decades of experience haven’t predicted Omega landing at Gulf Beach, Texas. Yet you read a few graphs and charts, look at a map, and just *know* Gulf Beach is where Omega will make landfall. Does that really make sense to you?”

Zeke drew back and blinked, as if shielding his eyes from a bright light that just turned on over his head. “I never thought about it like that. It’s just something I’ve always been able to do. Like the big ice storm in February, 1994. I told my parents it was going to be bad, and they were prepared when it hit.”

“You were a teenager at the time. And they listened to you?”

“Yeah. Even now, I call them when a tornado watch is in effect or when they’ll feel a tremor. Like year before last, when all those tornadoes hit the area in the spring, I called them and told them they’d be all right.” He shrugged. “I never thought it was strange because it’s something I’ve always been able to do.”

“Well, it *is* strange. In fact, it’s downright spooky. Even I didn’t think about how abnormal it is until just now. But if you casually accept your own ability, then you can’t deny Holly’s...or the cube’s.”

Zeke shrugged again. “I see your point. Holly may have some extrasensory perceptive powers. She is, after all, a thinking, breathing human being. But this—” He held out the cube. “This is just a wooden box.”

Brita swung her gaze from the cube to Zeke. The stubborn tilt to his chin indicated he wasn’t yet ready to believe. She could talk until she ran out of breath, but none of it would convince him. He would have to experience it for himself.

“Come here,” he said softly. He dropped the cube and reached for her.

Without hesitation, she went back into his embrace. She snuggled closer. She wouldn’t pursue it because she didn’t want to argue with him. She just wanted to love him for whatever time they had left together. He’d mull over what she had told him and draw his own conclusions. He’d either believe or not.

Basking in his body heat, she closed her eyes and allowed herself to relax. Morning would come soon enough and with it, Omega...if Zeke’s hunch was right.

Later, without even being aware she had gone to sleep, she was awakened by Zeke reaching over her for the radio. She yawned, rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

“Did you hear that?” He turned up the volume.

She listened as the announcer repeated the breaking news. “Hurricane Omega has turned north, and Matagorda, Texas is no longer the projected landfall site. It is now predicted that Omega will make landfall southwest of Galveston, near the city of Gulf Beach, Texas at approximately ten o’clock this morning. Repeat—Hurricane Omega has turned north...”

* * *

“I’m not leaving Gulf Beach, Zeke.”

Zeke sighed, pulling on his slicker, and looked up at Brita. “It’s too dangerous to stay here.”

Brita’s chin jutted at an obstinate angle, and she crossed her arms, effectively creating a barrier between them. “I’m not going. You can take half the supplies and leave, but I’m staying here. I have to open the cube when Omega makes landfall.”

“Damn the cube!” he shouted, his voice rising in anger over her stubbornness. “You’re going with me and that’s final.”

“You can’t make me.” Unlike his, her tone was quietly determined. “While you’re out filming, I’ll split up the supplies. Then you can go on to Houston. You get your film and I get rid of the cube—we both accomplish what we need to do.”

He seized the shoulder bag with his hand-held camera safely inside while getting himself under control. This elemental spirit shit had gone on long enough. Damn old man Stanton for his last attempt at a practical joke and Holly for feeding Brita’s fears. With a friend like that, who needed paranoia?

Neither accounted for why Brita didn’t see the design on the cube. There had to be a logical explanation—hysteria or hypnosis. Maybe Brita’s own fear of the cube caused a hysterical reaction, somehow psychologically blinding her to the decoration. Or maybe Holly had hypnotized her, inadvertently or not. He’d confront Brita’s friend when this was all over. He didn’t have time to worry about it at the moment. His first priority was getting Brita to safety.

“I’m not arguing with you, Brita.” He walked to the front door and placed his hand on the knob. “After I film, I’ll bring your SUV around. It’s larger and should hold both of us as well as all the supplies. We’ll load it up and get out of here. By the way, I got your keys out of your slicker pocket earlier because I knew you wouldn’t give them to me. I’ll be back in less than an hour.”

Her eyes narrowed and turned dangerously dark—nothing like the deep purple of her passion. “You’re welcome to it. You’ll be safer in it. I’ll have half the supplies ready for you when you get back.”

He didn’t bother wasting any more time arguing. He’d throw her over his shoulder if he had to. He turned the doorknob.

The wind rushed in, splattering him with rain, and kicked the door out of his grip to bang against the wall. He staggered back, nearly losing his balance. He leaned forward into the wind and stepped out on the balcony. He turned, intending to grab the door and close it, but Brita—her eyes still hard and her forehead etched in a frown—was pushing it shut.

At the last moment, she called out, “Be careful!” Then the door closed, and whipping wind and torrential rain surrounded him.

The building was old but sturdy, constructed in the days when structures were meant to last. That and its location, the rooms facing the beach across the highway, were why Zeke had chosen this motel. Using the building as a shield against the wind, he would be able to film the beach from the back of the motel. Unfortunately, the rooms faced right into the wind and made getting in and out his major concern.

He had waited until dawn, a little over four hours until the expected time of Omega’s landfall, but the sky was still dark gray with limited visibility. By the time he made his way around the building, he thought it should be light enough to film by.

His hands on the railing, he moved along the balcony and down the steps as fast as he dared. On the ground, white-capping water lapped at his ankles and gusts of wind snatched at his clothes until he turned the corner of the building.

The wind pushed him along until he turned the next corner, putting him on the backside of the motel, the side opposite from their room. Here, the wind whisked around the corner after him as if trying to snatch him back. With one hand trailing the wall, he reached the third corner and stopped.

So far, so good. But the longer he remained there, the stronger the winds would become and the greater the chance of something bad happening. He pulled off his backpack and dug out the camera.

He unfastened his hood and let it drop behind him, took a deep breath, and stepped from behind the protection of the building. The wind seemed to have claws grasping at his clothes and hair, and he almost fell to his knees. All around the motel grounds, trees and tall grass bent at sharp angles. Wind and water slashed at him and more loose debris blew across the wide asphalt drive at the front of the motel. A trash-can top, part of a lawn chair, a baseball cap and a plastic grocery bag tumbled and rolled by him.

