

Chapter One

SATURDAY, APRIL 13

CHUCK RITTENBURG, slump-shouldered, unshaven, stood on the concrete walkway in front of his dingy row-apartment in Norman, Oklahoma, sipping a Coors Light. It hadn't always been like this, a beer for breakfast. But now . . . what the hell.

Pulses of warm, humid wind from the Gulf of Mexico via the Piney Woods of east Texas whipped over him, bearing away the odors of cleaning solvent and insecticide that leaked from his cheap efficiency like aerosols of despair. Something else rode the wind, too; something at once ominous and exhilarating. He'd sensed it before, many times: the threat of monstrous thunderstorms, the kind that give birth to the Grim Reapers of the Great Plains—tornadoes.

The day that had heralded the unraveling of his life had begun like this . . . a decade ago. The image of what happened that day was seared into his memory like a psychic scar, one that would never heal, never stop hurting, never allow him to raise an emotional white flag and say I surrender, let this be the end of it. Instead, it clung to him like psychological leg irons, reminding him constantly of all he once had but had no more.

HE'D BEEN DRIVING the lead van of two belonging to Thunder Road Tours, his eminently successful tornado chasing operation. The vans had stopped on a shelf of high ground in Oklahoma's Glass Mountains, a rugged, semiarid landscape of mesas and buttes in the western part of the state. A line of thunderstorms, like slow-motion, alabaster napalm explosions, billowed along a dryline advancing out of the Texas and Oklahoma Panhandles.

A dozen chasers, tourists really, each having shelled out over two grand for the privilege of getting intimate with a tornado, piled out of the vans to watch the closest cell a few miles to their west. A visibly imposing, low-hanging bulwark of blackness, the wall cloud, rotated counterclockwise beneath the towering storm.

"Looks like it's about to drop a funnel," Chuck's partner, Mac Beauchamp yelled, his gaze on the right rear flank of the thunderstorm. A wind-borne rumble of thunder almost blotted out his words.

A bolt of lightning lanced out of the storm onto a nearby mesa, immolating a scrubby pine and simultaneously launching an artillery-like explosion of sound.

"Back in the vans," Chuck screamed. "Now!"

The chasers scrambled back into the vehicles. All except for two: a young man and his girlfriend. The man, from the West Coast and perhaps unfamiliar with the dangers of lightning, didn't heed Chuck's command. Instead, he pointed a digital camera at the cauldron of clouds and snapped a series of photographs. His lady friend stood beside him, her head dipped into the wind, her blond hair whipping around her face.

Chuck waited a moment, then stepped from the driver's seat of the van onto its running board and yelled at the two stragglers. But he was a heartbeat too slow.

The man turned and looked at Chuck. It was that image that Chuck knew he would carry with him the rest of his days: the man's electrically-charged hair standing on end, his eyes pleading, his mouth wide with unspoken thoughts—secrets only a man who knows he has a millisecond to live can harbor. The brilliant stroke hit him square, knocking him out of his shoes and throwing him yards away as if he were no more than a stuffed toy.

His girlfriend passed to the next realm with him. She didn't even have time to look up. She jerked spasmodically as the dart of lightning struck, then crumpled into a heap, dead before she hit the ground.

In tandem with the fatal harpoon of electricity, thunder erupted in an ear-splitting barrage and rolled across the barren landscape for several seconds, like tympani for a dirge.

Between the two bodies, a shallow, smoking crevasse lay in zig-zag repose across the gravelly surface, a final, eternal link between the young man and his lady friend.

CHUCK TOOK A SWIG of his Coors and stared across the parking lot in front of his apartment. The lot remained filled with cars—Saturday morning. Not too many people going to work, transporting their kids to school, or setting out for classes at the nearby University of Oklahoma.

He didn't realize at the time, on that day ten years ago, but the deadly lightning bolt claimed not only the lives of the young man and his lady, but his as well. Not in a physical sense, of course, but in all aspects of his life that mattered. Even though his company was covered by liability insurance and waiver forms, slick, predatory personal injury lawyers and the spiraling cost of mounting a defense forced Thunder Road Tours into bankruptcy. Chuck lost not just his company but, in quick succession, his savings, home, and wife.

Suzanne, his wife, had been unable to adapt to their new status as “have nots,” and after a brief affair with a former boyfriend, she and Chuck divorced.

His nineteen-year-old son, Ty, with whom he'd always had an arm's-length and contentious relationship—undoubtedly a contributing factor to the animus in his marriage—had stormed out of his life accusing Chuck of “blowing my college money chasing clouds.”

His daughter, Arlene, seventeen, had moved with her mother back to her mother's native Virginia. There was no doubt in Chuck's mind he would have been helpless attempting to raise a teenage daughter with his life in shambles. He'd kept in close touch with her, however, talking on the phone with her at least once a week during her high school and college years. Until she was 21, he'd dutifully delivered what little child support he could muster by working as head custodian at a local middle school and at various odd jobs, all of them menial. Even now he and Arlene remained in touch, though less frequently, as she busied her life carving out a career in public relations and attempting to find “the right guy.”

