

STORM FRONT

SUSAN MAY
WARREN



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Susan May Warren, *Storm Front*
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Soli Deo Gloria

TY REMINGTON BLAMED the homemade orange marmalade cake for why he found himself huddled under an overhang off some faraway path in Glacier National Park, shivering, praying he might live through the night.

Rain bulleted the enclave, a shallow divot in the granite at the lip of a now-rising flowing mountain creek. Wind tore at his thin rain jacket—he'd given his fleece to the couple huddled behind him, eking warmth from the scant fire he'd built. The blaze gave off a meager trickle of smoke and heat, but hopefully enough to keep them from hypothermia.

If it hadn't been for the growl in his stomach when the fragrance of Karen Reycraft's signature cake tugged at him, arresting his escape from the Fourth of July celebration at Mercy Falls Community Church, he'd be sitting on his leather sofa, watching through his window for fireworks to light over the river bridge in town.

Or he might have said yes to Gage Watson's invitation to join him and his girlfriend Ella for a movie.

Instead, he'd grabbed a plate and fallen into the potluck line ahead of Renee Jordan, proprietor of the local Free Fall B & B. Who happened to be worried about a couple of guests who hadn't

shown up for breakfast this morning. "They left for a hike in the park yesterday and never came back."

Yes, she'd knocked on their door, just in case.

Ty reined in the urge to remind Renee that she ran a vacation rental. That maybe Mr. and Mrs. Berkley wanted to be left alone.

She added, "I just know how scary it is to be out there alone in the park with a storm coming. I was hoping, since you're on that rescue team . . ."

There went his appetite, because unwittingly Renee had landed a lethal blow with the trifecta of arguments: in a storm, alone, and they might be in real trouble.

Most of all, maybe he could help.

Ty's gut had begun to roil with the weight of *what if*. He pulled out his map of the park and found the moderately strenuous and remote trail Renee had suggested to them. "The Dawson Pass hike has the best huckleberries," she said in defense.

Yes. It also passed through prime grizzly territory.

Not to mention the 2,935-foot climb.

Although, with its sweeping views of Dawson Pass, the seven-mile trek to No Name Lake could be the most dramatic day hike in the park.

"Maybe I'm overreacting," she said.

Ty had finally left his cake behind and headed over to PEAK HQ.

"You sure they're out there?" This question had come from Chet King, co-founder of the team.

After a thorough study of the map, as well as a call to local park rangers, Ty's best answer had been, "Not in the least. But my gut thinks yes."

His gut. He'd actually looked at Chet and delivered that statement. And yes, okay, he'd added a wince, a little *what-to-do* shrug, but still, he'd stood there like his gut might be the homing beacon they needed to activate a callout.

Chet had pursed his lips. Added a deep breath.

So maybe Ty shouldn't be listening to his gut. But it had told him the truth more than once.

Like when it warned him that journalist Brette Arnold would only cause trouble. He just hadn't quite realized it meant she'd break his heart.

Clearly, his gut needed to be more specific.

With Renee's words, however, it had grabbed ahold of him, an uncanny, bone-deep feeling that someone was hurt. *"Since you're on that rescue team . . ."*

A placeholder, really, the guy who helped carry things. Once upon a time, he'd been the chopper pilot, but he'd screwed that up, and royally, so now he simply showed up for callouts and hoped not to ride the bench.

Maybe he could really help, for once.

"It's a holiday, no need to call in the team. I'll just ride out there and take a look," Ty had said.

"It won't be nice for long, so put a hup into your step," Chet said. "Take a radio with you."

Ty parked his truck at the Two Medicine Lake campground and knocked off the first four miles by taking the ferry across the lake.

A mile in, as he turned toward the Dawson Pass trail, the faintest rumble of thunder sounded beyond Flinsch Peak to the north.

Spotting a couple hikers headed down the trail from No Name Lake, he asked them about Jan and Richard Berkley, but they hadn't seen them.

