

*For Amy,
fellow storm chaser and weather watcher,
thanks for being my sis and my supporter.*

*And in memory of my good friend,
David Fox,
who faced the storms of life with dignity, courage, and faith.
The earth has lost, and heaven has gained,
an incredible man of God.*

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“I know there is a God. . . . I see the storm coming, and I know that His hand is in it. If He has a place and work for me—and I think He has—I believe I am ready.”

Abraham Lincoln
(Joseph Gilbert Holland,
The Life of Abraham Lincoln)

prologue

baby child, come and eat. Come and eat your dinner.”

His mother’s sweet voice nearly drowned in the spectacular battle that played within the walls of his mind. He lifted his sword, fashioned from a paper towel roll and aluminum foil. The white light of his lamp glinted within its folds if he held it in just the right manner. Swiftly, he poked it into the dragon that stood before him. Its fiery breath poured into the tiles of the ceiling as it fell with a sickening groan onto the carpet near his bed.

“Ah-hah!” he yelled.

“Baby child, it is time to eat.”

She called him again. He smiled. Now it was safe to eat. The dragon was dead. He planted his foot on top of its head, stabbing his sword into the beast one more time.

“This shall teach you a lesson!” he proclaimed. “You cannot defeat a warrior!”

The door to his room creaked open. He could hear the theme to *The Love Boat*. His mother’s gentle face, round and soft, peered around the corner of the doorframe. “Baby child.”

“Hi, Mama.” He put his sword gently on his chest of drawers. She came to him and cupped her hands around his face.

“Aren’t you hungry?”

“Yes.”

Comic books cluttered the top of the tattered quilt she’d made him when he was born, before he could even sleep in a bed. He quickly tried to straighten them up. His mama never liked clutter. But she patted him on the back as she picked one up and flipped through it.

“You get your imagination from your grandmother, you know.”

He nodded. She’d told him that before. He didn’t understand it though. The only thing he’d ever seen his grandmother do was rock back and forth in a rocking chair. Sometimes she’d knit something. Mama said she was in an institution now, but he didn’t know what that was or why she was there.

“I killed the dragon, Mama.”

She dropped the comic book to the bed and looked at him. Her warm eyes dimmed slightly, but her small mouth kept a steady smile.

“You are a brave soul.”

“It can’t hurt us anymore. See? It’s dead on the floor. Watch out. Don’t step on it.”

“Well, a warrior needs a good meal, then.” She stepped on the dragon anyway as she went toward the door.

“Mama?”

“Yes, baby child?”

“He’s not coming home for dinner tonight?”

She swallowed. Her face tightened into a grim expression. But those eyes of hers, ever kind, locked with his. He and his mama had this understanding—always had—since the first time they’d found they had a beast among them. It was six years ago, on his fourth birthday.

“No. Not tonight.” She grinned at him. “I thought we’d eat by the TV, just you and me, find something good to

watch. Maybe a game show.” Her shadow swept across the bedroom floor as she walked away.

He carefully stepped around the dragon. This beast was dead for now. But sometimes it came back.



chapter one

The storm rotated so low to the ground it gave the impression of nearly engulfing the earth. The swirling clouds mesmerized, groaning and screaming in a way that made Mick Kline feel small. And that is why, over and over again, he found himself chasing them.

Behind him the other team, which included a meteorologist, an NOAA scientist, a cameraman, and one other storm chaser, were pointing at a map and shouting above the fierce winds, trying to locate a road nearby that would take them to the storm's south side. Meteorologist James Richards stood in front of the camera as his team reported on the location of the storm. Ryan the cameraman perfectly framed the scene, including a usually well-groomed Richards, whose hair was now flying over his head like a wind-whipped flag. It did confirm, however, that he did not wear a toupee.

The NOAA scientist shouted out wind speeds, now topping 100 miles an hour. Mick's heart thumped at an accelerated pace. This was a big one. The prime of spring had ushered in another monster.

Mick's friend and fellow storm chaser, Al, who had been standing near the NOAA van, with its fancy computers and large satellite dish, joined Mick at his truck. Mick and Al had been chasing the storm earlier, had met up with Richards' team, and had followed them to this location. Mick took his Canon 35mm camera and shot upward,

capturing the sun peeking through the western edge of the storm, as if heaven were reminding those who cared that the chasm between itself and earth was delicate and mighty all at once.

“It’s gonna drop,” Al said. Heavy rain pelted the pavement for a few seconds, then let up.

