



SYDNEY CROFT

RIDING THE STORM

'Croft redefines sizzle and spark with weather-driven passion.'

Romantic Times

R  **UGE**
SUSPENSE



Contents

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Also by Sydney Croft

Title Page

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter Twenty-Three

Chapter Twenty-Four
Chapter Twenty-Five
Chapter Twenty-Six
Chapter Twenty-Seven
Chapter Twenty-Eight

About Rouge
Epilogue
Acknowledgements
Copyright

About the Book

Haley Holmes has been dispatched to the Louisiana bayous to investigate the phenomenon known as Remy Begnaud - a man with a gift he never wanted: the ability to control a storm's fury. But even a woman trained in bizarre weather phenomena has no defense against the electrifying power of the ex-Navy SEAL...a power his enemies would kill to control.

With her agency monitoring their every move, Haley's job is to seduce Remy, gain his trust - and help him harness his extraordinary gift. But who will protect her from this voracious lover who's introducing her to a new world of erotic thrills - a man who grows increasingly insatiable with each new weather event?

The debut novel from Sydney Croft - a blisteringly hot paranormal series that has been described as *The X-Men meets erotica*...Titles in this series are: *Riding the Storm*, *Unleashing the Storm*, *Seduced by the Storm*, *Taming the Fire*, *Tempting the Fire* and *Taken by Fire*.

About the Author

SYDNEY CROFT is the pseudonym for two authors who each write under their own names. This is their first novel together. Visit their website at www.sydnecroft.com.

Other books by Sydney Croft:

Riding the Storm
Unleashing the Storm
Seduced by the Storm
Taming the Fire
Tempting the Fire
Taken by Fire

RIDING THE STORM

SYDNEY CROFT



Sydney Croft is the alter-ego of Larissa Ione and Stephanie Tyler, who came together to blend their very different writing interests into adventurous tales of erotic paranormal fiction. Though they love to write together as Sydney Croft, they also write individually.

As Sydney Croft, they are the authors of *Riding the Storm*, *Unleashing the Storm*, *Seduced by the Storm*, *Taming the Fire*, *Tempting the Fire* and *Taken by Fire*.

CHAPTER *One*

T-REMY, WHERE YOU *at?* Sa va mal.

“So what else is new, Dad?” Remy muttered, squinting through the darkness and rain the windshield wipers couldn’t keep up with as he struggled to stay on the muddy road and redial his cell phone at the same time.

For his old man to say things were bad meant one of two things: Either everything was business as usual and he was being dramatic, or the world was coming to an end. There was only black or white with his father, which is why Remy found himself comfortably in the gray most of the time.

And really, things were always going badly for Remy Senior, and calling T-Remy, as he was known affectionately around these parts, was like calling in his own personal cavalry. Navy style. Except that Remy had resigned his commission last month and had taken his final leave from his SEAL team seven days earlier, something he was not looking forward to telling his father.

Following in the old man’s footsteps, Remy Senior had told him proudly eight years earlier, then signed the papers allowing his son to enlist on his seventeenth birthday, right after he graduated high school.

The Navy had been T-Remy’s way out of the bayou, and joining the SEAL teams had been one of the hardest things he’d ever done. Leaving them had been as well, but he’d always known, on every level, that he wasn’t meant to be a team player.

So really, there was no excuse on God's green bayou not to visit and check on his father. Family was family, and all that crap, even though this was the last thing he wanted to do.

Still no answer. Not even a damned machine on the other end of either the house or cell line a full three days and seven hours since Remy senior's last call. He threw the phone down and pushed his truck forward on the muddy road leading to his old man's house. Hurricane season had hit the bayou hard this year, and he couldn't be sure if that's why his father had called.

Last night, Remy had been drawing again in his sleep—the same picture he'd been drawing since he was six years old, the same picture he'd been drawing every single night for the past six months, the fist against a background of clouds, clutching a handful of lightning bolts in a firm grasp—and he knew the hurricane that stirred from nowhere late last night was going to follow him inland from the coast. He'd always been a lure for storms. A human weather vane. Rumor held he'd been born during a hurricane, born and then left on the church's doorstep while the night winds howled around him.