He stopped for a moment at No Name, sweat trickling down his spine. He'd shoved a first aid kit, an overnight survival kit, and an extra blanket into his pack. The weight of it burned into his shoulders.

Maybe his gut was just reacting to the wannabe inside him. The fact that he hated standing on the sidelines, that without

EMT training or rescue climber certification, he usually drove the truck or hauled up the stretchers, muscle that filled a gap in the team's roster.

He'd thought about upgrading his certifications, but getting EMT training felt like admitting that his days as a pilot were behind him. So what if he hadn't flown anyone but himself . . . and recently, Chet, for his biennial exam. He would get back in the cockpit when he was ready.

Eventually.

Really.

Shoot, maybe it was time to face the truth. Without something to add to the team, he could be replaced with any number of the volunteers that showed up every year for callout training.

Ty had no doubt that only Chet's affection for him kept him on the payroll.

Ty had glanced at the storm gathering to the northwest—a rolling black thunderhead still forming on the horizon, bisected by jagged mountain peaks and rimmed on all sides by the mid-afternoon sun.

A couple miles later, he emerged through the tree line to the spit of a light rain. No Name and Two Medicine lakes were tucked into the valley below. The wind bit at him as he turned and ascended the south slope of Flinsch Peak. Bighorn sheep scuttled off the shale-littered trail.

When Ty's foot slipped on the slick rock, he stopped, breathing hard.

This was silly. The Berkleys had probably risen early and headed to Bigfork for breakfast at the Echo Lake Café.

Ty was leaning over, cupping his hands over his knees, when he heard it. A scream, and it echoed through the canyon, up the slope, and niggled the weight in his gut.

Maybe a hawk, but he stood up, listened.

It sounded again, and this time he recognized it as the shrill rasp of a whistle.

He reached for his own whistle and let out a long blow.

Three short bursts answered, the universal signal for help, and the hum in his gut roared to life. After returning the signal, he dug out his binoculars and cast his gaze over the trail that jogged up toward the pass. Then he swept his vision down, across the forest of lodgepole pine and huckleberry that dropped into a steep tumble from the trail.

The whistle continued to blast.

He stepped off the trail to angle his search and nearly slipped on the now-icy layer of snow that crusted a fissure in the rock. As he looked down, his heart stopped, lodged in his ribs at the footprints that bled down the snowfield.

Not a steep pitch at first, but the crust had broken off, and as he dragged his glasses over the field, he spotted the debris of where falling bodies had churned up snow, probably fighting for purchase before plunging down a scree slope into the trees.

A fall of nearly a hundred feet, although not straight down. He couldn't make out anyone at the bottom but followed his hunch anyway and backtracked down the trail. Finding a crossing place, he hiked down the base of the scree, shot out three blasts from his whistle, along with a shout, and received an answering report and headed into the trees.

Jan and Richard Berkley had huddled up for the night under the wings of a towering lodgepole, both nursing significant ambulatory injuries.

When she spied Ty hiking down through the bramble of forest and shaggy fir, Jan had dropped the whistle from her mouth, pressed her hands over her face, and wept.

"Hey, hey. It's going to be okay." Ty swung his pack off his shoulder and assessed the couple. Jan, who looked to be in her

midfifties, suffered from a seriously sprained, if not fractured, ankle.

"It's my fault. I was taking a picture, and I just . . . it was stupid." This from husband Richard, who spoke through pain-gritted teeth. Medium build and athletic, with graying hair at the temples, Richard reminded him a little of Mark Harmon. He held his arm possessively to his body, but it was his leg that had Ty worried. Broken for sure, the foot hanging at a grotesque angle.

"I tried to stop him, but he just went over—" Jan started.

"And I took her with me." Richard's voice tightened. "Stupid. We tried to hike out, but . . ."

Yes, okay, Ty would sign up for that EMT course at the local college because he'd really love to know whether it was shock, pain, or just the cold of the storm turning Richard pale. He worked off Richard's shoe and checked for a pedal pulse.

"He has blood flow," Jan said. "I've been checking. And I think we're past the danger of shock, although I know he's in a lot of pain."