By the time Omega made landfall in four hours, the town would look like a war zone.

Bracing himself against the force of the wind, he put the camera up and peered through the lens. Shouting, he gave his name, the time and his location. He talked about the wind and the water, his voice rising higher and higher. He ignored the voices he heard just under the sounds of the wind, whispering his name and beckoning to him. He screamed louder and louder, trying to drown them out, until his voice grew hoarse.

Pain from his raw throat, like needles striking tender flesh, made him aware of how loud he’d been shouting. He returned to the motel back wall, somewhat protected from the weather. He huddled there and brought out a bottle of water. The cool liquid eased his scratchy throat.

He heard no whispers now. No screeching wind rising into a high-pitched shriek. He ran his hands through his hair and wiped water from his eyes. He cleared his sore throat and whispered to himself, “All right. I’ll start over.”

He made it through the introductory speech this time without raising his voice over a shout. When he finished, he decided to cross under the portico protecting the front entrance of the motel. Leaning into the wind, he had found a balance that kept him upright and not in much danger of being blown over by the force. He wanted closer shots of the beach and water and started across the customer parking lot.

Glancing behind, he glimpsed the lines of doors on both floors of rooms through the sheeting rain. Although situated near the beach, the motel had been built on a rise of land. He had chosen a room on the second floor, putting him nearly thirty feet above sea level and above the average storm surge that would come with a hurricane.

Zeke turned back around and braced himself against the sturdy trunk of a tree in the landscape between the parking area and the highway. Directly on the other side of the two-lane road, sand stretched toward the gulf. He aimed his camera at the turbulent gray water and zoomed in on the white-crested waves, each rising a bit higher and churning a bit more than the last.

If Brita hadn’t been waiting for him in the room, he would have crossed the highway and stayed on the beach until...until his instinct told him when to leave. This time, he had Brita to think about, and he didn’t consider her presence a nuisance or a hardship. He wouldn’t be here to film when Omega made landfall, but he wasn’t disappointed. He had Brita again and having her back in his life was worth losing footage of a dozen Omegas.

He caught shots of outdoor furniture and pieces of rigging either flying by or floating on the water. When he checked the time, he'd been out over an hour, and that meant less than three hours until Omega made landfall. He had enough on film. If they loaded Brita's larger SUV with the supplies fast enough, they could head further inland toward Houston. Perhaps beyond Houston, if he felt they had the time to siphon the gas from his rental and keep ahead of the worst of Omega.

He kept the camera rolling until he returned to the backside of the motel then jammed it in his backpack. He hustled down the length of the building, stopping at the second corner. Their SUVs sat side by side, next to Mr. Mendoza's truck in the employee parking lot situated on slightly higher ground than either the motel or the customer parking lot in the front. Runoff from the slope sloshed against his shoes.

He left the shelter of the building and hurried across the small section of asphalt, but before he reached his SUV, he stopped and stared. All four tires were flat. The wind whistled around him as he walked closer.

Something sharp and pointed, a metal rod or a ripped wooden plank, had impaled each tire. He clambered around his vehicle to Brita's...and found her tires in the exact same condition. So were those on Mr. Mendoza's truck. He would check with the proprietor when he returned to the room, but unless Mr. Mendoza kept four spare tires on hand, they weren't going anywhere.

Chapter Eight

Brita opened the door, and Zeke stumbled into the room on a violent gust of wind. He helped her shove the door closed and glanced at the share of supplies she had placed between the window and the door.

"I'll help you load them," she offered.

"No need." His curt reply and flinty eyes threw her off. His adamant insistence that she go with him, implying he'd use bodily force if he continued to resist, seemed to have drained away. Grim resignation had taken its place. What had happened to change his mind?

"I don't mind." She grabbed her slicker where she'd placed it within easy reach on the back of one of the chairs.

"We won't be going anywhere." Zeke yanked off his slicker so hard water droplets flew everywhere. "Tires are flat."

"On my SUV? There's a spare. I can help you change it."

"Four spares?"

"All four tires are—?"

"Yep, all of 'em," he broke in, wiping the rain from his face. "Yours, mine, and Mr. Mendoza's truck. Something sharp is rammed into each one. I saw Mr. Mendoza before I came in here, and he doesn't have four spares either. We're stuck here, to ride out a Cat 5 hurricane."

"But that's what you do, isn't it? Don't you usually ride them out?"

He hung his slicker over the back of the other chair. "Yeah, but I always work alone. That way, I don't put anyone else in danger. Damn it, you shouldn't be here. You shouldn't have come."

"I didn't have any choice."

He shook his head. "Brita, you shouldn't let a few strange dreams send you into the path of a Cat 5."

"They didn't," she corrected. "Omega was headed for Matagorda, remember? They sent me to you."

"You didn't mention anything about me in your friend's dreams."

She wanted to tell him how often she had dreamed of him during the past year, how she relived their time together and created new scenarios for them. In most of her dreams, they made love passionately, and she awoke with tears in her eyes and a sense of loss and longing. She drew in a deep breath. Now was not the time to tell him how much she had missed him.

"I didn't tell you everything."

"All right, then. Enlighten me."

"Holly wasn't going to tell me about the first dream at all because she couldn't make much sense of it. But she had another dream." Brita paused then corrected her choice of word. "Or vision. I think they were more than mere dreams."

Another hard gust of wind sent a tremor through the building and rattled the glass behind the protective sheet of plywood.

"What else did Holly see?" Zeke demanded.

Brita wiped away the rain that had come in with Zeke from her face and eyelashes. "She was an observer again. She saw me buffeted by the wind, but this time the cube remained closed. The wind grew stronger until it became a howling, shrieking force, and I was blown away. Then she received flashes of different places on earth being utterly demolished—cities and countries flooded by water, covered in lava and mudslides, and torn apart by earthquakes, massive tornadoes and cyclones."