There was no denying that there was something about him and weather. He could predict it, ride it out, always knew when Mother Nature was going to piss on his parade. His former teammates called him Storm, as more of a joke than anything and mainly when he wasn't around to hear it, because Remy never did take well to jokes.

Lately, Mother Nature had been working her magic over-time on him, necessitating the early retirement, and today was no exception. Especially when the bridge started falling away behind his truck. He tried not to look back in fascination as the heavy logs that had been there for as long as he could remember broke like matchsticks under the wailing wind.

Yeah, this couldn't be good. He didn't feel like taking a swim in the murky water below. Or losing his truck. Never mind his aching ribs, freshly injured from an attempted mugging when he'd left his apartment in Norfolk for the bayou.

He urged the accelerator slow and steady, not wanting to encourage the bridge to fall directly underneath him. Five more endless feet and he'd be crossed over into no-man's-land and he could worry about getting back out later.

Part of him wanted to stop the truck right then and there, stand in the middle of nature's fury and let her try to kick his ass. But his feeling of responsibility nagged at him harder.

No time for play, T-Remy.

But that didn't mean Mother Nature couldn't play with him in the worst possible way, and his cock hardened in painful reminder. He'd tried to ignore the urges that started last night while he slept, the ones that would normally drive him from his bed, hot, restless and prowling for anything to scratch his itch.

That wasn't going to happen tonight, and he forced himself to tamp it down, turn it off and, within fifteen minutes, his truck turned up the dirt path and pulled in front of the house he'd grown up in.

The place was still a shithole.

Three years away and a storm that split the heavens wide open over the bayou hadn't softened the memories, and he was glad he'd made the drive at night. Broad daylight wasn't going to be any kinder and he hadn't been expecting much anyway.

His truck moved easily over the pitted driveway and stopped just short of the ancient garage that had long since lost its door. He strapped his knife onto his left bicep with a black band of Velcro, because the local gators tended to get riled up during a storm, especially when they were displaced from their bayou home. More than a few times

during his youth he'd been surprised by one or two lost ones that were just as pissed to see him as he was them. He'd learned how to alligator wrestle the hard way, a necessary survival skill around here.

He got out, grabbed his bag and went toward the back door before he lost nerve and turned tail. And the more he thought about it, the angrier he got, until it balled in his gut and hung there as he reached the door.

He'd lost the keys to the house, and tried to lose his way back too, years earlier. Of course, his father never locked the door. Hell, he couldn't pay a thief to come through this place.

The first thing he noticed when he flipped on the light was that it worked. Admittedly, he'd flipped it on out of habit, but he'd figured it was a sure bet the electric, and other bills, hadn't been paid in months. The only thing he knew for sure was that his father had called him from the house and now there was no sign of the guy to be found.

The next thing he noticed was that the kitchen was clean. Scrubbed clean. No dishes anywhere but in the cabinets, and there was even a cheerful yellow dish towel hanging on the stove handle.

The third thing he noticed was the sound of water running. His thoughts immediately went along the lines of a broken pipe or a leak in the roof. He dropped the bag and moved toward the bathroom.

A simultaneous burst of lightning and crack of thunder made the power flicker and then putter out as he reached the bathroom doorway. The storm illuminated the small bathroom briefly, just long enough for him to get a very good look at the beautiful naked woman in the shower.

Beautiful and naked, but not friendly. Screaming like a swamp cat caught in a coon trap, she hurled a bottle of shampoo at him. He ducked a split second before it could hit him, and it bounced off the wall behind his head.

Welcome home, Remy. This was going to be worse than he thought.

HALEY MARIE HOLMES LOVED SURPRISES. She did not, however, love strange men surprising her in the shower. In the dark. That she'd been expecting the strange man at some point didn't matter. He could have knocked.

"Get out of my bathroom!" she shouted as she pulled the cheap plastic shower curtain around her. The *clear* cheap plastic shower curtain.

"*Your* bathroom? This is my goddamned house, so I think you're a little mixed up, lady."

The voice was a low, controlled drawl, the sentiment behind the words anything but, and the man she hoped was Little Remy stood outlined in the light from the storm, dripping wet in the middle of the small bathroom, wearing a T-shirt, cargo pants and flip-flops, like he was coming in from a day at the beach instead of the outer bands of a hurricane. Except she'd never seen any man wear a lethal-looking knife to the beach.

