

FORCE OF NATURE

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Gable McCoy slowed the Jeep and craned forward to look out the windshield. Branches large and small littered the roadway. No other cars were about. Above her, the sky was a color she'd never seen before, a sickly greenish yellow. Directly ahead, a low wall of clouds churned and boiled with furious intent. She tried to shake off a feeling of unease that threatened to overwhelm her.

The emergency radio at her side was crowded with voices, overlapping each other and fighting to be heard above the relentless static. Many were harried and anxious, reflecting the unusual strain on the emergency dispatchers, firefighters, and police. None of them had ever experienced a storm like this.

It was a freak weather phenomenon, a convergence of hot and cold fronts coinciding with a change in the jet stream. An unusually muggy April morning had spawned a violent afternoon. Tornadoes were touching down all over Michigan. Two had already been spotted in her county and three more in the surrounding areas.

Gable had come through torrential rain and a brief burst of walnut-sized hail that left two small cracks in her windshield. But it had stopped all at once, and that was somehow more unsettling, as if the storm was gathering its strength to launch an all-out assault. She took another look at the dark, foreboding sky and increased her speed slightly—there were several more houses she wanted to check before nightfall.

She was still in her one-year probation period as a volunteer with the Plainfield Township Fire Department, one of only three women on the squad. The demanding physical training had not been a problem for her, though at forty-six she was older than many of the other volunteers.

She had been athletic all her life, and the taut musculature on her tall, lean frame reflected many hours spent kayaking and mountain biking.

So far, all the callouts she'd attended had been for relatively minor things—fender-bender auto accidents and small brush fires started by discarded cigarettes or careless campers. Today was different. This time she was responding to a full-out mobilization of SAR—the county's search and rescue squad, which involved fire departments, law enforcement, 911, and other local emergency personnel.

Right after she'd finished her initial training, SAR had paired her up with a veteran firefighter, Tim Scott, and assigned them a five-square-mile area west of the village of Pine River, three miles south of where Gable lived. The entire region was mostly state forest, but there were a number of cottages and year-round homes scattered here and there, tucked back off the road and hidden by trees.

Tim had taken her up and down the mostly dirt roads in his pickup until she was familiar with the area. She was now especially grateful he'd been so thorough. When she'd gotten the callout two hours earlier, the dispatcher told her Tim was out of town. No replacement was available, so she was on her own.

She felt the full weight of that responsibility as a ferocious wind gust tried to wrestle the steering wheel from her hands. Butterflies crowded her stomach as she struggled to keep the Jeep on the road. *Lives might depend on you today.* She had to bury her fear and try to remain focused.

Most of the places she'd checked so far were summer cottages, still locked up and vacant. Power was out in a few of the year-round homes, and wind had caused minor damage to roofs, but no one had been injured.

Gable slowed to turn onto Cedar Trail and rolled down the window. Something was very wrong. Suddenly there was no wind at all, where a moment ago it was buffeting the Jeep. She braked to a stop and got out. Stared up at the sky. Sniffed the air. It was eerily quiet, a kind of quiet she didn't think she'd ever heard in the forest. Where were the birds?

The hair on the back of her neck stood up and her pulse began beating double time. The air seemed charged by electricity. The ozone crackled around her. It just felt...*wrong*. Like there was too much air pressure.

That was when she heard it. Just like it was always described. A distant, muffled roaring, like an oncoming train. Dense forest

surrounded her. The trees blocked her view except where the road cut through. She couldn't see the twister.

The unearthly roar got steadily louder. A series of sharp reports, like rifle shots, sounded in the near distance. *Those are trees! Shit!*

To her left was a lone, boarded-up convenience store on the corner where she'd stopped. A simple wood-framed building, locked up tight. It didn't look like potential shelter.

Gable ran to the opposite corner of the intersection, where the edge of the road sloped away into a drainage ditch. Beneath the roadway was a concrete drainpipe that looked about three feet across. A tight squeeze, but her only chance.

