

The following is an excerpt from the novel *Zap Bang*,
Book 3 in the Storm Seekers trilogy.
It's available in paperback and e-book.
Learn more at <http://chriskridler.com/books>

ZAP BANG

a novel

by

CHRIS KRIDLER



SKY DIARY PRODUCTIONS

Rockledge, Florida

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PART 1

ELECTRIFICATION

 Jack wanted nothing more than to ignore the phone ringing at his desk in the dark, cavernous, nearly empty launch control room. He had a weather experiment to run. But only a few people had this number, and the call could be important.

Lightning flashed outside as he picked up the receiver, and his hand tingled with the sharp sting of electric shock.

“Damn!” he said, dropping the phone with a clatter. The grad student next to him laughed. Jack knew better. Lightning Safety 101: Don’t use a corded phone in a thunderstorm.

He picked up the receiver anyway, determined to get off the line quickly. “Yes?”

“Is this NASA?” came a creaky voice.

“No,” said Jack, already knowing this wasn’t a call he wanted to take as he scrolled through the sensor readings on his monitor.

“Are you sure? This ain’t the launch center? I want to report a UFO.”

“I’m sure,” he said. “Try 911.”

“I need NASA! This is a warning from the universe —”

Jack hung up and rubbed his hand, trying to recover his focus. Even with two weeks on the job, focus was elusive after his months-long escape to Florida and one too many naps by the ocean.

“You got zapped, didn’t you?” asked Daryl, one of the grad students who rotated in each day — or, at least, whenever storms were expected. “I thought these phones were shielded.”

“Lightning finds a way,” said Jack.

Outside the quiet building at Cape Canaveral, one of several devoted to the launch of rockets, the strobing thunderstorm grew louder. It promised good results for the sensor experiment Jack had been hired to run by a wealthy, some said wildly eccentric, patron who had yet to reveal himself in person.

Maybe the boss was odd, but Jack had to admit that it felt good to work again, especially when working meant hearing the sound of thunder. Unfortunately, Jack and Daryl had to watch the lightning on TV.

From a borrowed corner of the launch control room, with its tiers of computer desks ascending behind them, they monitored a movie-theater-size screen on the wall. Flanked by digital countdown clocks, it displayed multiple camera views that showed flashes illuminating the empty launch pad. Beyond the pad lay the Atlantic, dark and seething in the storm.

On the desk in front of them, computers showed the data their six lightning sensors gathered with each strike.

“It looks like it’s picking up everything tonight,” Daryl said.

“That’s because we cranked up the sensitivity,” Jack said.

“Oh, yeah,” said Daryl, a pale ectomorph with spiky blond hair who must have to wear a coat of armor to avoid getting burned in the Florida sun. None of the students seemed particularly informed about this project; the Florida Tech professor who was funded by their benefactor kept sending them Jack’s way. He guessed they were too busy drinking, screwing and occasionally studying to keep track of this little experiment.

Jack sighed. Those were the days. He was thirty-two and had spent at least as much time drinking as he had chasing women, but lately, his customary pleasures had been less than satisfying. Maybe he'd been in Florida too long. He needed to get back to Oklahoma and chase some storms. In a month or so, he thought, it'll be tornado time.

For now, Florida's severe season took the edge off his craving. March was a good month for storms, and this is when their billionaire backer, whom Jack knew only as Dr. Y, had wanted to test his prototypes. After a smattering of bird-fart storms earlier in the month, the elements came together in earnest today, powered by a low-pressure system over the Gulf and a branch of the jet stream dipping over the peninsula.

Jack stood, stretched and watched the big screen with a mix of awe and frustration as a lightning crawler danced across the black sky. He wanted to be out there. The numbers and lines on the monitors jumped up as the sensors mapped the location and voltage of the bolt. The high-ceilinged room resonated with the thunder that followed.

Rockets were rarely hit by lightning these days, mostly because of protection on the pad and stringent weather criteria for launch. But monitoring was essential; transient charges could work devious damage on sensitive satellite electronics. If you missed a strike and failed to check for problems, you could launch a billion-dollar piece of space junk.