“I’d say in about three minutes.” Mick shot two more pictures, then quickly reloaded his camera.

“You okay?”

Mick glanced at Al. “What are you talking about?”

“You’re usually right in the middle of the action over there.” He nodded toward the truck, which sported the words National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration on its side.

Mick shrugged. “I can only take so much of their fancy degrees and doctoral language. Sometimes I like to stand here and enjoy this for what it is.”

Al looked back at the storm. The rotation had tightened, and phantomlike fingers were twirling to the earth and then disappearing. The storm teased them. But it gave its final warning: the sky was now green.

Richards called to them. “Come on! We got to get to the south. It’s getting too close. Ryan found a road two miles west. Let’s go!”

Mick looked at Al. “Ride with them, will you?”

“Why?” Rain splashed Al’s dumbfounded face.

“I’ll radio you guys, catch up with you, okay?”

“What are you doing, Mick?”

“Nothing. Just go with them, okay? I’ll be fine.”

When Al didn’t move, Mick glanced around him to where Ryan stood staring at them. “Look, Al,” he said softly. “I want to get some good pictures. Some really good ones. And you know those guys are going to freak out if you’re not at the exact distance they say you should be

according to their storm-chasing manual.” He looked back at Ryan. “Ryan! Al’s going to go with you. I’ll catch up. I’m going to track the storm to the north.”

“I’ll stay with you,” Al said, but his eyes showed fear.

“No. Go. I’ll meet back up with you. *Go.*” Mick guided Al around and nudged him toward the van.

“Hurry up if you’re coming!” Ryan said.

A sudden shower of hail encouraged Al to make up his mind quickly, and within seconds the others were all inside the van. The brake lights indicated something was being explained, and Mick saw Richards look out the back window with an irritated expression. But the van quickly took off over the next hill and out of sight.

Mick held up his arm, but the hail, not even the size of a penny, still bruised his skin. He’d seen it the size of softballs and had the auto insurance claim to prove it. There was no need to move his car to the side of the road; nobody would be coming. And he had learned that trees didn’t do much to shield a car from rocks of ice.

Walking off the road, he picked a leafy tree to stand under, knowing it wouldn’t help. Still, standing out in the open seemed even dumber. The storm crawled closer, moaning and creaking and issuing its threats with brilliant strikes of lightning. But Mick didn’t budge.

Since he was a little boy he’d heard tornadoes called “the finger of God.” Mick was about to find out how strong God’s finger was.

Yelling into the wind was futile. His own voice would carry away so quickly it would sound like a whisper. Now was the time to match strength against fury.

The winds that would soon sweep the earth could snap his body like a twig, but he managed to hold his camera steady. He quickly wiped the lens, trying to get just one shot. Just one shot.

And now even the shelter of the tree couldn't protect him from the hail. His body stung as the hard ice sliced into him, chipping away at his dignity. He cowered, his arms over his head, unable to stand up. The entire sky roared above him, a dark hole like the open jaws of a lion. Mick's hands stung so badly the camera tumbled from them onto the ground.

And then it was quiet.

The hail stopped as if a celestial bucket had suddenly emptied. All around him, it looked as if he stood in the purest of snow.

But he knew that in the quiet of the storm lurked danger. He ran out from underneath the tree and looked up. There it was, right above him. The rotation was massive, more than a mile across. Gasping, he realized his camera was still underneath the tree.

Mick fell, then scrambled to his feet, trying to get a foothold on the ice underneath him. Any second a tornado was going to wind itself through the atmosphere and down to earth. And whatever was in its path would cease to exist. He imagined he might have the chance to get the closest picture of a tornado in history.

But he'd never stood under one before. He'd never seen up into the clouds like he was doing now. Breathlessly, he forced himself to take it all in. A supercell over a mile wide hovered above him, regarding him not in the least.

Even more awesome than the sight above him was the sound. Within the cell's walls was the ability to demolish anything on earth, yet the clouds now only whispered their power. Ghostly lights streamed through the mass. Mick fell to his knees.

And then it passed. Warm rain washed over him, melting the ice that had just moments before covered the ground. To the south and west he saw the hook. The twirl-

ing rope dipped to the ground with perfect elegance, as if it were engaged in a dance, and tore through the distant wheat fields.

Mick gasped for air. He felt the atmosphere's pressure change. He glanced over at the tree under which he had stood. His camera had settled against a dead limb.