The implication sent a shudder through her body in the same way the wind caused a trembling in the motel. She wrapped her arms tightly around herself. Zeke gave a short, derisive laugh, and she turned away from the skeptical glare in his eyes.

"So," he began slowly, clearly not believing the conclusion he'd drawn, "she interpreted it to mean that if the cube isn't opened in a catastrophic force wind, all of nature will unleash its worst and destroy the world."

"Yeah, that's how she saw it."

"And you believe her?" he asked harshly.

She nodded. "I trust Holly."

Zeke snorted. "The psychic my brother proved to be a fake."

Whirling on him, she defended her friend. "He did not. He shifted the burden of proof to her and that wasn't fair. No medium can prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that ghosts exist, especially to someone who refuses to keep an open mind. If they could, we wouldn't be arguing over it."

"How convenient," he muttered dryly.

“Just because there is no tangible evidence, doesn’t mean it isn’t real. I’ve known Holly a hell of a lot longer than your bother has—longer than I’ve known you, for that matter.”

“Yeah, you’re right.” Bitter sarcasm laced his words. “We only lived together two years. We hardly know one another at all.”

Brita rubbed her temples in exasperation. “Don’t make it about *us*. It’s not. And I’m not saying we don’t know each other. We do. We packed a lot into those two years.”

“Yes, we did,” he agreed, his face and tone softening.

She made sure she spoke more softly as well. “Zeke, it’s not only because of Holly’s dream-visions. I believe because of my own dreams, too. For whatever reason, Holly is more attuned to the things most of us can’t see. I couldn’t remember the specifics of my—my visions, but the description of hers matched the impressions that were left of mine and helped clarify what I was feeling and why.”

“Okay.” He nodded and seemed a little more open-minded. “What exactly did you feel in yours?”

“The sense of total annihilation if I don’t do what needs to be done. I also had the feeling that the cube has passed from one person to the next many times, some of them destroyed because they didn’t follow through. I think they didn’t do so mainly because they didn’t have someone like Holly to decipher what the elemental spirit trapped in the cube wants—its freedom.”

“And how was this spirit trapped in the cube?” The disbelief in his tone and attitude started growing stronger again, and she could almost hear the squeak as his mind narrowed.

She knew how crazy it all sounded, and this part sounded the most ludicrous of all because she couldn’t give him a complete and satisfactory answer. “Holly said she thought it was trapped twenty or thirty years ago...which coincides with what you call the active period of nature’s cycles. She wasn’t sure *how* it became trapped. Even her visions aren’t one hundred percent all the time. From the impressions she received, she thinks a group of people was fooling around with an ancient ritual, but they didn’t have the knowledge or the training to do it correctly. They built the puzzle cube and performed the rite to trap the spirit...and none of them survived the vengeance of the other spirits’ wrath.”

“Hold it! This is getting way too crazy even coming from a—” He stopped short and frowned. “I won’t insult your friend again, but on a scale of one to ten, the unbelievability score just hit a hundred.”

“I know.” Brita raked the hair from her face, crossed to the bed and sat on the corner. “That’s why I didn’t want to tell you everything at once. I wasn’t holding back or lying. I just wanted to give it to you in small doses.”

“I can see why. Even in pieces, it’s not making much sense.” He shook his head. “I still don’t understand why you have to go through all of this to free the spirit.”

“Holly thinks there’s probably another ritual to do that, a long and complicated procedure to prepare the spirit for release. Since we don’t know what the ritual is or even where to begin to look, the next best thing is to release it into a great physical force of its own element.”

“Like a hurricane.”

“Yes. The way Holly explained it—the spirit, in its fury at being trapped, is seething within the cube. Over the years, the concentration of energy has built up pressure, and if the cube is simply opened, it might be enough to blow up the world. But a powerful physical force could absorb or neutralize the energy.”

Zeke stared at her, and then he burst into laughter. “I don’t believe I’m even considering that any of this is possible.”

“Okay.” Brita crossed her arms and cocked an eyebrow up at him. “Then explain to me the odds of *all* the tires on three different vehicles being punctured by sharp objects and going flat at the same time.”

* * *

Brita turned off the radio and rested against the headboard of the bed. Nothing but static came through the speaker, even on the National Weather Station, now that Omega was nearly on top of them. She closed her eyes and listened as the wind whipped and roared around them. The building creaked and groaned and popped with each tremendous gust, but it seemed structurally sound enough to withstand the extreme force.

Something solid, heavy and large slammed into an outside wall, startling her, and her eyes flew open. The building shuddered hard and something cracked. She looked at Zeke who had stopped pacing and stood in the center of the room. He stared at the ceiling, scowling darkly at the raging storm.

Her comment about the tires had stopped his laughter cold and sobered him, reminding him that tangible evidence existed. She and Holly might be delusional or simply wrong, but twelve flat tires on three different vehicles was too much. Even Zeke had to concede something more than coincidence was at play.

“Do you hear them?” Zeke asked in little more than a whisper.

Brita sat upright and swung her legs over the edge of the bed. “What?”

“Don’t you hear the voices?” he asked again and clamped his hands over his ears.

She went to him and curled her fingers around his arms. “All I hear is the wind and the rain.”

He closed his eyes and shook his head. “They keep calling my name. What do they want?”

She squinted at her watch in the strange bluish light from the emergency kit. A little after eight, nearly two hours until Omega’s projected landfall.

Then Zeke's eyes sprang open, wide and shocked. "*They're here,*" he whispered hoarsely. "*They're...here.*"

"*They who?*" she asked, her voice trembling.

Zeke didn't respond or act as if he heard her. He lowered his arms, shaking off her hands, and glanced around the room. "The cube. Where's the cube?"

Confused, Brita followed him to the bed where she'd left it. "But it's not time, Zeke. We still have nearly two hours before Omega makes landfall."

He shook his head and grabbed the cube. When his fingertips touched the cube, an intricate design glowed in bright colors. She blinked against the glare that bathed Zeke from the tips of his fingers to the top of his head and where the boots he wore touched the floor.