On a launch day, this building would be teeming with engineers abuzz with the excitement of shooting a rocket to space. Jack had been given a tour on just such a day, arranged by their benefactor, who hadn't bothered to show up. Word had it Dr. Y

watched the liftoff as he dangled from a parachute over nearby Titusville.

Jack had been thrilled by the fiery power of the launch, a barely controlled explosion topped by meticulously engineered hardware. But nothing enthralled him as much as a storm.

The lightning increased in frequency. The images of the launch pad on the gigantic wall screen flashed in stuttering bursts of white as the lightning protection system — the surrounding towers and wires — shielded the empty space where a rocket would await launch.

As Jack watched, a bolt hit the ground, and a tree of lightning burst skyward from one of the towers.

“Upward lightning!” he noted with enthusiasm.

“So what?” asked Daryl, who’d been sneaking glances at the texts dinging on his phone.

“So it means the tower initiated the lightning, and it was probably a positive bolt. I thought you were studying meteorology? And would you put that goddamn thing on stun?” Jack asked as Daryl’s phone dinged again. Oh, great, he thought. Now he sounded like a crabby old man.

“Huh? OK,” Daryl said, pushing a switch on the phone. “Sorry. Anyway, I’m not studying lightning. I’m focusing on water resources and flooding. But I need some extra credit, and my prof needs his funding from the bizarro billionaire, so here I am.”

“Lightning kills more people in Florida than flooding does. You might want to pay attention.”

“Chill, dude,” Daryl said.

Jack wondered if he'd been this much of an asshole. Probably. "So what have you heard about our bizarro billionaire?" he asked.

"My prof tells me he monitors his pet experiments in progress. Live. Like Big Brother. He might be watching us right now."

"He must really like lightning, then," said Jack. "Because we are less than exciting."

He sat again at the desk, typing in his observation of the upward lightning and punching return, entering it into the log. Jack kept a running journal of his observations to enhance their data and, in part, to entertain himself during these long sessions on watch. His phone buzzed in his pocket, and he glanced at it briefly: a text from a girl he vaguely remembered after a night of rum cocktails at a local watering hole, followed by a depressing encounter in her shabby bungalow with her noisy cat mewing outside the bedroom door. He'd have to block that number.

He looked up in time to see a blast of white light overwhelm the cameras.

"Whoa!" Daryl said. The thunder trailed by several seconds, since the launch pad was four miles away.

Jack was already scanning the data. "We might've gotten a direct hit," he said.

"Awesome!"

"Not awesome. Look. This sensor is reading low," he pointed out as another bolt hit nearby. "Actually, one is dead, and three of them look off. It reset the sensitivity back to factory settings, if you will."

"Then I guess it worked. You know exactly where the lightning hit!"

“Not exactly.” Jack tried to restrain his impatience. “We have to look at the data. The bolt may have hit the ground and traveled. It may have struck above the sensors — four of them are right under the protection towers.”

“Your job, not mine,” Daryl said with relief as Jack punched in a new journal entry.

“What is your job, anyway?” Jack asked.

“To make sure the computers are running when you go pee. Hey, if you do, can you get me another Mountain Dew from the machine?”

“Why don’t *you* go?”

“Great idea. I’ll be back.” Daryl tucked his phone into his pocket and sauntered off into the shadows.

Jack shook his head and paged back through the data from the big strike. This would be fun to analyze. But not as much fun as being out there to watch it. And any other data they got tonight would be next to worthless now that half the sensors weren’t calibrated and one was fried.

He jumped when the phone on the desk rang again. This space was kind of spooky at night, and the electronic warble was sharp, echoing in the empty room. It was probably Daryl, lost on his way back from the soda machine, Jack thought. Or maybe it was another UFO nut. He picked up the phone more gingerly this time, hoping the shock had been a fluke.

“Jack Andreas,” he said.