She shivered, raised her gaze to the strong masculine features of his face, then upward to his hair. She'd always been a sucker for dark hair, and he wore his short but longer than the ate-up military guys she'd known, and he'd slicked it back from his face, his fingers leaving wild grooves.

This was definitely Remy, that uniformed SEAL in the photo from the dossier she'd been given by her agency. The knowledge should have put her at ease. Instead, his alert stance, the way he seemed primed for battle despite the casual clothes he wore, set her even more on edge.

"Can you give me a minute here?" she snapped, then forced herself to not look away from his eyes, which narrowed into slits as he stared.

"I don't give intruders anything. And where the hell is my father?"

She shut off the water, glad she'd already finished rinsing, and took a deep, calming breath of steamy air. "I'm not an intruder, and if you'll get out of here I'll explain everything."

Everything but the truth. He wouldn't learn why she was really there. Or how, after her contact at the National Weather Service had forwarded Remy Senior's letter to her, she'd bribed him into calling Remy to beg him to come home, something that turned her stomach because she knew firsthand how much power parents had to hurt their children.

The old man had all the bad qualities of a used car salesman and only half the charm, and she hoped his son was different. personality-wise, though, T-Remy's charm wasn't quite coming through the shower curtain.

In the bright glimmer of nearly continuous lightning, he studied her, the rigid lines of his brows framing an expression as hard as the man himself seemed to be. "I don't mind the view from where I'm standing. So why don't you start explaining now—because I'm not all that patient."

God, she hated military men. She'd hated them even when *she* had been in the military. No way would she roll over in submission like some trembling green recruit just because a big, tough ex-SEAL suffering from an excess of testosterone barked an order at her.

"I'll explain when I'm dressed," she said in a defiant tone that was probably lost to the storm.

She gathered the shower curtain more securely around her—for all the good it did—and stretched toward the towel bar, but Remy was faster. He snared the towel and dangled it just out of her reach. In the flickering shadows that played on his face, she could make out a smirk—a smirk that shouldn't be sexy, but for some reason was. The storm must be getting to her.

Or maybe the stories about Remy were true.

Discounting that last thought because it was ridiculous, she made a grab for the towel, but he yanked it away. "Tell me who you are."

She hesitated, not because her cover identity was a secret, exactly, but because his military-clipped order chafed at several sore spots. Which was why she and the Air Force had been a disastrous combination.

"My name is Haley. Haley Holmes. And," she said, wringing water out of her long hair, "I'm not saying another word until I'm dry."

She shoved the shower curtain aside because it was useless anyway, the sound of the rusted metal rings scraping the equally rusted rod barely audible over the sudden roar of wind through the trees. Water trickled down her face, dripping off her chin and onto her breasts, and Remy's eyes, glittering in the flashes of light, blatantly took it all in.

The appreciation in his gaze made her swallow. Made her hot and tingly and feeling the need to shower again, but with cold water.

She stepped out of the tub, and this time, when she reached for the towel, he held it out to her. Her fingers closed on the fabric; his fingers closed around her wrist. The man moved like a striking snake, and her heart stopped as though she'd been bitten.

She lifted her chin, met his intense gaze. He looked down at her from his considerable height of at least six-foot-three and drew her a step closer to him, so close she could feel heat rolling off his large body. Her dad had always told her how her impulsive nature and utter lack of fear would get her into trouble someday, even as he encouraged those qualities.

Now, as her stomach flip-flopped, she made a conscious effort not to tremble. Stepping out of a shower naked in front of a complete stranger wasn't the smartest thing she'd ever done. Then again, after several weeks of

studying the man right down to the name of his childhood dog, she probably knew him better than she knew the people she'd worked with for months.

"You've got five minutes to dry off and get dressed, and then you'll talk," he said, his voice rougher than it had been a minute ago.

The lights flickered, matching the quick-pounding of her pulse. Then they came on fully, leaving her standing bareass naked mere inches away from one of the best-looking men she'd seen in her life, with only a corner of the towel and a thin, swirling veil of steam between them.

She tried to wrench free of his grip, but he held her for a moment longer, as though to prove he could, his gaze traveling slowly from her face, down to her breasts, to her belly, her pelvis. Her skin tightened and prickled, her nipples puckered and heat spread in a languid wave from her cheeks to the juncture of her thighs.