"Landfall is when the center of the eye crosses land. The eyewall is where the most power is and it's here *now*."

Of course! How could she have missed that? She had been waiting for landfall, not when the eyewall reached them. She took one deep breath. She knew what to do—if not exactly *how* to do it—and she was prepared, as always, for this. She had even prepared for Zeke's participation, although she hadn't expected it in quite this way.

She scrambled across the bed and grabbed her backpack off the floor. After opening it, she dumped the rest of its contents on the bed.

"We won't need that," Zeke said quietly.

She looked at him, blinking at the intensity of the warm golden glow enveloping him. He wore a calm, serene smile. He looked at her over the cube in his upturned hands. He was still Zeke...but he was *more* than Zeke, too.

"I borrowed gear from a mountain climber I interviewed last year—harnesses, rope and carabine clips. He said they should be strong enough to hold up to hurricane winds. I brought enough for both of us."

Zeke's smile grew wider. "We don't need it. They'll take care of us."

"They? Who are they?" she asked again, bewildered.

"I don't have time to explain. If you're coming, grab hold of me," he directed and turned toward the front door. "Whatever you do, don't let go."

Confused and frightened, she hesitated. She had started this, but it wasn't going according to how she had *planned* and *prepared* for the situation. She'd gone in knowing she would have to convince Zeke to open his mind and let go of his preconceived notions. She hadn't known she'd have to release hers, too.

She snatched up a paper with the directions to open the cube that she'd laminated to protect it. At the door, Zeke called to her without looking over his shoulder. "Leave it. I know what to do."

She swallowed hard, and her muscles seized up in indecision. No gear to save them from the terrible wind. No instructions to open the cube. What if Omega blew them halfway across the gulf? What if Zeke found he really didn't know how to open the cube?

"Breezy, I need you to open the door," Zeke called to her once more. "Now."

What if...? The plastic-coated paper shook in her grip, and she looked up at Zeke again. Her own crazy story, the bright light emanating from the cube and surrounding Zeke, and his own confidence in knowing what needed to be done should have been enough. Still, it was difficult for her to let go and face the unknown without a *plan*.

She let the paper fall and wiped her hands on her jeans. She didn't have a choice or Zeke would go without her. Most of all, she wanted to see this through. She hurried around the foot of the bed and across the room.

"What about our slickers?"

"No time," Zeke said. "But we won't need them either."

How could they step out into hurricane-force wind and rain with no protection at all?

"We have to do this *now*, Breezy," he urged.

"All right!"

"Grab onto me and keep one hand on me no matter what."

She wasn't afraid of the golden light around him, but she didn't know what to expect when she touched him. She reached for his arm with one hand and his waist with the other. When she made contact with him she felt nothing, but the golden light winked out.

"Keep one hand on me and open the door," Zeke directed.

"But—"

"Just do it. We have to hurry."

The storm still raged and roared outside, blasting the motel with each gust, and the building shifted to and fro under the constant onslaught. She

removed her hand from his arm and placed it on the knob. When the door opened, the power of the wind should blow it off the hinges and throw them back into the room. Apparently, Zeke didn't believe anything like that would happen. If Zeke believed, so could she. She braced herself and turned the knob.

Chapter Nine

The door swung open slowly as if it were a balmy summer day, but a morass of leaden gray swirled and writhed beyond the threshold as Omega fought to keep up her fury over the uneven terrain. Heavy sheets of rain lashed toward them, but not a droplet of water touched either of them. Brita replaced her free hand on Zeke's arm and quivered as she edged behind him.

"Ready?" he asked.

She couldn't speak, only nodded. Somehow, he must have sensed her affirmative answer even though she was out of his range of vision. He took a step across the sill. She expected his leg to be swept out from under him, but nothing happened. His jeans didn't even get wet.

Zeke took a few more steps, and she moved with him. They were completely outside now, but they weren't blown away or drenched. She still couldn't feel anything from the storm that beat and twisted all around them.

Hugging the wall, they eased along the balcony toward the end of the motel. Their feet sloshed through water not yet drained off, but that was the only rain that physically touched them. Brita looked up and out, but the sheeting rain made for near zero visibility. If not for the concrete slab beneath their feet, it would seem as if they floated in a bubble, the rain parting for their passage.

In the shifting grayscape, she caught a glimpse of the stairs that went down to the parking lot. She breathed a sigh of relief when Zeke continued past them. The flooding rain and storm surge combined must have covered the parking lot by now.

She decided the spirit in the cube—or the *others* Zeke heard in the sounds of the storm—created an invisible shield around them to protect them from the weather. The golden light that glowed around Zeke but disappeared when she touched him didn't really turn off. It included her in its protection as well. If she were outside looking in, she would see the light engulfing them both.

When they reached the corner of the building, Zeke turned right and started to ascend a set of steps she hadn't noticed before, leading to the flat roof. She went along with him, holding onto him tightly.

On top of the motel, roofing material crunched under their feet while debris flew past them—tree limbs, clothing, lawn furniture, pieces of siding. A sheet of metal shot directly toward them. Brita ducked as it hit the invisible shield and careened off in another direction.

"We'll be all right. Just hang on to me," Zeke said.

Surely, she was cutting off the blood flow in his arm already, but she did as he said. He stopped in the center of the roof and glanced up. Then he looked down at the cube, turning it over and over until, it seemed to her, he found just the right place to begin.

His fingers flew over the cube, twisting it, turning it, changing its shape and back again. The seams where the wooden pieces came together mixed up, but then another different set of seam lines started to emerge as he rotated more pieces of the cube.

Brita watched over Zeke's shoulder, but she couldn't really tell *how* it happened that the cube now began to grow in size with each twist and turn of his hands.

"Here we go!" Zeke shouted. "Hold on!"

She wrapped her arms completely around his waist and pressed the side of her head into the crook of his neck so she could see over his shoulder. Now, nearly double in size and with many more faces of differing lengths and widths, the polyhedral shell he held no longer resembled a cube. As Zeke's nimble fingers made a few more turns, rays of bright light leaked from its seams.