In a whirling hail of sticks and stones and leaves, she scrambled down the bank, her hands shielding her face. The wind tried to blow her off her feet, and the noise of the tornado was deafening, like a jet aircraft parked directly overhead. Squinting between her fingers, she saw the twister cut out of the woods and onto the highway a quarter of a mile away. It looked like a mammoth V-shaped plume of black smoke.

Frozen with horror, she stared at the debris rotating within. Huge limbs whirled around the funnel with astounding velocity, crashing into each other in the air. The tornado was fifty yards wide, and headed straight for her.

Adrenaline jolted her from her inertia and she dove into the pipe, ignoring the stench of rotted matter and the cold slimy water that soaked her to the skin. It was upon her in an instant, trying to suck her from the pipe, tugging at her with fierce determination. She fought back, bracing herself against the sides, but they were slippery with algae. *Please God please God please God.*

It was hard to breathe, caught in this incredible vacuum. The whole drainpipe seemed to be vibrating. She began to lose ground, slipping by inches, her fingers clawing at the slick surface. Her feet protruded from the pipe, then her calves. Sticks, dirt, and stones pelted her. *Can't hang on much longer!* Her arms began to tremble, braced against the pipe. *Please God, don't let me die like this!*

It lasted no more than thirty or forty seconds, but it seemed an eternity. While her life didn't exactly pass before her eyes, she had time enough to think about family and friends, and to feel a pang of regret that she hadn't seized upon every experience she'd wanted to try. Then, all at once, the world was calm again.

Gable wriggled out of the drainpipe, gasping for air. Her heart pounded in her chest like a runaway jackhammer, and her body shook all over. The adrenaline rush was so intense she thought she might faint.

It registered that one of her tennis shoes was gone, ripped from her foot and nowhere in sight. All the stuff that had been flying around had pelted her legs pretty good, and she'd have some impressive bruises to show for it. But she was otherwise uninjured. She could hardly believe she was alive. *Thank you, Lord.*

The convenience store on the opposite corner was now only concrete foundation and scattered wood, plaster, bricks, and assorted wreckage. The store's large metal Dumpster was lodged in a tree, twenty feet off the ground. Pieces of lumber and store shelving and dozens of cans of food littered the road. *Any one of those could have killed me.* Right where she'd stood only minutes ago, the tornado had driven a huge two-by-four several feet into the ground. A few feet away, an enormous white pine had been pulled up by its roots, leaving a gaping hole seven feet wide.

Stunned, she climbed up onto the roadway and surveyed the area around her. Her Jeep was still right side up, but the front windshield was shattered and the vehicle was sitting half on and half off the road, a dozen yards from where she'd parked it.

The rain started anew as she reached for her radio and headed to the Jeep. "Dispatch from McCoy. Reporting tornado touchdown, Cedar Trail at Wolf Run Road. Debris in the area. No injuries. Over."

Though she tried to keep her voice even, she could not completely disguise how much the twister had scared her. She had grown up in Tennessee, and though she retained the soft-spoken slower cadence of a Southerner, she had mostly lost her accent. It surfaced in the occasional word, and was more apparent when she was stressed. Tornado came out *tornayduh*.

Gable had thrown a pair of knee-high Wellies in the back of the Jeep in case she hit some flooding. After the dispatcher responded, she pulled the black rubber boots on and got behind the wheel. As she reached up to adjust the rearview mirror, she caught a glimpse of herself. *Holy shit.* Her short brunette hair was standing up at odd angles, as if she'd stuck her finger in an electrical socket. A pungent slime from the drainpipe covered her face and neck, turning her normally bronzed

complexion an eerie greenish gray, and her eyes were so dilated that the black pupils had nearly overtaken the hazel irises.

Her soaked clothing was filthy too—her T-shirt and jeans were the color of mud, and they clung to her uncomfortably. She looked like an extra in a grade B horror flick, a member of the undead, rising from the grave. Somewhat apropos, she thought.

The pavement had disappeared where the tornado traversed it, and branches and downed trees lay scattered all about the roadway. She put the Jeep into four-wheel-drive and maneuvered over and around what she could, but she had to get out several times to haul some obstruction out of her way so she could proceed.

