



SOUTHERN STORM

By Terri Blackstock

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Chapter One

The Georgia Weather Bureau's prophecy of fifty-mile-per-hour winds had been fulfilled and surpassed, much to Matthew Cade's chagrin. As chief of the small Cape Refuge police force, Cade could do little about the ravages of the storm as it beat across the island toward Savannah. But the safety of the residents was always his concern.

Though it was two in the afternoon, the sky looked as dark as nightfall.

Lightning bolted overhead in a panoramic display of white-hot fingers, grounding on the island and splaying across the angry Atlantic. The thunder cracked in rapid crashes, and rain slatted down at an angle that made umbrellas useless and flooded some of the streets.

Cade strained to see through the windshield of his squad car. The rain pounding on his roof and his wipers slashing across his windshield made it difficult for him to hear the radio crackling on his dashboard. He turned it up.

Fender benders had been reported at three locations on Cape Refuge, and a power line was down near the condos lining the north beach.

If everyone would just stay inside, maybe they could avoid any more problems. But that never happened. On days like this, residents insisted on driving through the storm at the same speeds they used on dry, sunny days. Tornado watchers stood out on their front porches, watching the sky for funnel clouds. And the most reckless among the residents would brave the lightning and drag their surfboards out to the waves, hoping to catch a thrill in the tempest.

Cade and his police force were left to clean up the messes and head off new disasters.

The dispatcher's voice crackled across the radio, and he picked up the mike. "Go ahead, Sal."

“Chief, there’s another power line down on a road over at the dock. Somebody’s going to get hurt unless you detour that traffic.”

Cade sighed. “All right, I’m on my way.”

He set the mike back in its holder and turned on his blue lights. Making a U-turn, he headed back around the southern tip of the island, then northbound toward the dock. He couldn’t have residents driving over live power lines. He hoped the power company would hurry up and get its trucks out here.

The wipers swiped across his windshield, but the rain pounded too hard to give him much visibility. He strained to see.

Most cars pulled to the side of the road to let him pass. He turned on his siren to alert the others, but three or four kept their course in the lane in front of him.

“Get out of the way!” he yelled, pulling so close to the car in front of him that he knew one touch of its brakes would put him in the front seat with the driver.

Fortunately, the man pulled over. The other cars ahead of him still hadn’t heard or seen him, so he moved up behind the next one, his siren still blaring. A block ahead, Cade saw a man standing on the opposite side of the road, seemingly oblivious to the rain pounding down on him. Passing traffic sprayed walls of water up over him, but he just stood there, watching the traffic pass.

The car in front of Cade still didn’t move, so he punched his horn. The southbound lane with traffic coming toward him had cleared as drivers pulled off to the shoulder of Ocean Boulevard.

He pulled around the car in front of him into the southbound lane and gently accelerated.

The man on the side of the road still stood there, drenched and undaunted. Cade knew that, as he passed, his tires in the water would spray him. Why didn’t the man move?

He kept his siren blaring and pushed his horn again as he drove northbound in the southbound lane. He pulled even with the car that had refused to move out of the way and looked across at the driver. The driver looked back, panic evident on his face— a teenager, probably a new driver with no idea how to react. The kid slammed on his brakes.

Cade stepped on his accelerator and turned his eyes ahead again—just in time to see the pedestrian step out in front of him.

Cade yelled and slammed on his brakes. His car slid straight toward the man. . . .

Thunder cracked at the same instant as the impact. The man flew up over the hood and smashed into Cade’s windshield, shattering it . . . then, as if he’d bounced, he flew out in front of the car and landed in a heap in the middle of the road. Cade couldn’t move for a few seconds, then

fumbled for the door handle and managed to get out. The rain flooded over him, and the wind almost knocked him back into the car. He rushed toward the man.

Oh, dear God, what have I done?

He heard yelling and doors slamming as other drivers got out and splashed toward him.

Reaching the man first, Cade knelt in three inches of water.

The victim's eyes fluttered open, and his lips moved without sound. Cade grabbed the radio on his shoulder. "Sal, I need an ambulance just half a mile north of the Pier!" He yelled the words to make sure he was heard. "I need it right now! I just ran over a pedestrian!"

"Right away, Chief."

Cade touched the man's head, careful not to move it. Warm blood soaked his hand, but the pelting rain quickly washed it away.

"Can you hear me, buddy?"