Then the shell lifted from Zeke's fingers. He held out his hands for a few moments longer, but when it became clear the shell was continuing to rise at a slow, steady rate, he dropped his arms, putting one around her waist.

Brita moved into his embrace, still clinging to him. She looked up and squinted against the brightness of the light rays. When her hair blew across her eyes and she brushed it out of the way, she realized some of the wind now reached them. A few drops of rain splattered her face and arms.

She held out her damp hand. "Zeke, the protection is wearing off. Maybe we should go back."

"I don't know if we can. It may not stay with us if we do. Besides, I want to see what happens." He squeezed her. "We'll be all right. Everything will be all right."

He spoke with such confidence, she relaxed against him. She didn't know what would happen and, therefore, couldn't plan or prepare. Whatever it was, she and Zeke would get through it together. At that moment, she was surprised to find the unknown didn't worry her...too much. She had Zeke, who thrived on the unexpected, to show her how to cope and adjust to anything the elemental spirits and Omega dished out.

The shell continued to elevate, and its array of bright lights intensified against the roiling dark gray clouds. Electrical charges in the air raised the hair on Brita's arms, and her scalp tingled.

She looked up at Zeke, the loose strands of her hair flying more wildly across her face.

"Zeke!" She raised her voice over the sound of the wind and rain. "Let's try to go back."

His eyes never left the rising shell. "I promise you, Brita, we'll be all right. Just watch."

She did as Zeke said, deciding to trust in him and his connection to the spirit to keep them safe. When something dark moved in the clouds, she put one hand around her eyes to shield them from the wind, rain and radiance of the light. She stared at the darkness as it contorted and twisted and took

shape.

The form it took looked like...a clenched fist...and fingers uncurled, reaching for the shell. When the shell rested on the huge palm, looking like a matchbox in a giant's hand, the fingers closed over the shell, completely cutting off the rays of light.

The moment the dark hand squeezed the shell, breaking it apart, the wind and rain slammed into her and Zeke. Brita spun around and tumbled to the roof in a wobbly spiral, like a top losing its momentum. She shut her eyes, and her arms went up to protect her face. Elbows, hands and cheek grazed the gritty surface of the roof. She felt Zeke's hands grab at her again and again, but she continued to roll just out of his reach until her shoulder struck something solid, stopping her.

The wind pushed her harder against the barrier. Then Zeke's body folded around her, his arms holding her tight, but the bullying wind now pressed them both into the barrier.

"Hang on, Breezy!" Zeke screamed at her.

She clutched at anything, but her hands only came into contact with rough concrete...the edging of the roof. Brita scabbled to find a secure hold, but the concrete was too wide. The wind shoved them, nearly picking them up and thrusting them over until her arm caught on it. She squeezed the concrete under her arm as hard as she could.

The wind kept razing them, and she opened her eyes, squinting and flinching against the wind and rain. Through rapid blinks and the hair whipping back and forth across her face, she saw Zeke's white-knuckled hands pressed to the concrete next to her arm. Then she looked down...down two stories to the asphalt below, and a low scream started deep in her throat, quickly rising to a high-pitched wail.

"It's all right, Breezy! We'll be all right," Zeke shouted in her ear.

She wanted to believe him, and because she had no choice, she stopped screaming. She clung to the roof edging, gripping it with her arm as tight as she could. Their bodies lifted and slammed down with the vagaries of the wind and then—

Everything stopped.

The wind cut off abruptly and the rain came to an end just as suddenly—as if someone turned off a fan and a sprinkler at the exact same moment. The hollow sound of dead silence replaced the incessant howling wind and drumming rain. Several moments passed before she became aware of a steady pouring below where rain drained from the roof through the gutters.

"Oh, God, it's gone. It's all gone!" Zeke moaned miserably as he fell away from her and slumped against the concrete.

Brita eased back, too, and turned around to sit beside him. Brushing her hair from her face, she looked up at the sky.

The shell that had once been a cube was gone, along with the ethereal hand. White fluffy clouds replaced the ominous gray thunderheads. As she watched, the first rays of sunlight she'd seen since reaching Texas filtered through and bathed her in its warmth.

"I knew it, I knew it all, and now it's gone," Zeke lamented with a frustrated groan.

Brita turned from the sun-laced sky to Zeke. His hands covered his face, rubbing briskly. She scooted closer to him and touched his arm. "Zeke?"

He dropped his hands away, revealing his troubled eyes. Then he blinked and grabbed her hand in his. "Are you all right? Your cheek—"

"I'm fine. A few scrapes, but I'm fine. Are you?"

"The same." Drawing her into his arms, he looked up at the sky.

Brita's gaze followed his. "This is the eye of the hurricane, isn't it? I've heard about it, but I've never seen it." She turned to Zeke. "How much time do we have? We should go back to our room, shouldn't we?"

Zeke's distress changed to serenity. He smiled, a mysterious, knowing smile, then looked at her. "The hurricane's gone now. We don't have to hide."

"I don't know as much about hurricanes as you, but I do know they don't just disappear in a matter of minutes."

"Ah, but this was no ordinary hurricane and you know it." He placed a quick kiss on the tip of her nose. "It's gone."

"What you said before, is that what you meant?"

Zeke's forehead furrowed and some of his anxiety returned. "No, I wasn't talking about the hurricane. While I held the cube and knew exactly what to do, I also knew the secrets of the universe—the cure for cancer, how to build an engine for faster-than-light travel, and even the identity of Jack the Ripper. But as soon as Ya-eh-tu received the released spirit back into the fold—"

"Ya-eh-tu?" Brita questioned.

"She is the mother of all the elementals. *She from whom all life began*," he said as if quoting something he'd heard. Then he shook his head. "As soon as her son returned to her, I lost all of the knowledge. All of it. Now, I only recall that I knew it, not *what* I knew."

Brita hugged him. Nothing she said would comfort him after what he had gained and lost. She took his hand in hers and saw the raw scrape on his palm. "Let's get back to the room so we can take care of our injuries."