Chuck turned as the man who lived in the apartment next to him stuck his head out the door, stooped to retrieve the morning newspaper, and said, “*Buenos días, amigo.*”

Chuck nodded. He didn't know the guy's name, nor those of his wife and three kids. Probably illegals. He seated himself on the steps leading to his apartment and placed the beer beside him. Empty paper cups and styrofoam hamburger containers tumbled across the parking lot, driven by the fitful wind. A small whirl of dust chased a mangy-looking dog toward the main street.

A black SUV, a Lincoln Navigator, turned into the lot and eased along the row of apartments where Chuck lived. Looking for a specific unit, he guessed. The Lincoln coasted to a stop behind the vehicles jammed into the narrow parking slots directly in front of where Chuck sat. He watched as the front driver-side window of the SUV opened. A well-groomed man with a broad face and full black beard, wearing a white Greek fisherman's cap, leaned his head out.

“Looking for apartment 3A,” he said.

“Guess you found it,” Chuck answered. He remained seated.

“Charles Rittenburg?” the man asked.

Shit, not another fucking lawyer. “Who wants to know?”

The man scratched his nose, perhaps buying time to formulate a response, then laughed softly. “I come in peace, Mr. Rittenburg. With an offer of employment.”

“I've got a job.”

The man looked down at something on the passenger seat, then moved his gaze back to Chuck. "Pushing a broom at Kiowa Trails Middle School?" he said.

Chuck didn't answer.

"Oh. Almost forgot. You've got a summer gig ushering at RedHawks Field. Big-time stuff. The team must draw what, four, five thousand per game? You gotta be raking in the dough from that."

Chuck fingered his beer. "Who are you?"

"Jerry Metcalf," the man said. "How about I buy you breakfast?"

Chuck held up the Coors Light. "Got it," he said.

The man shut off the Navigator's engine. "Not exactly the Breakfast of Champions."

"Then I guess it fits."

"I passed a Waffle House when I got off the Interstate. How about it?"

The dog shooed away by the dust devil earlier returned and crept toward Chuck, stalking the beer can but probably hoping there were some accompaniments nearby—pretzels or chips or popcorn.

Chuck stood and, carrying the Coors, turned to go into his apartment. "Not interested," he said.

The Lincoln's door opened, then slammed shut.

"Hear me out," Metcalf said. "I'm from Global-American Cinema. I'd like to hire you as a consultant for a film."

Chuck pivoted to face Metcalf, a large man, overweight, with an odd sense of style: In addition to the fisherman's cap, he wore a white dress shirt with epaulets, cargo shorts and Timberland hiking boots.

"Don't know anything about movies," Chuck said.

Metcalf stood on the short walkway leading to Chuck's apartment. "Yes," he countered, "but you know about tornadoes."

"Not anymore."

"Bullshit, if you'll pardon my French, sir. You were the best chaser in the business. Charles Rittenburg: The Great White Hunter of Tornadoes. That's what you were called, wasn't it? You were a guest on 'The Today Show,' 'Good Morning America,' '60 Minutes,' and The Weather Channel. You were featured in *USA Today* and *People* magazine. Don't blow smoke up my ass. Chasing storms isn't a skill you lose overnight or even in the depths of a beer can. Hell, I know you've kept up with stuff because I saw you as a talking head on CNN and Fox after the Joplin disaster, in the wake of the Dixie tornado swarm in 2011, and then Moore in 2013. Jesus, that was close to home wasn't it?" He paused, seemingly thoughtfully, then shook his head. "Ya know, Charlie, I don't understand why anybody would want to live in a place like this."

"A place like this," Chuck responded, a hard frost on his words, "is where a lot of people *choose* to live. It's good country with good people. As far as keeping my hand in the business, I did that as a hobby until my laptop went tits-up last year. I haven't been able to afford a new one. Look, I can't help you, Mr. Metcalf. And something else, just for the record. I like to kick off my day with a Coors, you know, smooth the rough edges. It's my first and last of the day. I'm not a boozier. By the way, it's Chuck, not Charlie."

"Sorry," Metcalf said. "Look, I know some heavy-duty shit came down on you. Life's unfair and all that crap. But I'm offering you a chance to even the score."

Chuck opened the door to his apartment. "Life only works out like that in the movies," he said.

"Exactly." Metcalf paused. "Did I mention I represent a film company?" He smiled broadly. Chuck could have sworn the man's teeth sparkled in the low-angled morning sunlight.

The mangy dog, some sort of terrier-Lab mix, settled onto its stomach and watched the exchange between the two men.

Chuck glanced at the mutt, then at Metcalf. "Like I said, I can't help you."