His half-lidded blue eyes smoldered, but a vein throbbed at his temple, just below his hairline, and she sensed more than saw the battle that raged within him, even if she didn't completely understand it. And she felt certain he had no idea his thumb was stroking the sensitive underside of her wrist any more than he knew his fingers were digging painfully into that same wrist.

Thunder sounded in the distance, and he flinched, snapped his gaze back up to hers. "Like I said, five minutes. And you can get dressed now." With that, he released her wrist, pivoted with military crispness and stalked out of the bathroom.

Cursing, she slammed the door shut.

What. An. Ass.

It didn't help that her fingers shook as she held the towel to her chest as though Remy were still in the room, watching her with those intense, intelligent eyes that flashed even without the lightning.

She waited until her heartbeat slowed, until the storm outside had ebbed—the outer bands of a hurricane moved out as suddenly as they came in—and then she dried off and, with the exception of her underwear, dressed in the clothing she'd worn into the bathroom before her shower. She hadn't expected Remy to show up tonight, after all.

She'd been here in his house for forty-eight hours now, and she'd figured she'd have at least twelve more to review the files her agency had given her one last time, the ones containing his military records and an impossibly detailed account of Remy's entire life—including obscure information obtained by the agency psychics.

Since accepting the assignment five weeks ago, she'd unearthed personal statistics, like how he ate anything with shrimp, had an allergy to chocolate and that he shared her May third birthday, though he was three years younger. The most fascinating details, though, the weather details, came from the recordings she'd covertly obtained while talking to Remy's father.

In any case, she'd expected more time to prepare tonight, and then, tomorrow, to have met the man who supposedly drew weather phenomena like trailer parks drew tornadoes. Which was a myth, but a popular joke in her profession.

She'd rented the place for a month, had a cover story worked out, and if all went as planned, T-Remy Begnaud would never know he was the subject of a scientific study sanctioned by the government but funded almost entirely through private sources.

Unless the allegations against the man proved to be true, and then all bets were off. Her job would veer from research to recruitment, because the enemy could be knocking on his doorstep within days.

Except Itor Corp didn't knock. They forced their way inside, took what they wanted and destroyed what remained.

Of course, she fully expected her investigation to quickly reveal that the stories were nothing more than fantastical rumors, or that Mr. Begnaud—junior *or* senior—was a charlatan. Either way, she'd have enjoyed the opportunity to observe a late-season hurricane before moving on to her next assignment as a parameteorologist, something far more interesting—the possible existence of a weather machine.

She'd balked when orders to investigate the seemingly nutty ramblings of a television weatherman had come down the pipe, but really, the military had been trying to control the weather for decades. Cloud seeding, Project Cirrus ... so if the thing existed and could cause violent weather, ACRO needed to get their hands on it before the enemy did.

First, though, she had to make it through the coming days with a man who, people claimed, could summon lightning at will. Who had emerged unscathed from the center of an F5 tornado. Who had supposedly screwed a woman insane during a storm that had made him insatiable.

Naturally, none of those claims could be substantiated, but as she reached for the doorknob and the power went out again, she swore she'd get to the bottom of the tales. If anyone knew about extraordinary weather phenomena, it was Haley. And after taking one look at her subject, she was more than willing to go wherever she needed to go to get the information she required.

Even if that meant testing out Remy's power in bed.

CHAPTER *Two*

REMY'S RIBS BEGAN to ache in tandem with his head, and his balls, as another storm cell moved in and the evening hurtled rapidly downhill. He'd always appreciated the unexpected—didn't like it, but appreciated it the way he did a bag of gris-gris or the spell-casting voodoo queens he'd grown up around; yet this was beyond what he'd been prepared to handle.

Of course, he *could* handle Haley all right, palm the curve of her hips and push her thighs apart with one of his while the wind shook the world around them, breathe in the scent of soap and woman while he found her core with his fingers, his tongue.

She wasn't afraid of you. His cock twitched, and he looked toward the bathroom. She didn't look like she'd break easily.

Get a fucking grip. He wheeled around and pressed his forehead against the window that faced the backyard, closed his eyes and let the cool feel of the glass calm him a bit.