“Dr. Andreas, so nice to speak to you at last,” came the oddly pitched male voice. What was that accent — 1930s Hollywood? Jack didn’t recognize it.

“May I help you?”

“That will be telling. This is Dr. Y. So you know about upward lightning?”

Their benefactor? Or, as Daryl called him, the bizarro billionaire? He must have been reading the journal entries as Jack was punching them in.

“I know a little,” Jack said.

“Your old friend Professor Malik says you know quite a lot, and as a storm chaser, you might be just the fellow to help me with a project I’m working on. Could you come see me tomorrow to discuss it? I’m not far away.”

“I — sure, I don’t see why not,” Jack said. “Your sensors are going to need work anyway.”

“I saw that, and they are just a sideshow, my boy, a sideshow. I’ll send my people out in the morning. No need for you to stay another minute. You’ll come for drinks and dinner tomorrow, won’t you? I’ll have my car pick you up.”

“I’d prefer to drive,” Jack said.

“If you must, of course. I’ll have my assistant email you the address. We’ll buzz you in at the gate. See you at seven.”

Jack hung up the phone. He’d been happy to get this little job. The money from his last consulting gig was running out. But he wasn’t sure he was ready to deal with an eccentric billionaire.

Daryl wandered back into the room, soda in one hand, phone in the other.

“Anything new?” he asked.

“Go home,” Jack said. “God called. Show’s over.”

Jack drove his Volare wagon south on A1A past Patrick Air Force Base as the late-afternoon sun gilded the ocean on his left. The shallow waves looked exceptionally blue today, careening into turquoise as sunset neared, glinting in the light. He could smell the salt air through his open window and wondered if he would miss it when he returned to Oklahoma.

He turned west on the Pineda Causeway, enjoying the feeling of soaring as he crested the bridge, and took the exit for Merritt Island.

As he turned south, the light immediately thickened under the growth of hoary oaks, their branches shading the road like wizened arms. He wended through the curves of Tropical Trail, watching the Indian River Lagoon appear and disappear through the trees on his right, and the sun reached for him through the gaps. As the island narrowed, the water became a steady companion, almost always in view, its bank studded with boat docks that accompanied the larger and larger houses on his left.

He checked the address again on his phone but kept the GPS voice off. He wanted to enjoy this ride in quiet, savor the peace before whatever awaited him beyond the gate at Dr. Y's.

Gate? It looked more like a fortress. He pulled into the wide driveway and faced an eight-foot-tall, spiked, black wrought-iron fence. Its wide gate, incorporating a design that evoked forked lightning, was flanked by tall, elegant stone posts.

An island of flowering bushes and short palms grew in the middle of the driveway, camouflaging another post with a keypad. Jack leaned out the window and pressed the intercom button. He felt someone watching him as he waited and looked up, noticing small cameras atop the gateposts.

“Dr. Andreas?” came a woman’s voice, tinged with a light Jamaican accent. “I’m buzzing you in.”

The gate slid open, and he eased the car through, following a winding avenue of pavers toward a structure he could barely make out through the trees. The house seemed to grow as he approached, unfolding into a contemporary, three-story stucco mansion with a columned patio flanked by two long, curved, one-story wings embracing a circular courtyard. Jack parked on the edge of the wide court, near a detached garage with four doors that easily could hold twice that many vehicles. No other cars were in view. This was a driveway made for a Mercedes or BMW, not his shabby green 1977 Plymouth.

He emerged and smoothed his tan cotton canvas blazer, which he wore over a light-green collared shirt that picked up the color of his eyes — an unusual concession to civilized attire, given he was meeting his employer. He’d even shaved. But he hadn’t given up his jeans. It was just cool enough to wear these layers; soon, the heat would triumph over fashion.

The light was fading here among the oaks, diverse palms and flowering plants — hibiscus, bougainvillea, plumeria, oleander. He’d learned that much from his aunt’s botanical books at her vacant Cocoa Beach condo, where he’d been staying since late summer. The rest was too exotic for him to identify.