The road curved up and over a hill. At the top, Gable braked to a stop and sat gawking at the devastation below her. *Dear God!*

The twister had carved out a path of destruction a quarter mile wide through the forest. Trees were snapped like matchsticks, jagged edges uniformly cut five feet off the ground. There were two homes within the area, and from a distance, both looked like they'd been hit by bomb blasts.

She headed toward the nearest one and keyed her radio. "Dispatch from McCoy. Two homes leveled on Cedar Trail. Stand by."

The two-track driveway to the first of the flattened homes was overgrown with high weeds and blocked by a padlocked gate. The place was obviously another seasonal cottage still closed from winter. *Thank God.* She reported it to dispatch as she sped toward the other house.

This driveway was open. And despite the rain, Gable could tell from the tire impressions in the dirt two-track that it had been recently used. *Shit.* She gripped the steering wheel harder and headed up the drive toward the house, which was set well off the road in a small clearing cut into the forest.

The first thing she came to was a red pickup truck lying on its side, partially blocking the driveway. She was able to squeeze the Jeep around it, but a few yards farther on, the home's five-hundred-gallon propane tank prevented further progress.

The smell hit her at once. *Gas! Holy shit!*

Her heart pounding, she cut the engine and eased out of the Jeep. The tank was intact but on its side, gas hissing from a broken pipe that stuck out of the top. When she turned the valve beneath it, the hissing stopped. She grabbed her helmet and a thick pair of leather work gloves

from the Jeep and went the rest of the way to the house on foot.

A portion of one wall still stood—the area around the fieldstone fireplace. A massive section of the roof was propped against it, forming a nine-foot-high lean-to. An intact bookcase rested beneath it, empty of all its books. Everything else around her was debris—insulation, lumber, electrical wiring, shingles, bits of furniture—all precariously jumbled together in towering heaps. It was impossible to negotiate through it. Jagged pieces of glass and metal were everywhere, the footing uncertain. Here and there lay various clues about the homeowner. Sheet music. A computer keyboard.

“Hello? Anybody here?” Gable listened for a response, but could hear nothing but the howl of the wind and the drumming of the rain. Picking her way around the perimeter, she tried again on the other side of the house. “Hello?”

She thought she might have heard something human. Or maybe it was the wind playing with her imagination.

“Hello!” she yelled as loud as she could.

This time it was unmistakable. Through the pounding rain, she heard a muffled female voice. “Down here! In the basement!”

“I hear you!” Gable shouted. “I’m with search and rescue. Keep talking. How many of you are there? Are you hurt?”

“No, I’m not hurt. And it’s just me, but I’m trapped. Get me out of here!” The voice had a panicky sound.

“Hang on. I’m coming. How do I get to you?”

“There’s a storm door right outside the house in back.”

Gable stared around. She was already behind the house. Finding the door beneath the mountain of rubble in front of her would be a daunting task. “I’m calling for more help. Sit tight and try to relax.”

“Hurry! Please hurry!”

Gable reached for her radio and turned it up. The bedlam of voices was even worse than before. While waiting for a break in the radio traffic, she pulled her work gloves from her back pocket and started picking through the debris, searching for the door. “How are you doing?” she shouted. “Can you move around?”

“I’m in the basement shower! Part of the ceiling came down. I can move around but I can’t get out of here.”

As soon as there was a lull in the cacophony on the radio, Gable reported in and requested assistance, but was told that all available

resources were tied up on other calls at the moment.

Knowing she was on her own, she resumed her search with a heightened sense of urgency. The debris of the house didn't appear to be shifting, so the trapped woman was probably not in any immediate danger. But it was going to be dark very soon.

"I'm Gable McCoy, a volunteer firefighter," she hollered. "What's your name?"

"Erin. Erin Richards," came the muted reply. "Have you seen my cat? He's charcoal with a white mustache."

The devastation was so complete, Gable had trouble imagining anything as small and defenseless as a cat living through it. "No, I'm sorry, Erin," she shouted. "I don't see a cat."