He should never have touched her. Just seeing her had been enough to push him close to the edge, but once his hand closed around her wrist and the quick tick of her pulse slammed into his palm, he knew it was going to be next to impossible to spend any length of time near her without having her. One of them was going to have to go.

One more second in the small confines of that bathroom and he would've taken her right there against the tile wall. He could barely control himself with a woman during normal storm conditions, and the way this one was intensifying, Haley Holmes had better run for her damned life.

As the storm's fervor rose, so did his, and it bound to him like a fever he couldn't shake. He wouldn't be able to until he got laid or jerked off a few times to ease the pressure, and even then, it wouldn't erase the longing, the need, until the storm died down and released him from her grip.

Unfortunately, his arousal would increase the duration of the storm, feeding off the other until both just burned out in a frenzy of hot, destructive need.

His fingers gripped the windowsill as his balls tightened—every nerve was on edge and screaming for some kind of sweet relief he hadn't completely found since all this began with the giant testosterone surge when he'd turned fourteen.

When he found himself near a woman during a time like this he'd force himself to hold back, afraid of hurting her, which wasn't satisfying to either party. The one time he did let loose, way back when, before he'd learned to get out of those situations fast when a storm was approaching and restraint was limited, things hadn't turned out well. He'd regained control before he hurt her, but shit, she'd been terrified. And she'd told all her friends.

His sexual tie to the storms didn't get easier as he got older, but with effort and planning and praying, he was able to keep himself in check. Still, it effectively killed any hope for a love life. He was so tired of scaring people, tired of being a freak and tired of being alone, even though that was the easiest way for him to live.

At twenty-five, he was pretty sure things couldn't get much worse, but over the past six months his needs had

been increasing to such a degree that he could barely contain himself during a storm period. And he knew that the current need he was experiencing had never been this bad or lasted this long. Something different had happened in just the past forty-eight hours to shift the already skewed balance of power.

He ripped the knife off his arm, stuffed it into his bag and turned, seconds before Haley emerged from the bathroom, and watched her saunter into the living room wearing shorts and a T-shirt, her long brown hair, still damp, pulled back into a low ponytail. When the lights blew again after he left Haley in the bathroom, he'd only bothered to light one of the hurricane oil lamps by the kitchen, even though she'd scattered at least ten of them throughout the house. The less he saw of her, the better, even though the image of her wet, naked curves was burned into his brain.

The wind howled with a force that shook the walls as he watched Haley's long-legged strides. She didn't seem to notice the sudden surge, and he didn't bother telling her that three of his paychecks had gone to reinforcing the structure to withstand the brunt of most hurricane-force winds that threatened Louisiana and her precious bayous.

Mother Nature could be a real bitch when she was trying to make a point.

"So, you're Little Remy," she said over her shoulder, as she entered the kitchen.

"T-Remy," he said, teeth on edge.

She shrugged. "Same difference." She yanked open the door to the ancient fridge and bent at the waist, giving him a view of her ass hanging out of Daisy Dukes that should be illegal. She plucked out a Miller Lite, which was not his father's first choice of beer, and turned back to him.

She'd been here long enough to buy groceries.

"Actually, it's not the same difference," he said. "But since you didn't grow up around here, you wouldn't know

any better.”

“So how do I know you are who you say you are? I mean, I don’t see any pictures.”

“I’m half owner of this shithole—*tonnere m’écrasé si j’sus pas après dire la vérité*,” he muttered.

“Translation, please.”

Shit, he’d lapsed back into Cajun French without thinking. Never a good sign. “It means, may lightning strike me dead if I’m lying,” he said with a smile, because she had no idea. She did, however, give him a strange look, probably wondering what kind of idiot dared Mother Nature during a storm. If she only knew. “And I’m starting to lose my patience with you.”

“And I wasn’t expecting you,” she shot back.

“But my father did mention me to you. You know my name.”

“He said he had a son in the Navy, but didn’t say you’d be coming home tonight,” she said, and as much as he wanted to believe that was the truth, he couldn’t.

Remy Senior had always struggled to keep his son’s freak weather ways out of the public eye, but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t try to make money off of it any way he could. Especially as the old man got older, drank more heavily and continued losing his hard-earned money, and T-Remy’s too, on the ridiculous inventions Remy Senior thought would make him a millionaire.