* * *

Zeke awakened to the smell of coffee. He rolled over and automatically reached for Brita. He remembered doing so several times while they slept,

finding her and molding his body to her incredible soft warmth. Asleep, she'd snuggled closer to him, and he'd drifted off again, knowing they were exactly where they should be.

This time, his searching hand met with cool sheets, but the aroma of coffee assured him she remained with him. Exhausted after their ordeal, they had returned to their room, tended their wounds and, after waiting to be sure Omega had indeed completely dissipated, fell into bed and sleep.

He opened his eyes, quickly scanning wall to wall, and found her curled up in the overstuffed chair, angled so the sunlight through the window fell over her left shoulder. Reading glasses perched on her nose, she balanced a legal pad on her knee. Her pen scribbled across, shot back to the left, then scribbled across again.

He watched her a few minutes, once more amazed she was back in his life. Each moment he spent with her now, he realized even more how much he'd missed her. He rolled from the bed, found a clean pair of jeans and pulled them on. When he turned around, Brita had removed her glasses and was looking at him.

"Hey, sleepyhead," she said, her smile rivaling the bright sunlight behind her.

He walked around the bed and went to her. Leaning over, he kissed her—a deep, hungry kiss that expressed how much he wanted and needed her.

"Wow," she said when they parted. "What was that for?"

She sounded breathless and very sexy, and he swore right then to take her breath away every day for the rest of their lives.

"Just to let you know I'm glad you've let me back in your life." He kissed the tip of her nose. "And your bed."

The radiant smile faded from her face, and he straightened to give her the space she seemed to need. How had he fucked up this time?

"Aren't we back together?" he asked cautiously.

"Are we?" she shot back.

"I guess not." Something fell to the pit of his belly, and he thought it might be the pieces of his heart.

"But—" She paused and rubbed the top of her pen along her bottom lip. "But I didn't think you wanted to try again. You—you said it was just for now."

He blinked at her. "When did I say that?"

She rested her hands on the arms of the chair, and her gaze darted away from him and back again. She looked as if she felt cornered. He took two steps back and sat on the foot of the bed to give her more space and so she wouldn't think he hovered over her. She visibly relaxed.

"Yesterday. Right before we made love the first time."

And then he remembered. When he'd joined her on the bed, she'd tried to keep him at a distance. He'd told her to concentrate on *now*, and when she asked about *later*, he'd said they'd worry about the hurricane afterwards. He'd only wanted to rebuild their relationship slowly, one step at a time, but she'd thought he intended for them to go their separate ways when it was over.

"Breezy, I never—"

"Don't call me that if you don't mean it." Her brows furrowed, and the corners of her mouth tightened.

He felt his own anger rising. She kept interrupting him, so maybe, deep down, she didn't *want* to hear what he had to say. Maybe *she* didn't want to get back together with him. After all, she'd told him several times that she hadn't come to Gulf Beach to renew their relationship. He now knew that to be true, that she'd come because of the cube. Yet the attraction between them still simmered hot, and he wasn't going to give her an easy out. She'd have to tell him outright and straight up she didn't want him anymore.

"Oh, I mean it," he said solemnly.

Her eyes widened. "Do you? But you said—"

"I said what I did to keep from scaring you because you said you didn't come here to be with me."

"And I didn't. Not that way. But that doesn't mean—" She broke off and bit her lip.

"What, Breezy?" he coaxed.

The uneasiness left her eyes, and her grip loosened on the arms of the chair. She stood, laying aside her paper, pen and glasses, and crossed the distance to him in a couple of easy strides. He spread his knees farther apart, and she stepped between them, placing her warm hands on his shoulders.

"It doesn't mean," she murmured, looking down at him, "that I don't want you or I don't want us to try again. I do."

Her words sounded like sweet music to his ears. He put his hands on her thighs and slid them up her hips to her waist, trying to bring her even closer to him. Her arms stiffened, stopping him.

"But I told you before I can't go back, and I meant it." Her brows knitted, and while she looked as if she wanted to kiss him, she didn't bend her head toward him.

"So you don't want to try again?" The words came out sounding too hollow, revealing how anxious he was over what her answer might be.

“That’s not what I said, Zeke. I can’t go back to the way we were, the way *you* were...and maybe the way *I* was.”

He could tell she had a difficult time admitting her part in their problems. Not that he blamed her for his actions—no, he took full responsibility for the things he’d done—but her rigid refusal to be spontaneous and her unbending need to plan *everything* had created tension between them. She never let go or did anything on a whim. Her strict adherence to a plan and the meticulous preparation of an itinerary frustrated him—and added to his fits of temper.

In his own way, he was as inflexible as Brita—something he had learned to acknowledge and work through.

“I need to know something, Zeke, before I can agree to trying again. I’ve been with you less than two days, and you’ve been plagued with self-doubts over Omega, not to mention me showing up out of nowhere with a wooden cube and crazy story to go with it.” She hesitated again.

He knew what she was going to ask, but he remained silent to let her say it in her own way.

“I noticed something about you. It seems like you find ways to control your temper, and I wondered—” She ran one hand up over his shoulder and rested it in the bend of his neck, her thumb tracing back and forth along his jaw. “Is it a fluke? Are you on your best behavior because I’m here? Or have you really changed?”

He caught her hand in his and pressed a kiss to her palm. “I’ve been working on it. Anger management courses, stress management seminars—you name it, I took it. I’ve been using some of their techniques to control the worst of my temper. I haven’t broken anything in nearly eight months.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” She sounded hurt, and her violet eyes glistened with tears. “All I needed was for you to admit something was wrong and be willing to fix it.”

“It wasn’t that easy.” He squeezed her hand. “When you told me to leave and never come back, I was mad as hell. I wanted to break anything and everything I could get my hands on. And I pretty much did. A few months later, after paying off yet another exorbitant credit card charge from some motel, I knew I had to change to get you back. I did it for you, at first, but I came to realize I was really doing it for me. Even I didn’t know how far I might go and that scared me.”