"Maybe he'll come out if you call his name," Erin begged. "It's Earl Grey. Maybe he's hurt or scared, and just hiding."

Gable wanted to get the woman out of there. It went against her better judgment to spend time worrying over a cat, but something about Erin's plea touched her deeply. So she hollered Earl's name and kept an eye out for him as she dug through the wreckage, searching for the entrance to the basement. She came across a snowshoe. A green and white Michigan State University baseball cap. A diving mask and snorkel. Lots of mementos of Erin Richards's life, but no door.

"Erin, we need to concentrate on getting you out, then we can both look for your cat, okay?"

"All right. I understand."

"It will help me if you can direct me to exactly where the door is," Gable shouted. "It's covered up."

"It's outside the bathroom window."

Gable frowned. "That doesn't help. Erin, I'm afraid your house is pretty much gone. It took a direct hit. There are no windows and no bathroom left."

There was a lengthy silence.

"Erin? You still with me?"

"The house is gone? Everything's gone?"

"Yes, I'm sorry. Try not to think about that now. Help me find you."

"Isn't there anything at all I can save?"

Gable looked around. "Maybe. It's hard to tell—everything is all piled up. Erin, you can't worry about that now. You gotta concentrate

on helping me find you.”

After another brief silence Erin hollered back. “The door is a couple of feet outside the house. About a third of the way down from the corner nearest the driveway.”

“That’s great. Hang in there.”

The area Erin described was covered by a large pile of wreckage, topped off by the stove. Gable cleared what she could, then put her back to the appliance to shove it out of the way.

“Is more help coming?” Erin shouted.

“As soon as they can.” Gable gave the stove another push, putting her long legs into it. A jagged edge tore her jeans, cutting into the flesh of her thigh. It wasn’t deep. She ignored it.

The stove toppled off to one side. She dug through the rubble beneath it, spotted the edge of the big metal storm door, and cleared a space around it. The door was dented in and wouldn’t budge, despite her best efforts. She had to run back to the Jeep for her tire iron to get the job done.

Several steps led downward, out of the rain. Following them, Gable found herself in a concrete basement about fifteen feet wide and thirty feet long. One wall was lined with shelves containing home-canned goods—peaches and pears and tomatoes in jars, undisturbed. Cardboard boxes and large plastic storage containers were stacked high along the opposite wall, each one carefully labeled—“Old dishes,” “Winter clothes,” “Christmas ornaments,” and the like.

Two-thirds of the room was untouched by the tornado. Farther in, much of the ceiling had given way, toppling onto a desk and file cabinet. It caved in right over the only door. It had to be the bathroom. She knew she couldn’t move the enormous beam that blocked her way, and even if she could, doing so might bring the rest of the house down on top of both of them. It would take more than human hands to get the woman out of there.

Picking her way through the rubble, she got as close to the door as possible. Creaks and groans from over her head were frequent, as though the remaining wreckage would collapse upon her at any moment. It was a scary, precarious situation. Her mouth was dry.

“Can you hear me, Erin?”

“Thank God.” A muffled response filtered from the other side of the wall. “I’m here. In here.”

“How you doing?” Gable glanced upward. A bit of sky was visible through a three-foot-wide hole above her, and she felt a mist of rain against her face.

“All right, I guess. I’ll be fine as soon as I’m out of here.”

“The door is blocked on this side,” Gable said. “It’ll take heavy equipment to move everything out of the way safely, so you’ll have to be patient. It may be a while before anybody can get to you.”

There was another long silence.

“Erin? Keep talking to me. How you holding up?”

“How much longer do you think it’ll be?”

“I’ll see what I can find out.”

Gable stepped back into the untouched half of the basement. She had turned her radio down, but she’d heard no letup in the turmoil of voices and static. Unclipping it from her belt, she increased the volume to listen to what was happening.

Another tornado had touched down. Three homes were destroyed and six people were injured. Resources were stretched thin. When there was a break in the voices, she radioed in with an update.