Someone had loved his father once. Her death had taken away a piece of Remy Senior’s heart that no one else had been able to fill. And Remy himself got that, understood what it was like to always feel that something was missing.

He gazed at Haley, with her smooth skin and tight, toned body as his own began to ache. “My father called me,” he said. “He sounded upset. In trouble. Asked me to come home.”

“Well, as you can see, he’s not here.”

“And what—you’re his newest girlfriend or something?”

Her slightly upturned nose wrinkled in disgust she didn't bother to hide. "Hardly. I'm renting the house from him for the next month, and the last time I saw him, he was perfectly fine."

Fuck. Inviting some strange woman here was something his father would do, but why the hell would anyone come to Bayou Blonde if they didn't have to? "Are you on vacation?"

She snorted. "A vacation would mean Hawaii, not some godforsaken swamp. I'm here for work."

"What kind of work?"

He glanced around the room and saw the piles of paperwork and books on the floor next to the weathered desk in the corner, which was laden with electronic equipment, hard plastic cases and a laptop computer, which must be on some kind of serious battery backup. He swore, wondering how the hell he'd missed all that until now.

"I'm a meteorologist. I'm studying the ecological after-effects of hurricanes."

"Why here?"

"Because this area has been relatively untouched by human hands since it was devastated by Hurricane Tessa twenty-five years ago." She twisted the cap off her beer and tossed it into the garbage can at the base of the counter. "Tessa was an anomaly, not only as a rare May storm, but in her behavior and unique pattern of destruction. By studying how an area recovers organically from an irregularity, we can learn how nature inherently protects itself from storms."

Yeah, Tessa was an anomaly all right, and so was he. What kind of mother abandons her kid outside during the worst hurricane the bayous had ever seen? He could never understand how he'd survived for three hours outside in the storm, the only cover being a thin blanket and the awning above the church steps, but his father always insisted that was how it happened.

He wasn't sure if that was bullshit, but he knew Haley's pseudo-environmental study definitely was. Because this area had never really recovered, and most would say, neither had he.

His skin tingled, and half a second later there was another lightning strike, too damned close for comfort. He checked Haley for a reaction, but she only pursed her lips around the beer bottle, circling the opening. He watched the way her throat moved as she took a few long sips, and realized he'd taken two steps toward her.

Her mouth would feel so good around him, cool lips, warm tongue inviting him to slide farther down her throat.

...

Back it up, Remy. And he slowly did move away from her even though every fiber throbbed for Haley Holmes and that hot place nestled between those finely muscled, tanned thighs. If she'd just touch him, put a hand between his legs and stroke him through the fabric of his cargos, he'd be okay. He'd put his hands behind his back and let her take him, maybe instruct her to handcuff him so he couldn't hurt her, and then everything would be all right.

Except you hate being tied down. ...

"Are you okay?" she asked, and he hated the concern in her voice, hated the fact that he'd let the low rumble of a groan slip from the back of his throat as the house swayed and the wind slammed the already battered exterior, like it wanted in.

He knew neither the wind nor he would stop until they got what they wanted, and he grabbed his bag in one last-ditch effort to save what he could. "Since you've already paid rent for the place, I'll be the one to vacate."

She shook her head and set the bottle down next to her equipment. "You can't go out there now. Conditions are going downhill—" The laptop beeped, and she tapped the keys. Frowning, she checked an image on a small-screened portable radar. "I don't understand this," she muttered.

“This cell isn’t part of a hurricane band ... it makes no sense. It’s moving over us from the wrong direction. It’s almost as though it formed *on top* of us.”

There’s a reason for that.

“I’ll be fine, and so will you, as long as you stay inside the house,” he said, his voice rough with a mix of desire and fear and *Bebe, you have no idea what you’re in for. ...*

She didn’t look up. “Stay inside. It’s too dangerous out there—we’ll figure it all out later.”

He knew he should leave, knew what the hot rush of blood throbbing between his legs meant, but he couldn’t take another step any more than he could look away as she nibbled on her bottom lip. Reaching up, he touched his own lip subconsciously, wondering how she’d taste against his mouth.