Lean and tall, with her brown hair pulled back in a ponytail, Jan wore a rain jacket, Gore-Tex pants, and hiking boots. She wiped her eyes. "Sorry. I'm just tired. And cold."

Cold, yes. Because with the storm spitting down at them, hypothermia, even in July, could be their worst enemy. "Let's find protection, and then I'll go for help."

"What?" Jan grabbed his arm. "No—please. You can't leave us."

"I have a radio, but the mountains will block the signal. I need to hike out if I hope to contact my team."

"There's a storm coming. Please, don't leave."

Please, don't leave.

Like a punch to the sternum, the words, the earnestness of her voice unseated him. He drew in a shaky breath, the memory of his mother's voice just as swift and brutal. "*Please, Ty, don't leave.*"

"Let's find shelter," he'd said, hating the promises he was already making.

He'd twisted his bad knee carrying Richard down the mountain, but he gritted his teeth until he found the overhang, and by the time he gathered kindling and made a fire, the night was falling in a hard slash around him, the sky igniting with slivers of lightning, the rain icy on his skin.

Not a hope of the PEAK team hearing from—or finding him—on a night like this.

Ty slid back inside the cave, made sure that the fleece stayed tucked up to Richard's neck, then coaxed the fire back to life with one of the few still-dry branches he'd found on a low-hanging nearby pine tree.

"How did you find us?" Jan pressed her fingers to her husband's neck, checked her watch.

"Renee Jordan corralled me at church. Said you were missing."

Jan settled by the fire, put her swollen ankle up on her backpack. "And that's it—you just decided to look for us?"

Huh. When she put it like that . . . But he could hardly add, *My gut told me you were out here.* "I dunno. I guess the thought of you out here, alone, hurt . . ." He lifted a shoulder. "Besides, I'm on a rescue team."

"Oh, so you're a natural hero." Jan smiled at him from across the flames, and for some reason, it spilled warmth through him.

Still, he shook his head. "No. Trust me, I'm not the hero on the team. I just . . . I know what it feels like to be alone and hurt and . . ." He couldn't say much more, the memory lurking.

So he shut his mouth, his throat burning. He didn't look at Jan.

The silence that fell between them turned lethal to his resolve to keep the story to himself. He blew out a breath. "I was in a car accident when I was ten, in the middle of a blizzard, and I . . . I

wanted to go for help, but . . . anyway, I watched my mom die right in front of me. So . . ."

He clenched his teeth against the rise of a forbidden and ancient grief. Strange timing, but he decided to blame Jan and her uncanny resemblance to Elyse Remington.

"I'm sorry," Jan said.

He looked out at the storm. "I should have hiked out—"

"And get lost in the storm? You were ten."

He blinked at her for a second, then caught up. He was actually talking about the storm raging here, on the mountain. Nevertheless, Jan's words still sunk in. But it didn't matter how often he heard that truth. It still felt like he should have done *something* to save her.

He stopped shivering and held his hand to the warmth of the flames. "I'll leave at first light. We'll get you out."

"Richard's injuries aren't life-threatening." Jan grabbed his hand, squeezed. "I'm a doctor, trust me. We'll be okay. It's enough to know we're not alone."

Not alone.

And for some reason—maybe the fatigue, the storm, maybe even the ache in his knee—right then, Brette Arnold tiptoed into his brain.

Even after eighteen months, or nearly, still she had the power to run an ache through his bones, right to his heart. With it rose a desire to hit something, to let out a shout.

In his less sane moments, it even caused him to resume his search for her.

Because, deep in his gut, he knew that she was in trouble. And regardless of the fact that she didn't have the courage to stick around, didn't have the courage to reach out, didn't have the courage to admit she needed him . . . she did.

And if Ty knew one thing, his gut was rarely, if ever, wrong.



How Brette had hitched herself to three daredevil storm chasers who followed clouds for a living, she didn't quite know. One day she'd snapped a picture of a funnel churning up a Colorado prairie, the next she'd hitched a ride with the team from Vortex.com as their blogger-slash-photographer.