The dispatcher told her it would likely be morning before the required manpower and equipment could be spared to her location. But she wasn’t needed elsewhere at the moment, so she was free to stay and do what she could for Erin, at least for the time being.

Amid more groans and creaks from overhead, she made her way back to the bathroom door and called, “Erin? You’re gonna have to be patient. We probably won’t be able to get to you until morning.”

“Morning? You have to get me out of here! I can’t wait until morning!” There was a manic desperation to Erin’s voice.

“Look, I know you’re scared. But you should try to stay calm.”

“You don’t understand! I have claustrophobia! Really *bad* claustrophobia, know what I mean? I *have* to get out of here!”

Oh great. What do I do now? Gable thought for a moment. Oddly enough, having Erin’s discomfort to focus on dispelled some of her own unease.

“And there’s another problem,” Erin said, in a much more subdued voice.

A chill ran over Gable and her arms puckered with goose bumps. Something about Erin’s tone told her this would not be good.

“I’m terrified of the dark. It’s worse even than my claustrophobia.”

Oh crap. “Well, that’s just a bit more of a challenge, that’s all.” Gable tried to keep her voice even and reassuring. She angled her head to see through the hole above her. Rain pelted her in the face. It was already early twilight. It would be dark in less than half an hour. “So... you still have some light to see by over there? Can you see the sky?”

“There’s a hole in the ceiling near me. It’s been letting light in,” Erin said.

“How big a hole?”

“Couple of feet across, I guess.”

Gable tried to picture where they were in the house in relation to the wreckage above. “Got anything you can stick up through the hole? A towel bar, a piece of wood or something?”

She could hear sounds coming from the other side of the wall as Erin shifted things around. Before she could open her mouth to warn Erin, there was a loud crash as a piece of ceiling gave way above the bathroom.

Hearing a sharp cry, Gable put her ear to the wall. “Erin? You okay?”

“Damn! I pulled on the wrong piece of wood and the ceiling caved in. Well, part of it did, anyway. I have even less room to move around now, and I cut my arm.”

“How bad is it? Do you have first aid supplies in there?”

“It’s a pretty deep cut,” Erin said. “It’s not very big, but it’s bleeding quite a bit. I have a towel wrapped around it. I can’t get to my medicine cabinet.”

“Is the hole in the ceiling above you big enough that I could maybe get some supplies through it to you?”

“Yes, I think so.”

“I’m going upstairs. See if you can find something to stick up through the hole to help me find you. But be careful!”

“I’ve got a piece of wood that will reach,” Erin said.

“Good.” Gable started toward the storm door, but Erin’s voice stopped her.

“Gable?”

“Yeah, Erin?”

“Would you have another look around for Earl Grey while you’re up there? Please?”

“Sure.”

On her way back through the basement, Gable glanced again at the boxes. It was getting decidedly cooler out, and she felt a bit chilled in her soaked clothing. She imagined Erin might be feeling the same.

“I see you have a box marked *winter clothes* out here,” she called. “Are you warm enough, or do you want me to try to get something to you?”

“Yes! Some sweats would be great. Thanks.”

Emerging through the storm door with the clothes, Gable discovered the wind had picked up considerably, but the rain had diminished to a steady patter. The sky was getting darker by the second.

She opened the back of the Jeep and reached for the daypack SAR had issued her. She emptied it out and sorted through the contents, selecting a flashlight and extra batteries, three candles and matches, a bottle of water and two power bars. These went back into the pack along with the sweats and several items from her first aid kit. Antibiotic ointment. Gauze. Tape. An Ace bandage. The flashlight she kept in the glove compartment of the Jeep went into her back pocket. After tying one end of a twenty-five-foot length of thin nylon rope to the pack, she returned with it to the house.

“Erin!” Her voice was getting hoarse from yelling. “Show me where you are!”

Near the middle of the wreckage, a long strip of wood waved back and forth. The hole it came out of was a bit larger than a basketball hoop. Gable couldn’t get nearer than ten or fifteen feet. Too much debris was in the way, and the flooring around the hole was too uncertain. She didn’t want to bring more of it down on Erin’s head.