A printer on the scarred old dining room table spat out a page, which she tore loose and scanned in the greenish glow from her equipment.

“Hurricane Center update.” Dropping the page to the floor, she turned back to the radar image. “This is way more fascinating. Amazing ...”

She was talking more to herself now than to him, lost in the weather. She glanced at her watch and then shook her wrist and frowned down at it, and he looked at the ancient clock that had sat on the mantel for as long as he could remember. The arms had frozen at nine-forty P.M.—the exact time he’d walked into the damned house.

A ragged breath shuddered through his chest. His pull was getting stronger and threatening the entire bayou, and Haley would figure some of it out soon. Sweat broke out on his forehead as nerves and muscles stretched. He had to get out of there, because when lightning struck again, it was going to be too late for him to stop himself.

Another flash, too close, and by the time the boom hit seconds later, his body had been taken over by its ruling member.

And while Haley was bent over, staring at the screen, her concentration on the impending storm outside rather than him, his brain fogged. Led by the heat of her body, he dropped his bag and found himself pressed to her, his thighs to her buttocks, his arousal straining to get out and into her.

She gasped when he wrapped his hands around her waist and pulled her upright into him. He gathered her shirt in his fist and pushed it up, needing to palm her full breasts as much as he needed air. Somewhere in the back of his brain, he heard thunder, and then the sound of electrical equipment popping.

Next, his hands were moving faster than his brain, to unbutton her shorts and shimmy them down. A violent tug and then they cleared her hips, and he barely heard her say, "*Remy,*" before the windows rattled as the storm surged forward against the house.

"Remy, please ..."

With a grunt that came out like a howl, he jerked away from her, left her standing there with her shorts halfway down and, with no explanation, headed outside into the storm that was getting worse instead of better, a fact that no amount of Haley's research and equipment could ever explain, to get it all over with. Force Mother Nature to push him to his break point and, finally, let himself break.

It had to hurt less than this did.

HALEY SAGGED AGAINST the desk, heart pounding, knees trembling inside the shorts that were tangled around them. What had just happened? One minute she'd been trying to figure out where the storm cell raging above them had come from, and the next she was at the mercy of Remy's strong hands.

Not that she'd minded. Not when she felt the hard bulge of his arousal pushing against her, his hands under her shirt, massaging her breasts, pinching her nipples. His voice, gruff and low, had murmured phrases into her ear—

some she understood, though they didn't make sense. *Touch the lightning?* Others she didn't understand, though she knew they had been uttered in smooth, sexy French.

Then his warm breath had fanned the back of her neck as he'd whispered, "Need you now," and shoved down her shorts. She hadn't had time to think, to protest or beg for the penetration that might follow, because he'd roared like a wounded bear and run out into the storm.

The storm. Oh, God, he was in danger. Quickly, she pulled up the shorts, not bothering to button them, and darted to the front door. When she turned the knob, the door blew open and slammed painfully into her hip, nearly knocking her off her feet. Rain stung her cheeks as she stepped outside. She squinted into the darkness, battling the wind with every step. Her bare feet sank into the muddy ground, and she tried to keep her thoughts on finding Remy, not on what might be squishing under her heels.

"Remy!" she screamed, but the wind swallowed her shout.

And then, outlined by a bolt of lightning that made the hairs on the back of her neck stand up, she saw him. There, a few feet away, one arm and his forehead braced against a swaying tree. Somehow, he'd lost his shirt, and in the backdrop of brilliant flashes and dappled shadows, the deep valleys and rounded peaks of his incredible muscles drew her gaze, even as thunder cracked, made her eardrums rattle.

Remy didn't so much as flinch.

"Remy!"

She staggered forward. What was he doing? Was he injured? The raindrops felt like tiny needles as she struggled for every step, desperate to reach him, wondering how she'd get him medical attention. Her van, parked in the back, would be useless if the roads had flooded.

“Remy!”

He didn't move. *No, please, no.* Her toe snagged a fallen branch, and she stumbled, careened off two trees with bruising force before she lost her footing and slipped downhill several feet. Ignoring the cutting whip of vegetation against her bare legs, she used vines and roots as handholds as she clambered back up the incline.

At the top, she found herself a few feet from Remy. As the lightning flashed and thunder threatened to rupture her eardrums, she noted his expression, one etched in misery. Pain.