Jack paused at the water feature at the courtyard’s center. The fountain was dark granite, rectangular, topped with an unusual sculpture mounted on a pedestal. The clear acrylic block, about two inches thick by eighteen inches square, was set on edge like a window, and water spilled under it. The shifting colored light that shone beneath it revealed a pattern inside the block that

reminded Jack of a branching tree reaching toward the sky. And then he realized what he was looking at.

“A Lichtenberg figure,” he murmured, reaching out to run a finger over the smooth surface as the changing colors illuminated each delicate branch. It looked like a lightning crawler frozen in ice.

“So now you know my taste in art,” came a voice from nearby, the same strange tenor he’d heard on the phone, tinged with British or Ivy League or something Jack couldn’t identify.

“It’s beautiful,” Jack said, looking up at Dr. Y. He was surprised to see a man of barely five feet tall, with gold wire-frame glasses and curly, reddish-gold hair that had thinned to wisps in the center. His rotund form was clad in a vintage Hawaiian shirt, long white shorts and leather sandals. So much for dressing up.

“Nothing that a five-million-volt particle accelerator won’t do,” said Dr. Y with a grin of tiny, numerous teeth. “Or lightning, if you’re unlucky enough to be hit by it. I prefer a more controlled situation. That’s why I let the artists play in my lab sometimes.”

“I want one,” Jack said in a rare moment of acquisitiveness.

Dr. Y chuckled. “Perhaps we can arrange that as part of the payment plan,” he said. “Won’t you come in?”

Jack walked up the few shallow steps to the wide patio, past the columns, and shook the man’s hand before entering through the double wooden doors. Dr. Y closed them with a soft click behind him. Classical piano played from hidden speakers that reverberated off the marble floors and through the seemingly endless open floor plan. A sunken living room before him led to a wall of sliding glass doors that opened onto a pool, terrace, vast

back yard and, seen dimly through more trees, the Banana River Lagoon on the other side of the island.

“River to river,” Jack noted.

“It cuts down on neighbors,” said Dr. Y. “Elena?”

“Right here,” came the response from a female figure click-clacking down the dim passage on the left, which curved away to mysterious destinations. When she emerged into the light of the living room, Jack blinked at the sight of an elegant woman with ebony skin and tightly cropped black hair. “I can show him to the game room while you get ready,” she said, islands in her consonants. She wore business attire — black slacks, a white button-up blouse and low black leather heels with silver buckles. “I’m the assistant,” she said to Jack, flashing him a bright smile. “I e-mailed you? Come with me.”

“Go on,” Dr. Y said. “I’m preparing a little entertainment before dinner, and I need a few minutes to make the cocktails.” He grinned again and walked quickly in the opposite direction.

“Sounds ideal,” Jack said. Cocktails would go a long way toward lubricating this peculiar evening.

Elena briskly led Jack back the way she’d come. The soft notes of the piano music echoed off the marble floors, marble walls, marble everywhere. Halfway down the wide corridor, a staircase spiraled up to rooms unseen. Wide windows offered views of the lawn and river on the right; doorways lined the hall on the left. Elena pulled a phone from her pocket and tapped the screen a few times. Recessed lights above them came on.

“Very sci-fi,” Jack said.

“You have no idea.” She stopped in front of a dark wooden door, opened it and gestured Jack inside. “I’ll be back in a few minutes to get you.” She whirled and was gone.

“Damn!” came a voice from inside. He couldn’t see from where, at first, as the room had a narrow entrance that opened up into a dream man cave. Or perhaps a gentleman’s cave. Rock music played in the background, and the look was warmer, more vintage. A bar of rich, dark wood with six stools, all with wooden backs and green leather seats, stood to his right, illuminated by antique chandeliers. A generous liquor selection lined the old-fashioned mirrored bar back; the door to a glassed-in, refrigerated wine pantry could be seen to the bar’s right. On the far left of the room was a low platform topped with three antique chairs, the kind where men used to sit while their shoes were shined, that made for perfect viewing of the ornately carved, green-felted pool table at the center. Next to the chairs were a few blinking pinball machines and a glowing jukebox.