He reached up and wiped away the tears that had escaped her luminous eyes. “I’m sorry, Brita. I promised myself if I ever had another chance with you, I’d never make you cry again.”

She smiled through her tears. “Apology accepted. That’s a first, too, you know.”

“Yeah, I know. I am sorry for all the heartache I caused you. I thought because the objects I broke were just *things*, it didn’t matter. Things can be cleaned up and replaced. And I *never* would have hurt you. I damaged a lot of stuff I didn’t mean to, and when it occurred to me I might have accidentally hurt you—”

“But you didn’t,” she interrupted. “That wasn’t the problem. And it wasn’t the *things*, it was the—the uncertainty. Never knowing when you’d go off, like a stick of dynamite with a hidden fuse. It was something I couldn’t plan or be prepared for. But, at the same time, I was wound up like a spring because I was *always* waiting for it. I couldn’t live with the tension, and I *can’t* go back to it.”

“You don’t have to.” He pulled her to him, sitting her on one of his thighs. She put her arms around his neck. “I planned to come back to you.”

“Why didn’t you?” she whispered. “I missed you so much.”

“I had to make sure. It was a habit, and bad habits aren’t broken overnight. I had to be sure I was ready. Not a day passed that I didn’t think about you, but lately, I thought it was time. Then Omega came up. After Omega, I was going to take a break, go home for a while, call you and see where we could go from there. Yesterday morning, it was like a dream come true, finding you when I opened the door.”

“You didn’t sound happy to see me.”

“You surprised me. And if I was right, we’d soon be in the middle of a Cat 5 hurricane. I didn’t want you in danger.” He put his hand at the nape of her neck, his fingers sliding into her thick curls, and drew her to him until their lips met.

He had her right where he wanted her...and he never intended to let her go again.

Chapter Ten

Brita closed her eyes and took pleasure in Zeke's lips on hers. The kiss deepened until their souls touched as well as their tongues. Desire skated through her body and blended with the throbbing between her thighs.

Kissing Zeke, holding Zeke, having Zeke again made her heart beat a tempo she hadn't felt in over a year. She welcomed the comfortably familiar yet exciting sensations he roused in her and hoped she'd never live without them again.

Her love for Zeke burned hotter than an active volcano, stronger than a Cat 5 hurricane, deeper than tsunami waves, and more unsettling than an earthquake. Loving Zeke, in all its chaotic glory and unpredictable splendor, filled her until she thought she might burst into brilliant fragments and crown the sky with her radiance.

Their first try at a relationship had ended in disaster, but a chance to start over dangled within their grasp. She wanted to snatch it and hold it close, and she decided to show Zeke how much she desired a second try. And him.

She broke the kiss to lift her shirt and, with Zeke's help, pulled it over her head. Thick black lashes half closed over his smoldering eyes, and his gaze went from her breasts to her face and back again. Bedroom eyes, she'd often thought when he looked at her that certain way.

He traced the top edge of her bra cups with his fingertips then ran his fingers underneath, tugging her bra free of her breasts and over her head, too. He glanced up at her again, his dark, simmering eyes holding hers this time as each of his hands surrounded one of her breasts. The fire within turned into hotter flames flicking her clit, and she closed her eyes to revel in Zeke's touch. She wanted more, needed him all over her and inside her, but she didn't want to rush to the ultimate conclusion just yet.

"Open your eyes, Breezy," Zeke ordered.

The sudden harsh rasp of his command made her obey, and she stared into his hazy blue eyes. He'd held the secrets of the universe for a short time, but now only his love and lust for her reflected in the windows of his soul.

His thumbs raked over her taut nipples, and she gasped, reeling with the tingles that spiraled downward. She ran her hands up his arms to grip his shoulders and steady herself. As his thumbs continued their teasing, her fingers dug into hard muscle.

She wanted him *now*. With a push, she sent him flat on the bed. She hooked her fingers into the waistband of her sports pants and pushed down. Zeke rose up on his elbows, his mouth open, but he remained silent, apparently mesmerized by her provocative actions.

Slowly, she eased her pants down until they fell into a pool at her feet. Then she caught the elastic of her panties and repeated the performance. By the time she stood before him wearing nothing but a smile and a promise, his breathing had turned ragged and the bulge in his jeans had grown to an impressive size.

Brita licked her lips in anticipation then situated one knee on the bed between his thighs. Arching her back and extending her arms with feline precision, she leaned forward, forcing him down again. She placed her hands on each side of his torso, bringing her other knee to rest alongside his hip.

He reached for her, splaying his hands at her waist. "You're beautiful."

His husky murmur sent thrills up and down her spine. She whispered, "So are you."

When she bent closer, he raised his head for a kiss. She placed one, feather-light, on his mouth, then his chin. She left a trail of mini-kisses along his throat to the top of his breastbone.

She made a wish, as she used to do when she kissed that spot, but this time, she wished for the emotions and excitations their lovemaking evoked to last forever. She wanted what they created this day to never end.

She slipped her tongue between her lips and changed from kisses to licks. With the tip of her tongue, she explored every inch of the vast territory of his broad chest, tracing each contour. She closed her eyes and thoroughly enjoyed the range of textures from smooth skin to coarse hair to pebbled points, from boned hollows to curved muscles.

After circumventing his navel, she raised herself up enough to catch the opening at his waistband and unzip. He lifted his hips, and she slid his jeans down, just far enough for his cock to bounce free. Her breath caught at the first sight of it, and she felt the moisture grow at her core as her clit pulsed with the need for attention.

She ran her fingers over his long, sleek erection, tracing the slight curve it made from the rounded head to the coarse curls at its base. She caught the trickle of pre-cum with her thumb and spread it over the silken spot just below the head.

Zeke's moans intensified her need for him, and she finished removing his jeans, standing long enough to wrench them from his legs. As she joined him again, Zeke moved them backward to the center of the bed.