She dragged her gaze down, to where his right arm worked furiously—and then she sucked in a breath of rain-saturated air with such force she nearly choked. His expression, dear Lord, his expression—not one of pain. One of pleasure.

His long fingers pumped up and down around the jutting length of his cock. Rain dripped into her eyes, and she blinked. Maybe the water was playing tricks on her vision. But no. Remy was braced against the tree, which sheltered him only slightly from the raging wind and rain, seemingly unconcerned that standing beneath a tree was the worst place in the world—short of a golf course or lake—to be during a thunderstorm.

She knew it was stupid to remain out there. She knew what she risked. She knew she shouldn't be watching.

But neither could she look away.

Each violent stroke of his fist caused her pulse to strum deep in her belly. Every time his palm cupped the head of his penis, heat worked its way lower in her body. And when he threw his head back and shouted at the storm, she felt her vaginal muscles clench and weep.

She'd known since the moment she saw him that she'd be willing to spread her legs for him. Sexual inhibitions had never been an issue for her, and even if she didn't need to bed him for scientific reasons, she'd do it for her own. She

liked sex, and he looked like he knew his way around a woman's body.

It would be so easy to walk up and take him in her hand, her mouth. But doing so wasn't an option. Something was happening here, something intimate between Remy and Mother Nature, and she couldn't intrude. She could only watch from the darkness, a voyeur captivated by a powerful image of sensual, savage carnality.

The world spun as her own body reacted, hungry for something it hadn't tasted in a long, long time. Desire whirled through her as ruthlessly as the wind whirled around her, and unbidden, her hand slipped inside her unbuttoned shorts. Her fingertips slid down her flat belly, over the tattoo that seemed to have grown as sensitive as the day she'd gotten it. By the time she realized what she was doing, it was too late.

Her fingers found her slick folds, and fierce, biting pleasure radiated upward to where rain pelted her breasts like a lover's kisses. Her hips rocked against her hand, and she nearly cried out as she squeezed the pearl of nerves between her thumb and forefinger, the pressure agonizing yet soothing. And still, it wasn't enough, not when the fingers she wanted touching her were Remy's.

Lightning and thunder exploded simultaneously. A tree went down behind the house. Whether or not Remy had seen it, she didn't know. His only reaction was to bare his teeth and pump his hand even faster. Faster, and the storm raged harder. Each pull from root to crown ended with light streaking across the sky. Each thrust of his hips came with a shift in the wind direction.

Rain pounded her, ran in rivulets down her arm and along her finger that stroked her pussy, the cool water easing the steamy heat there between her legs. Her fevered skin welcomed the rain even as it burned for the touch of the man in front of her.

“Remy,” she gasped, and his head swiveled, his intense, glowing gaze capturing hers.

His sensual lips parted, and he said something, something she couldn't hear. Then his eyes closed and he turned back, braced his forehead against his forearm where it supported him against the tree.

Creamy moisture coated her fingers as she pushed two into her sex, where right now she only wanted the part of Remy that jutted magnificently from between his legs. Her internal muscles would pull him deep, ripple around his thick shaft as he stretched her sensitive tissue and drove her to orgasm.

Her legs grew shaky, her breath choppy. A twisting, wrenching sensation tugged at her, from her breasts that strained against the wet, cold fabric of her T-shirt to her pulsing, aching clit, which screamed for attention. Just one light caress would send her over the edge. A flick of her thumb, or better, a flick of Remy's tongue. But she waited, watching him, her feet inching her closer.

Remy's long fingers squeezed his hard flesh, stroked, and then his hips jerked forward and she heard his roar of release over the sudden tempest that broke over their heads like the heavens had opened up.

She smelled the acrid stench of ozone, felt her skin sizzle with electricity, and somewhere in the back of her mind she knew she'd never been so close to death—not even during her tornado-chasing days—but it didn't matter. Nothing mattered but finding relief.

She circled a fingertip around her clit, pressed against it in exactly the right place, and then her shout joined Remy's, and somehow, over the rioting storm, she heard their voices mingle.

When she could think clearly again—and she had no idea how long it had been—she found that the rain had stopped. The sky still flashed, but the lightning was distant, the