No, wait, in between there she'd posted the legendary picture on Facebook and sold it to *Nat Geo* for enough money to pay her cell phone bill and the monthly rent on her long-term POD container in Boston. A container she might never see again, the way Geena drove.

"We're going to hydroplane! For cryin' out loud, slow down!" A rare shout from their fearless captain, Jonas Marshall, as he slammed his hand on the front dash. Dressed in a black T-shirt, the orange Vortex.com emblem on the breast, and a red cap with his short brown hair curling out the back, he looked every inch the storm warrior who regularly reported on-the-scene updates to the Weather Channel.

His other hand steadied his computer on the front seat mount. On the screen, Doppler radar spit out, every two seconds, what looked like a child's coloring of an amoeba twisting and curling across a gridded map of Kansas.

Hopefully Jonas had an idea where to send them to intercept the forecasted tornado, because to her eye, they'd driven right into a line of squalls. And everyone knew that a squall line was a series of thunderstorms all in a row, and while impressive, it fought for the warm air necessary to fuel tornadic conditions.

In short, on the other side of this torrential rain might be nothing but blue sky. No swell of winds, no mesocyclones, no storm hook inside which the tornadic winds would organize, form a funnel, and drop to earth.

A wild-geese chase that netted them nothing but another day of endless driving and fatigue, and frankly, she couldn't remember the last time she'd eaten.

"Listen, you wanna get out of this mess or are we actually going to catch a tornado on this little cross-country trip?" Geena snapped as she gripped the wheel of their extended Suburban. Petite and tough, with a tribal tattoo up her arm and her jet-black hair twisted into an Oklahoma Sooners ball cap, Geena drove with the tenacity of a NASCAR champion. "Is this the gust front or not, Mr. Weather?"

Beside Brette in the backseat, Nixon smirked at Geena's name for Jonas, even as he angled the camera out the window to the northwest where the eerie green horizon turned black. He'd freshly shaved his head and face, and with his mocha skin and eyes, he looked fierce and very capable of standing up to and capturing on video whatever nature dished out.

Jonas blew out a breath and examined the amoeba on the screen. Encased in an outer edge of green that marked the precipitation, the layers comprised a fiery mix of yellows, oranges, and reds all the way to the supercell core.

"We're on the southern edge of the storm. Just keep going west. We'll break free of this and hopefully be right in the path of the mesocyclone. But please stay on the road."

"That's why you hired her, Big J, to bring you up close and personal," Nixon said.

"I hired her because you wanted your girlfriend on this summer's excursion," Jonas snapped. "Look out—there's *trees*! Sheesh, Geena!"

Brette tightened her grip on her seat belt as Geena maneuvered around a downed branch scooting across the road.

Geena glanced at him, smacked her gum. "Take a breath there, boss. I'm only going thirty."

Brette held up her camera, searching through her viewfinder for the right shot. Strange thing, storms. Unpredictable and chaotic, they possessed an ethereal beauty that held her captive, enthralled. Like watching an accident in slow motion, the dread curling up like a fist inside, tighter, arresting every breath until the release came in a gust of horror. Or perhaps awe.

She could never truly get a handle on her emotions, just the painful fact that she couldn't look away.

The sky to the north had turned an eerie sea green, bubbling with black frothy clouds. Like a turgid wave along the front edge, a dark gray wall of rain and thunder rolled, churning and hungry as it devoured the blue sky to the south. Under it all, the deep green prairie grasses of rural Kansas undulated, whipped to a frenzy by the 60 mph winds.

Lightning flashed, a skeletal hand reaching from the heavens, and illuminated a farmhouse in the distance, its white silo a grim sentry to the oncoming assault. She waited and focused on the mushroom clouds forming to the far southwest, found her payoff in another brilliant surge of light caught in the cumulonimbus cloud.