Skin to skin, they came together, Zeke enfolding her in the warmth of his long, strong limbs. His kisses turned hungry, devouring, and she lost her breath more than once. His rigid cock prodded her belly and mound, finally slipping into the juncture of her thighs.

She spread her legs wide, accepting him within her body the same way she received him into her heart—with joy and abandon. His thrust went true and deep, and her wet pussy melted around him. She pumped her hips with his until the first quickening of orgasm flickered deep inside her. Then her hips undulated faster out of control, drawing him in deeper and pounding her clit against him.

Her back bowed and mewling moans resonated from her throat when ecstasy washed over her and flooded her body from pussy to fingertips and toes. As the last of it drained away, Zeke's rumbling groan chorused hers, and he rammed into her one last time. His release came on a shudder and a

grunt.

His breaths sounded in sharp tandem with hers as he eased down and stretched his body alongside her. He placed breathless kisses between her breasts, and she cradled his head there, next to her trip-hammer heart.

She'd been lost without him, as if she wandered a desert without a map or compass, a contingency plan for rescue, or even knowing her destination. She placed a kiss on top of his head and closed her eyes. Now, everything fell into place. Now, she knew where she was and where she'd go—with Zeke, wherever that took her.

* * *

Shadows shrouded the room, held at bay by the light of one candle that ran on a battery, when Brita got up and dressed. She had drifted in and out of twilight sleep at the time he left her. He hadn't yet returned, so she decided to go to him.

She checked the bathroom, but found it empty. Then she grabbed a jacket, slipped on her shoes, and opened the front door. Millions of bright stars filled the sky overhead, and the crisp December night air washed over her.

"I'm over here," Zeke called to her softly and turned on another small battery-powered candle.

She walked to where he sat on the top step of the stairs leading down. "Do you mind if I sit with you?"

He moved over, giving her room. "Not at all."

"If you want time to yourself, I don't mind going back inside."

He shook his head. "I'm glad you're here."

She settled beside him, leaning into him, and he dropped a quick kiss on the top of her head. He said nothing more, and she remained quiet, too. The longer the silence stretched, she became more certain something bothered him.

After a long while, she spoke up. "If you don't want to tell me, it's okay, but I'm here if you want to talk."

She heard him sigh, a slow, hushed passage of air that expressed discouragement and bewilderment. Still, he didn't say anything. Disappointment darted through her, but she didn't try to persuade him again. She hoped he'd confide in her without prompting, but perhaps that would come in time.

By the time she'd abandoned the notion, he inhaled deeply and said, "I have this—this ability to know when natural disasters occur. I could help thousands, maybe millions of people by letting everyone know when the next earthquake, tsunami, or Cat 5 hurricane is going to hit. But what good is it? Who's going to believe me? If I tell anyone what I know, they're going to think I'm fucking crazy. Just a freelance photographer trying to gain some notoriety to boost his career."

She put her arm around him. "You do what you can. You save those who believe in you and will listen to you, like your family and friends. Meanwhile, you continue to be first, capture the best on film and get it out the quickest. And..."

She let her voice trail off, unsure if Zeke would find the idea she'd contemplated that afternoon as interesting as she did.

He put his finger under her chin and tilted her head up. "And?"

"You can take all the time you need to think about it. I don't expect an answer right away. And it's all right if you don't think it's a good idea." Brita stopped and bit her lip. She hadn't thought through all the aspects of her proposal. Plunging ahead unprepared unnerved her...but not as badly as she imagined. "I thought I could travel with you and write up the experiences you film."

Both of his eyebrows shot toward his hairline. "You understand that requires leaving at a moment's notice? No time to plan an itinerary or pack more than an overnight case. My sixth sense—or connection to the weather gods or whatever it is—doesn't give much advance notice most of the time."

"I know." On the verge of hyperventilating, she took slow, even breaths. She could do this. Yes, she could, to be with Zeke. "When Holly told me what to do, I didn't have much time to prepare. There wasn't time to make a list and double-check it, shop around for the most economical reservations, or make sure the SUV I rented had a tune-up and oil change since the last customer had driven it. I had to just do it and hope for the best."

He grinned and kissed her. "I know how hard it must have been for you."

"Yes, very. I don't know why, but I've always had this compulsive need to plan and prepare everything down to the least detail and have everything ordered and structured."

"I bet when you were a kid, you kept every toy in place and *never* lost a puzzle piece."

"Never. In fact, I still have all my old puzzles and not one piece missing. So, yes, it was very difficult for me. And I had a completely unbelievable reason on top of everything else. Holly and I were the only ones who knew how real it was, no matter how crazy it sounded." She caught his hand in hers. "But I did it and...it wasn't too bad. Maybe, just maybe, everything doesn't have to be planned down to the most minute detail. I was terrified of heading toward a Category 5 hurricane, and I was petrified to see you again without completely preparing myself. But it wasn't as bad as I thought it might be. I-I kind of liked the rush of hurtling into the unknown."

Zeke threw back his head and laughed out loud. "Isn't that what I've been telling you all along? It *is* a thrill to just go and not know exactly what's going to happen or when. It's what makes you feel alive."

Brita exaggerated a shudder. "Well, I wouldn't go that far. I can't promise to like it all the time. I still need some order and structure in my life. I do promise I won't freak out *every* time we have to leave on short notice."

Zeke chuckled. "Not every time, just some of the time."

"Yeah. I reserve the right to freak out some of the time."

"Okay, but I reserve the right to be able to express my anger and frustration when things don't go my way. I promise not to throw things. Y'know, we'll make a great team."

She straightened up and looked at him. "You mean you want to do it?"

"Oh, Brita, I love you." He slid his hands into her hair and cupped her ears. "I want you with me always. I can't imagine a better partner, out of bed or in.

"I love you, too," she said and meant it with all of her heart.

Their lips met and mated, their tongues dancing together and delving deep. They kissed their way to bed and proceeded to prove again what a wonderful team they made.

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To learn more about Lani Aames, please visit www.laniaames.com. Send an email to Lani at laniaames@yahoo.com or join her Yahoo! group http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Moonlight_Fantasy.

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