Closing his eyes, he realized it wasn't his passion for storms and storm photography that had led him to stare down a supercell.

It had nothing to do with the storm in the sky.

Mick poured a stream of sugar into the flimsy paper cup that held six ounces of wretchedly stale coffee. His last dating casualty, Gwyn, used to complain how much he smelled like stale coffee every time they'd see each other. Of course, Gwyn had complained about a lot of things, ending what was, by his standards, a perfectly good relationship.

Stirring his coffee, he thought momentarily about calling her up, seeing what she was doing, how things had gone during the six months they'd been apart. But he disregarded the thought as quickly as he discarded his little plastic stirrer. If Gwyn had had an ounce of optimism in her, it might've worked. But in Mick's line of work, he needed something positive to come home to, and Gwyn just happened to see the whole world from the perspective of a glass half empty.

"You spent another night here."

Reggie Moore, Mick's partner, stood next to him at the watercooler, filling a jug to the rim. Everything about Reggie was round: his face, his body, his nose, his eyes, his fingers. The only thing that broke up the roundness was a killer grin that stretched from one ear to the other in a nearly straight line.

“I know these things. I am a detective after all,” Reggie said and smirked. But then his eyes widened. “What happened to your face?”

“Nothing.”

“And your arms!” Reggie gasped. “Did you get into a fight or something over the weekend? A church brawl?”

“Cute. Yes, I got into it with a little old lady who took my seat in the front pew.”

“Looks to me like she wasn’t too little,” Reggie laughed.

“Actually, I was chasing a storm this weekend. Saw a good one, an F4, in east Texas. Got caught in some hail.”

Reggie followed Mick to their desks and sat across from him, sipping his water and opening a plastic bagful of baby carrots.

Mick grimaced. “How can you eat those things?”

“I’ve lost ten pounds in ten days.”

“I don’t know anyone who has lost more pounds in less days than you and still weighs what they did when they started.”

“I fluctuate. Middle-aged men tend to fluctuate. That’s what the book says.”

Mick shook his head and sipped his coffee. “So is this still part of the Slim-Fast plan?”

“That one worked for a while, but I guess you can’t really drink ten of their shakes a day and expect to lose weight. If I hadn’t stumbled upon the fudge flavor, I would’ve been okay, but that stuff was so good I just couldn’t stop.” He crunched on a carrot.

“So this is a new diet?”

“Guaranteed to work, too, or your money back.” Reggie held up a carrot. “Eat fifty baby carrots a day, five cups of pineapple every other day. Broccoli and one bagel every morning for breakfast with a glass of orange juice, and then a sensible dinner. The great thing about this is

you can have all the ice cream you want, but you have to eat it between eight and ten at night.” Reggie answered Mick’s skeptical expression with a shrug. “It has something to do with how all the foods interact with each other—speeds up your metabolism or something. Anyway, it seems to be working.”

“How do you stomach broccoli for breakfast?”

“You get used to it after a while. The bagel helps.”

“You know, you could just get out and jog a mile a day.”

“I’d rather eat broccoli for breakfast.” He closed his bag of carrots, but not before offering Mick one.

Mick waved it away. “I found another case last night. Out of Texas. Not far from where that sheriff was murdered. I’d say about two hundred miles.”

“Where do you sleep, anyway? In your chair? On Tom’s sofa? In the lounge?”

“Are you listening to me?”

“Just curious.”

“I sleep on your desk.”

Reggie chuckled.

“Anyway, this guy was a police officer. Leaves a party, gets killed in a parking garage. Pretty random, wouldn’t you say? Happened almost two years ago.”

Mick watched Reggie’s gleeful eyes focus and turn serious. “Okay, yeah, it’s random.”

“I’m just connecting the dots. One by one.” Mick leaned back in his chair, clasped his arms around the back of his head, and rocked back and forth, staring at the folder on his desk. “I think I may have enough to go talk to Tom again.”

Reggie leaned forward. “Do you think that’s a good idea?”

“Why wouldn’t it be?”

“What’d he say last time?”

Mick paused, rocking in silence.

“I’ll tell you what he said.” Reggie stared hard at Mick. “He said he wasn’t seeing a connection. He was worried you were putting evidence together to *prove* your theory, not collecting evidence to *form* a theory. He thought you might be acting on emotion rather than instinct. Oh yeah, and something about being obsessive. And that’s your watered-down version. Who knows what he really said.”