Standing as close as she dared, she instructed, “Okay. Back away from the hole.”

“Go ahead!”

It took two tries to get the pack to Erin. After another quick look around for the cat, Gable headed back to the basement. The light was fading fast, and she had to use her flashlight to find the bathroom door.

“Erin? How you doing?”

“Better. Warmer. I got a candle going and took care of my arm. It’s stopped bleeding.”

“Good. Hey, you mind if I borrow some sweats? I got soaked through.”

“Of course. Help yourself.”

Gable found a lone large sweatshirt amid the preponderance of mediums, and managed to get on a pair of Erin's sweatpants. They were tight and several inches too short, but she felt worlds better. As she changed, she listened to the radio traffic. It sounded as though things were finally beginning to quiet down. She returned to the door.

"I'm back."

"Gable, I'll never be able to thank you enough for everything you're doing," Erin said. "Especially for staying with me."

"I'm just sorry you're stuck there till morning." As soon as she'd spoken, Gable immediately regretted it. *Why remind her she's trapped, idiot? You need to be taking her mind off it.*

She found a spot near the door where she could sit comfortably out of the rain. Though she'd rather have been in the undamaged portion of the basement, the rain was really coming down again, and if she got farther away she and Erin would have to shout so loud to hear each other they'd be hoarse in no time. Even sitting just a few feet from the door, Gable had to raise her voice to be heard over the frequent downbursts.

"I'd rather be anywhere else, that's for sure," Erin said. "I want to be out looking for Earl Grey. I keep hoping he's just scared and holed up somewhere."

"Well, if I'm not called away, I'll go up at first light and have another look-see," Gable promised.

"Do you think you *might* be called away?"

"Ya never know. It's been a really wild, busy day. But I checked in not long ago and it sounds like things are quieting down. There haven't been any tornados in a while. Not since it's cooled off."

"I hope you *can* stay," Erin said. "But I certainly will understand if you have to go help someone else who needs you worse than I do. You know, I was amazed at how fast you got here, by the way. I couldn't believe it when I heard your voice. The tornado had just hit the house. Did you see it?"

"I sure did. It was coming right at me. I had to dive into a storm pipe."

"Were you scared?"

"Terrified. Absolutely terrified. You?"

"I didn't have time to be," Erin answered. "I turned on the TV and saw we were under a tornado warning, but I couldn't find Earl Grey. I

was down here looking for him when the house blew apart. It happened so fast I hardly had a chance to register what was happening. Not until it was over did it really hit me. I still don't think it's really sunk in fully yet. Probably won't until I get out of here and see what's left of my house."

"This half of the basement wasn't badly hit. Everything in your bins down here is okay. And you might be able to salvage some things from upstairs. I saw a bookcase and some clothing."

There was a loud groan as debris above them shifted. Gable ducked just as a portion of the ceiling near her fell a foot and then inexplicably stopped. She held her breath, waiting for it to fall farther. Her heartbeat pounded in her ears. *You shouldn't be sitting here. It's too dangerous.* But she felt compelled to stay within earshot of Erin. "How you doing over there?"

"Could be better." Erin's voice seemed to get a bit higher whenever the ceiling shifted.

"Let's try to take your mind off where you are," Gable suggested. "First, get as comfortable as you can. How much room you got? Can you lie down?"

"More or less."

"Got a towel or something you can use as a pillow?"

"Yeah."

"Good. Now I want you to close your eyes and try to relax. Concentrate on your breathing. Nice deep breaths. In and out. Pretend you're someplace nice and peaceful."

"Okay."

"Good. Now describe where you are to me. Really *be* there. What do you see? Smell? Hear?" Gable cleared a path in the debris around her so she could stretch out her legs.

"Hmm, let's see...I'm lying on a beach. And that isn't rain I'm hearing, it's...the sound of the surf. The air smells like salt."

"Very good. Now I want you to try to relax. Why don't you tell me about yourself?"

"What do you want to know?"

"Start anywhere. Whatever you want to share."