"I think it's starting to organize, Jonas," Brette said. As he'd explained it once to her, back when she first joined, a tornado was a combination of warm, wet air rising into the atmosphere, colliding with the cool air to create a cycle of falling and rising air until it collected into a uniform, circular current. The current then spun faster and faster, not unlike the Tilt-A-Whirl she'd ridden as a child. When the air began to rotate on a horizontal axis, it turned into something called a mesocyclone.

AKA, tornado.

The rain turned to bullets pinging off the roof.

"Hail!"

"Stop the car!" Nixon shouted and reached for a motorcycle helmet behind the seat.

"Not now, Nix!" Jonas said. "We're nearly through, and we need to get in front of this wall to lay down the probe."

When the season ended, Brette would miss the ongoing squabble between Nixon's on-the-side hail research and Jonas's commitment to field testing equipment for the SPC—Storm Prediction Center out of Norman, Oklahoma.

The wipers could barely keep up as the deluge turned deafening. Brette found herself ducking even as Geena fought to keep the car on the road.

Then, suddenly, just like that, they broke free. The hail dissipated, the rain turned into a spring shower, the gusts died.

They drove into what remained of the sunlight.

"Crazy," Jonas said and turned his hat on backwards. "But I love it when I'm right."

"Oh please," Nixon said.

"I told you those were just gustnados. And, for the record, when I say get through the gusts, I never mean punch the core," Jonas said.

"You're no fun," Geena said.

"But I am alive, and I'd like to stay that way. Still, good driving." He lifted his fist, and she met it with a bump. "And good eye, Brette. The hook on that Cb to the south is starting to organize."

Cb—shorthand for cumulonimbus, aka thundercloud—just another of Jonas's crazy words she'd had to learn. Words like *gunge*, the haze that blocked their vision, or *bear's cage*, which described the weather they'd just escaped.

And the easiest, Cu, or the general term for cumulus. All words she used now with alarming regularity.

They'd passed the farmhouse, and Brette took a shot of it—the silo, the tiny white house, a truck in the dirt driveway. Sheets whipped to a frenzy on the line, like ghosts in the wind. She hoped the inhabitants had found shelter.

"I still say there's tornadic activity in this mess to our north."

Nixon trained his video camera on the green haze on the opposite side of the road. Indeed, even from here, Brette recognized debris—roof shingles, hay, dirt caught in the wind.

"Nixon's right—this is a multicell storm. We could have a slew of mesocyclones!" Jonas shot a grin at the backseat.

And right then, Brette had her answer as to how she'd ended up here, as a member of this crazy group of storm enthusiasts. Jonas Marshall had called her on Skype and his charismatic personality had practically reached through the computer and grabbed her by the heart. Made her feel again, at least a rush of adrenaline. And yes, it might be dangerous, but in this moment, her heart thundered, the excitement of seeing something bigger than herself enough to make her forget the last year. She desperately needed to be a part of something that she didn't have to think about, something that would catch her up and drag her along for the ride, something she could lose herself inside, if ever so briefly.

And if she could capture it with her camera, tame it for a brilliant nanosecond, perhaps she could also find the beauty in the storm.

"C'mon, drop. You know you want to," Jonas said, coaxing the sky.

She trained her lens on the cloud. Almost on cue, nearly a half mile away, a thin funnel dropped from the clouds, white and skinny, dancing across the open field.

"Oh, she's so pretty," Nixon said, turning his camera on the sidewinder.

"Let's get up in front of her, drop the probe, and then we'll back up for a ringside view."

Geena punched it up the road as the dancing funnel thickened, veed-out in a nice Hollywood twister, one even Dorothy would have appreciated.

Three months ago, when Brette had joined the team, the danger would've stopped her heartbeat, caused her to scream, hold

her breath, beg them to find shelter. But she'd learned that they could tiptoe right up to the beast, take their shots, and edge away without being swept up into the destruction.

In theory. Yes, the storm-chasing community told tales of renegades, chasers who edged too close to disaster and found themselves injured, their vehicles torn apart, and even a few giving their lives for the chase.

But Jonas was smart. He'd been chasing tornadoes since high school, knew how to read them, and most of all, pledged to keep them all alive.