Beyond the pool table was a roomy, round alcove with comfy chairs, a large television that hung on the wall, and more west windows. The pink and orange light of sunset revealed a figure standing in the shadows, fringed with fire.

She stepped into the pool of light cast by the stained-glass lamps hanging over the pool table, holding a cue stick, evaluating him with cool gray eyes.

“At last, you’ve arrived. Just when my luck was running out,” she said, gesturing to the table, now empty of everything except the eight-ball. “Want to play?”

Jack felt a prickle of recognition and a more insistent rush of attraction. She was dressed more casually than he, in a soft, black, wide-necked T-shirt with long sleeves, loose jeans and black sneakers. Her brown hair fell just above her shoulders in a modern cut. She wore little makeup, and he noticed her faint freckles, her strong but soft cheekbones. Her slight smile showed one

dimple more persistent than the other. Not perfect, but a natural beauty, Jack thought. And somehow familiar.

"I'd love to play," he said, withholding his name as she had done. This encounter felt delicate. Who was she? Was she working for Y, too?

"Beer?" She leaned her cue against the table, walked over to the bar and, behind it, opened what had looked like another wall panel to reveal a large refrigerator.

"Of course," he said.

She grabbed two, popped off the caps with an opener mounted behind the bar and walked out to press a cold bottle into his hand. It was Florida Beer's Swamp Ape. She looked him in the eye with an expression that suggested she was withholding something. Maybe a laugh. "Want to break?"

"Sure. Rack 'em up."

Jack had spent enough time in bars to become a fair pool player, though his victories were often owed to lax bar rules and drunken opponents. This woman seemed more or less sober, though she took a healthy swallow of her beer before setting it down on the bar. She rescued the balls from the pockets and popped them into the correct triangular configuration. Jack went to a cue rack on the wall and shopped for a weapon, trying to figure her out. He knew one thing. He wasn't going to be beaten by a girl.

Armed with an elegant stick from the collection, he turned back to the table and put himself behind the cue ball. The woman leaned against her cue, watching him, making him nervous. Why? Women didn't make him nervous. He hit the white ball hard, and it scattered the rest with a clatter. None went in.

“Wide open,” he said, stepping back to let her have a look. She circled the table, found a shot she liked and bent low to execute it. Jack thought he could see the bar’s chandeliers glitter in her eyes as she sunk the three in a side pocket. She moved on to the one and banked a shot to drop the yellow orb into the corner. Then she barely missed the seven as she tried to use another ball to hit it into the next corner, where it rattled and was still.

“Damn,” she said, as she had when he’d entered the room earlier.

“Looks like a pretty good run to me,” he said, trying to pick the easiest stripe.

“I can do better.”

She’s a driven creature, he thought. It was only pool. He targeted the eleven and managed to get it into the pocket opposite the corner where her seven stood guard, then failed to hit the thirteen into the side pocket. She picked her next target and proceeded to sink four balls in a row as he drained his beer and admired the graceful way she bent her body over the table. She left only her pesky blue two, and she put the cue ball where he’d have to possess magical powers to sink the ten, his most likely target. Nonetheless, he drew on geometry to concoct an unlikely scenario — a double bank shot — and got the damn thing in.

“I knew you were lucky!” she said, though why or how, he didn’t know. And his luck ran out on the next ball.

“Almost lucky enough,” he said as she circled the table and picked her angle.

“Sometimes a little luck is all you need. Though skill helps.” Was she showing off? Or teasing him? She dropped the two in two seconds, then turned to the eight ball and called the farthest

corner. She drove the cue ball into the eight with a satisfying thwack and grinned as it popped into the pocket.

He raised his eyebrows. "Where'd you learn to play like that?"

"I learned more in the Army than how to fly a helicopter. No hard feelings, Jack?"