Mick blew a sigh through tense lips. “All right, fine. Tom’s not yet on board with my theory. But I know I have something here.” He grabbed a piece of paper out of the folder and held it up. “Look at this. Eight murders of men in law enforcement over the past two years. Five unsolved. And all within a radius of about 300 miles, in four states.”

Reggie took the paper from him and looked it over skeptically.

“They were all murdered in different ways, and I know that doesn’t fit into the profile of a serial killer necessarily, but the link here is that they’re all law enforcement. And they were all killed for no apparent reason. You see where I’m coming from?”

Reggie handed the paper back to Mick. “When are you going to talk to Tom?”

“Maybe today.”

Reggie’s fingernails found their way to his mouth. “I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“Reggie, we’ve worked together enough years for me to know that when you start slurping on your fingers, you’re hiding something. Now spit it out . . . and I’m not talking about that fingernail on your tongue.”

“Okay, fine. There’s talk.”

“Talk. About what?”

“You.” A worried expression flickered across Reggie’s

face. "I'm not the only one worried, okay? Tom's saying things like 'losing it.' Not in a bad way."

"Is there a good way?"

"He means it in a . . . sympathetic way."

"I don't need sympathy."

"We're all a little worried, all right? It's only been three weeks, and when you should be with your parents and *Jenny*, for crying out loud, you're here combing the computers, sleeping on desks, putting together theories that don't have a lot of . . . credibility."

"If he hadn't been my brother, none of you would be thinking twice."

"If he hadn't been your brother, you'd be thinking twice about your theory. I'm not saying you're wrong. I'm just saying you don't have enough proof, definitely not enough to give us jurisdiction." Reggie looked at Mick carefully.

"Or to start the hunt for a serial killer."

"I'm not a fool. I know what this means."

"I know," Reggie said softly.

A relieving silence settled between them, and Mick tried to let his anger go. He knew Reggie cared. His emotions were getting the best of him these days.

"Jenny needs you right now," Reggie said. "Your mom and dad need you. An entire police department is working this case. Your brother was one of their own. You don't think they're working this case like crazy?"

Mick lowered his gaze to the small pink piece of paper that held a handwritten message: *Please call Jenny. Calling to check on you. 11:46 a.m.* He slid the message underneath a folder, out of his sight. "They're looking at people who might've held a grudge against Aaron."

"And that's a good place to look. It makes sense." Reggie sipped his water. "What made you think the killer didn't know Aaron? I mean, in the beginning?"

“There were just a few things I could deduce.” Mick studied the brown liquid in his cup. “Aaron was asleep in his bed. Shot in the head.” Mick looked up. “If someone had had a grudge against him, they’d want him to know who was taking his life and why, if it is someone who knew Aaron. There would have been multiple shots fired, not one bullet in his head, execution-style. And you know as well as I do that this doesn’t have the signature of a mob killing, which would be execution-style: two or more deliberate shots into his head. And as far as I know Aaron was not involved in the arrest of any gangsters anyway. It’s not a robbery gone wrong. What idiot would break into a house with a police car sitting in the driveway? No, whoever it was staked out the house, maybe for as long as a month. He knew their schedules, knew Jenny would be leaving for work, knew Aaron would be asleep.” Mick took a breath. “So I just started doing research, and I came across these other cases.”

Reggie seemed to consider Mick’s speculation while staring at his own desk, and Mick knew something was registering. Reggie then said, “You’re doing okay, right? I mean, with Aaron’s death?”

Mick studied the paper. “I think with these new cases I found, Tom might be convinced. I’ve got more to my theory now—more links, more connections.”

Without looking up, Reggie said, “Just be careful.”

“That’s what you say when we go on a stakeout, not when I go in and talk to the boss.”

“Just take it easy with him.”

Mick’s eyes narrowed as he studied Reggie. There was something more Reggie knew.

“Look, Mick, don’t overstep your boundaries. Let Tom make a decision and be at peace with that.” Reggie picked up a pencil and nibbled at the eraser like it was a carrot.

“That’s what you’re always talking about, right? Peace. Peace with God, peace that He’s in control.” He pointed upward with the pencil.

Mick smiled a little. “You were listening all this time.”

“Well, you talk about it so much I feel like I’m in Sunday school.”

“If you’d get to Sunday school more often, I wouldn’t have to talk about it so much.”

“Try taking your own advice, eh? As you like to put it, ‘Give it to God.’”

Mick glanced up at his partner, then stared at the thick folder on his desk. A dose of his own medicine. Right now it tasted awfully bitter.