"Stop here," he said. "She's moving northeast. This should put us right in the path." Jonas and Nixon jumped out to dump the probe, a flat box with recording equipment under a domed glass. They carried it ahead of the car and settled it into the grass on the side of the road.

Brette lowered her window and snapped the funnel. From this angle, the sun lit up half of it a bold, cottony white. At the base, the fury tore up the earth, and a cloud of dark Kansas prairie dust webbed the cone. A massive magenta thunderhead mushroomed above and behind it like smoke. And, to add mystery to the awe, clear blue sky backdropped it all to the west.

She needed a better angle, so she got out of the vehicle. She took a few bursts, Nixon shouting behind her. "Let's go!"

But, as she turned to get in, the eerie green sky to the northwest caught her up.

A second vortex had formed, this one a thick black wedge emerging out of the web of rain and hail heading southeast.

"Nixon! You're right!" She ran up the road for a better view.

Two tornadoes in one sky, telling two different stories. One white, one black—she loved the dichotomy of it. And the rarity. *Nat Geo* would lose their minds for this exclusive shot.

Brette stood in the road, the wind a locomotive in her ears, and

sorted out the shot. She could get them both in her viewfinder. She just needed to wait until they converged.

"Brette!" Jonas stood on the runner of the car, his door open. "What are you doing?"

"There's two of them! And by the looks of it, they might even collide!"

"Come back to the truck!"

"Just wait!"

"We'll pull back, you can get the shot—"

The roar throttled his words, and she stilled as the dark funnel exploded through a barn a half mile away. The roof shattered, boards ripped into shreds like toothpicks. Debris darkened the sky.

She set the camera on burst again and took her shots.

"Brette!"

A moment later, she turned to the white tornado, now graying as it fell under the hood of the cloud, into the grasp of the larger supercell. The cone at the earth had turned black, and it slowed as it plowed through a copse of trees, ripping them from the earth.

She caught it all, ignoring the roar. Maybe she could sell to the Weather Channel too—shots this close, this clear—

"Brette!"

Her name in the wind gave one second of warning before arms slammed around her. In a second she went airborne. She screamed, clutching the camera to her body even as she tumbled into the soggy ditch, barely cushioned by the hard planes of Jonas's body.

For a moment, she lay dazed, staring at the frothing sky.

"What are you doing?" She pushed off him, but Jonas had already found his feet and was pulling her up by her elbows.

"That is what I'm doing!" He pointed to a sheet of metal that lay where she'd stood. "Get in the car. Now!"

Right. She ducked her head against the debris now raining down and fled to the car.

Geena slammed the gearshift into reverse.

"Go, go!" Jonas shouted even as Geena looked over her shoulder.

"Hold on!"

In a second, she popped the truck into neutral, spun the wheel hard, then shifted into drive and gunned it, in a classic car-chase U-ey.

"Seriously?" Jonas shot Geena a look.

"Told you she could drive!" Nixon shouted.

But Jonas was looking past him, toward the back window.

"Faster! It's hooking toward us."

Brette couldn't help but turn. Behind them, the black locomotive churned toward the road.

"It's sucking us in. We can't outrun it!" Geena said.

Why had she ever thought this was a good idea?

"What about the overpass?" Nixon pointed to the highway overpass a half mile away. "We could climb up under it."

"And be impaled or decapitated," Jonas said. "That's the worst place we could go—it turns into a wind tunnel. We'd be cut to pieces."

"How about the farm?" Brette pointed to the farm they'd passed earlier, now coming into view. "I'll bet they have a storm shelter—"

"Maybe, but we don't have time. Get off the road, Geena!"

Geena hit the brakes.

"Drive into the ditch!"

She plowed into the drainage ditch, and the Suburban bumped hard along the rutted ground.

"Everybody out!"

What? The tornado had hit the road and now carved a path toward them, a bulldozer that churned up the gravel, along with flying debris. "We need to stay in the car!"

Jonas had already gotten out. Nixon too. Now Jonas yanked open her door. "Get out!" The look on his face turned her cold.