The man tried to speak, but Cade couldn't hear him. Thunder crashed again.

He touched the man's throat; his pulse was weak, erratic.

"Hang on! You're gonna be all right. Just hang on." He had to stop the bleeding, so he pressed against the wound at the back of the man's head. But there was so much blood . . . too much . . . The man tried to rise up, and this time Cade heard his raspy voice. "You have to . . . please . . . out of control . . ."

"Don't move!" What did one do for an open head wound?

He heard sirens blaring, voices calling. Someone opened an umbrella over them in a feeble attempt to shelter the victim from the storm, but the wind turned it inside out. Someone else threw a raincoat over the man. . . .

Lightning flashed, thunder bolted. . . .

"Cade," someone said, "he just ran right out in front of you!"

The blood was coming so fast. The man's pulse weakened.

Where was that ambulance?

"I saw him. It was like he was in a trance or something."

"Is he dead, Cade?"

The siren grew closer, and he prayed that people would stay off the road and leave the ambulance a path. It stopped short, and he heard feet running toward him. Paramedics knelt beside the body, and Cade moved back. “Head injury,” he yelled over the storm. “He bounced off my windshield.”

As the medics worked, Cade backed farther away, his mind racing with the facts.

I’ve hit a man . . . an innocent man. . . .

He started to whisper rapid-fire prayers for a miracle. The man couldn’t die. That was all there was to it. Police cars were meant to keep people from danger, not kill them.

“Call for a Medi-Vac, Cade!” one of the medics cried. “And clear us a path. He’s running out of time.”

“The helicopter can’t fly in this! You’ll have to drive him.”

He helped the paramedics get the man into the ambulance and then directed traffic as the ambulance headed out.

He shook his head, trying to pull himself together. Somebody had to be in charge here. But what did the chief of police do when he was the one who had almost killed a man?

He turned and saw some of his uniformed officers coming toward him.

“J.J., detour traffic,” he yelled. “Keep it off of this block until we finish here. Jim, get over to the downed power lines out in front of the dock and divert traffic there. Alex, you take pictures and work the accident. . . .”

“But Cade, are you sure you don’t want to work it?”

“I’ve got to get to the hospital and see if he’s all right.” His voice broke. “Just write the report and treat me like any other driver who hit a pedestrian. Call my cell phone if you have questions. It should get a signal by the time I reach Savannah.” He walked back to his car and got in. Through the shattered windshield, he saw Alex looking back at him as if he wasn’t sure what to do. Then he turned away and began questioning witnesses.

Cade closed his eyes and lowered his head to the steering wheel. That man could die.

Why had he stepped out into traffic? He must have seen Cade coming. The squad car lights had been flashing and his siren was on. Even people in cars with radios blaring and air conditioners humming had heard him and gotten out of the way. How could this man have stepped into the path of a speeding police car?

He felt as if a fist had punched a hole in his lungs. He found it hard to breathe, and his head had begun to throb.

He reached for the keys hanging in the ignition, then realized that he couldn't move this car until they'd finished working the scene. Besides, he couldn't drive with a busted windshield.

He got out of the car and started walking through the rain.

"Where are you going, Chief?" Alex asked him.

"To find a ride back to the station so I can get my truck."

"I'll take you, Cade!" Melba Jefferson, a little round woman who attended his church and made it her business to comfort those in need, stood nearby, fighting her umbrella with a distraught look on her face.

"Okay, Melba," he said. "Let's go."

She led him to her car parked on the side of the road. He got into it, and she slid her round body into the driver's side. "Honey, are you all right?"

He shook his head. "It's not about me, Melba. There's a man dying."

She reached into the backseat and got a box of tissue.

"Sweetie, your hand's all bloody."

Cade looked at it. The man's blood had stained it, though the rain had begun to wash it away. He pulled out several tissues and wiped the rest of it off.

Melba pulled out onto the street, and Alex directed her so that she could turn around and head back to the station. When they were on their way, she stayed quiet, which Cade appreciated.

Clearly, Melba knew when words were appropriate and when they weren't.

She drove him up to the station, pulled into the parking lot.

"I'll get some people praying, Cade," she said.

He nodded. "You do that. Thanks for the ride, Melba."

Cade jogged across the gravel parking lot to his truck, jumped inside, and was pulling out onto the street before Melba could get her car turned around.

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