“Help yourself then.”

“I’ve never been good at that.”

“You’ve given up?”

Chuck shook his head. “I’m just tired. Tired of fighting lawyers. Tired of arguing with bill collectors. Tired of explaining to others how my life got so fucked up.” He stepped into his unit and slammed the door.

Metcalf’s voice carried into the apartment. “I’m going to tape an envelope to your door, Chuck. The envelope contains a proposal from Global-American Cinema. Take a look at it, then decide how tired you are.”

Metcalf paused as if waiting for a response. But Chuck said nothing. Metcalf continued. “I’m staying at the Colcord Hotel in Oklahoma City. I’ve attached my business card to the proposal and put my room number on it. Give me a call after you’ve read what we’re offering. I think you’ll change your mind.”

Chuck still didn’t respond.

“Okay. I know you can hear me,” Metcalf said. “I’m leaving now. But I’ll be in the area for a couple of days.”

Chuck stood near the door, gripping his beer can, waiting for Metcalf to depart.

“Two weeks’ work, Chuck. And an opportunity to make more money than you probably ever netted in a year from Thunder Road Tours.” Metcalf fell silent briefly, then added, “A chance at redemption, too, my friend, if you’re interested.”

Metcalf’s footfalls retreated from the door. Chuck stepped to the front window of his unit, parted the stained venetian blinds, and watched as Metcalf climbed into his Navigator and drove off.

Chuck drained the rest of his Coors from the can, tossed the empty container into the trash, and settled into a tattered, faded armchair, Goodwill-issue, in front of his TV set. He clicked it on with his remote and watched a meteorologist with a manufactured grim-faced expression explain there was a threat of severe thunderstorms and tornadoes later in the day.

Chuck switched the channel to ESPN to check out how the Royals had done in their first home stand of the season. He’d become a Royals fan when he lived in Kansas City from the mid-’80s to the mid-’90s working at the National Severe Storms Forecast Center, now called the Storm Prediction Center.

He’d moved to the Oklahoma City area in 1996 and started Thunder Road Tours. Success came rapidly and he spun off a subsidiary, Cat Five Tours, to pursue hurricanes. But his life and business and everything else had imploded with the lightning strike in the Glass Mountains.

Some things, apparently, were never meant to be.

He stood, retrieved another beer from the refrigerator, and plopped back into the ratty chair. Normally, as he’d told Metcalf, a single beer was his limit, but today . . . too much melancholia. He changed channels again and found an old Tarzan movie. He watched the film disinterestedly and sipped his beer until he dozed off, his chin resting on his chest, like a geezer in a retirement home.

He awoke with a start, realizing it was almost noon. The Coors can, half empty, sat on the floor beside him. The Tarzan film had morphed into an old Western, something starring Randolph Scott.

Chuck rose unsteadily, stretched, and poured the remaining beer into a soiled sink cluttered with unwashed dishes and a deceased cockroach. He exhumed his wallet from beneath a pile of dirty clothes in his bedroom. He opened it. Eight bucks. At least enough for lunch at McDonald’s.

He opened the front door. A gust of wind darted into his apartment like a refugee seeking asylum. A piece of Scotch tape, nothing fastened to it, clung forlornly to the exterior of the door. The proposal. He’d forgotten about it. Well, it didn’t matter now. The wind had taken it. The story of his life. Some things never change. *Que sera, sera.*

He shrugged, shut the door and headed toward McDonalds, dodging a dozen kids on trikes and

skateboards monopolizing the sidewalk. He headed west, noting with a meteorologist's practiced eye towering cumulus clouds in the middle distance, billowing skyward.

Something brushed against his leg. He looked down. The mutt that had been hanging around the apartments earlier trotted beside him, a white business envelope clamped in its mouth.

The dog stopped, dropped the envelope at Chuck's feet, and waited expectantly, its head tilted to one side, probably hoping for a game of toss and fetch.

"Not today, doggy," Chuck said. "Beat it."

He continued walking.

The dog did, too, envelope again in its slobbery mouth.

"Hit the road, Jack. If you're counting on lunch, I can barely afford to feed myself."

Once more, the mutt dropped the envelope. This time, Chuck saw a name embossed on its upper-left hand corner: Global-American Cinema. He picked it up. The dog yapped and ran off a short distance, waiting for Chuck to lob the thing.

Instead, Chuck opened it and extracted three sheets of paper pitted with teeth marks, the proposal that Metcalf had taped to his door. He looked down at the dog, who stared back with big brown eyes almost hidden behind a tangle of matted fur.

"Whaddaya think, pooch, worth looking at?"

The dog cocked its head in a quizzical pose.

"Well, *que sera, sera*," Chuck said, and began to read.

When he came to the paragraph spelling out the amount of money being offered, he jerked his head up and glanced around, certain he was being set up as the butt of a TV gag show.