"Run down the ditch!"

She stared at him, and he grabbed her arm and pulled her behind him.

"This is crazy!" The roar drowned out her words. *My camera!* She'd dropped it in the truck. She yanked out of his grip, turned. The twister had jumped the road, out toward the field, headed toward the farm.

An arm clamped around her waist, and Jonas threw her down. His body landed on top of hers, his voice in her ear. "Stay down!"

She couldn't get up if she wanted to, not with him pinning her in the mud, not with his arms tenting over their heads, his legs clamped over hers.

The wind howled over them.

Oh . . . oh . . . She pushed her head down into the cocoon of her arms and just tried to breathe. To concentrate on her heart-beat inside of the ravenous wind, the squeal of metal, the way Geena—or maybe Nixon—screamed near them.

The wind swept over them, and as he held her, Jonas began to shake.

She closed her eyes and tried not to cry.

Then, just like when they'd broken free of the hailstorm, the wind died. Just moved away from them, taking the earth-shaking thunder, the roar, the flying debris, and the scent of upturned soil with it.

The chaos fell to a blood-curdling quiet. Her heart banged, loud and clear, in its effort to leave her body.

Jonas didn't move, and for a second she feared he'd been wounded. "Jonas?"

"Just give me a second here."

He breathed out hard, and she didn't blame him. She waited in silence until he eased off her, climbing onto his hands and knees, backing away from her.

She pressed herself off the ground and sat up.

The twister had missed them and—thank God—veered away from the farmhouse, leaving a swath of knotted, uprooted field nearly fifty feet wide through the cornfield.

She sat back and only then realized that she, too, was trembling.

"What were you thinking?"

She stared at Jonas, his dark expression.

"You nearly got killed—twice," he said.

"You nearly got *us* killed!" Nixon stood not far away, his arms wrapped around Geena. "For a picture?"

Brette drew in a shaky breath. Swallowed. Bile filled her mouth. "Sorry?"

Nixon closed his eyes, looked away from her. Geena raised an eyebrow, her mouth tight.

Brette got up and walked away from the crew, watching as the white twin curled up into the clouds, swallowed by the darker twister.

Jonas finally walked over. Settled his hands on her shoulders. "Maybe we need a little break."

She turned. "What, are you firing me?"

He paused, maybe too long, but finally shook his head. "No, but . . . you did put us all in jeopardy."

"It's my job to get the great shots—"

He held up his hand. "I'm the first to say that I can get overzealous, but you were just . . . you nearly got decapitated."

Oh. "Sorry. And, uh, thank you."

He nodded, his expression softening. And for a second, she thought . . .

Oh no.

She backed away. "I need to check my camera."

"I'm serious about taking a break, Brette." Jonas followed her as she opened the door to the SUV. "We need to stop in Norman, and then maybe we call it quits. The season is nearly over, and we—"

"Need more footage. More epic photos. C'mon, Jonas, don't do this to me." She didn't know where all the pleading came from, but . . . "I'm not ready for the summer to be over."

And there came that look again, something so tender in his blue eyes that she looked away. She studied her camera, scrolled through the shots.

"Come home with me to Minnesota."

She froze.

"Nixon is from my hometown, and maybe we just take a rest. You can meet my family, and . . ."

She swallowed and looked up at him, hoping her face didn't betray the sheer panic at the idea of stepping into his personal life.

The last time she'd gotten involved with a guy, walked into his world, and let him into hers . . . well, she still went to sleep at night thinking of the way Ty Remington broke open the guarded places, made her long for something she'd never had.

In a way, she could never forgive him for that. It made the wounds that much deeper.

"Geez, Brette, take a breath," Jonas said. "I'm just suggesting that we take a couple days off. Regroup. There will be more tornadoes, I promise."

"Right." She sighed. "Okay."

He shook his head. "And I thought I was the zealous one."

She gave a high-pitched laugh. Because no, she wasn't zealous. He simply had no idea that she had nothing left but the storm.