She knew his name. And what was that about a helicopter?

"You have me at a disadvantage," he said. His slightly wounded male pride was salvaged by her smile.

"You really don't remember me, do you?" she asked. "Maribeth Lisbon. Helicopter pilot?"

The match of his memory struck and fired. He remembered her eyes, the debris strewn over the field, the adrenaline of the moment and that same powerful allure, then as now.

"Holy shit," he said unceremoniously. "Uh, your hair was longer, I think."

"You do remember." She looked pleased. "And yours was shorter?"

"Yeah, letting it get a little shaggy," he said, running a hand through his dark mane.

"You gave me your card. I kept it, kind of as a good luck charm. You showed up after the crash, and I just sort of associated it with the fact that I was still alive." She'd retrieved a canvas satchel from behind the bar, and from it, a small, black wallet; out of it, she pulled his wrinkled card.

Jack laughed. "But you never called," he teased, glad he finally knew who she was.

"Luck brought you to me," Maribeth said. "I never really expected to see you again. Luck doesn't work like that."

“Only this time, it did,” Jack said, and he reached out and shook her hand. Her grip was firm and comfortable and electric. “The next question is, why are you here?”

“It’s a long story. Let’s just say I think a lot of luck will be required.”

Just then, Elena came through the door. “It’s time,” she said. “Time for cocktails and acts of genius.”



Elena led them back through the corridor, to the living room and through its French doors to the thickly landscaped terrace and the lagoon-shaped pool. It was nearly dark, now, but tiki torches cast a flickering glow over the water, the waving fronds of the palm trees and the adjoining tiki bar, decorated with carved masks and a roof of thatched palm. There was just enough light to make out a strange machine on one side of the patio and, in the pool, a round figure in a black wetsuit doing the sidestroke. Dr. Y stood up in the shallow end when he saw them.

“Excellent!” he said. “Time for Mai Tais. Colin?”

Colin, presumably, appeared from another door beyond the bar. A thin, pallid, well-groomed fellow, he was dressed in what Jack considered hotel tropical — a bland Hawaiian shirt that matched his khaki pants. He held a tray laden with cheese, crackers, fruit and something fried that smelled delicious. This he placed on the bar, exchanging it for a tray already loaded with drinks in tiki mugs, each garnished with a bunch of mint and a straw. He offered the cocktails to Jack and Maribeth first, who each took one, and then to Elena, who waved him off. She was on

her cell phone and had retreated to a lounge chair near the bar to conduct business.

“Sir?” Colin said in an English accent to their host, holding up a mug that looked like an escapee of Easter Island.

“Afterward,” Dr. Y said.

“Yes, sir,” said Colin, retreating once again to the house.

“I pay extra for that accent,” Dr. Y said, making Jack wonder if Elena’s accent cost extra, too. And Dr. Y’s wasn’t exactly average. Maybe Jack could earn a few extra bucks by ginning up some exotic dialect. Say, Arkansas.

“You all should stand back,” their host continued. “Head over to where Elena is. That should be sufficient.”

Jack complied, taking a sip of his Mai Tai and its heavenly layers of rum and juice and grabbing a bite off the tray before heading to the far end of the patio. The nibble was a crab ragoon, he discovered, and a damn good one. No fake krab with a “K” for Dr. Y. Maribeth picked up a couple of pieces of cheese and crackers and joined him in the shadows, shooting him a questioning look. Jack shrugged.

“All right!” said Dr. Y, who half-swam to the edge of the pool and put on a crinkly, shiny cap and shoulder wrap that were sitting there. “And they mock tin-foil hats!”

“Is he going to do what I think he’s going to do?” Jack said, more to himself than anyone.

“What’s he going to do?” Maribeth said.

“I thought you might like a little demonstration before we talk,” said Dr. Y, who was adjusting his Jiffy-Pop attire. “Besides, it gives me a chance to play with my Tesla coil.”

“That’s a fucking big Tesla coil,” Jack said under his breath, surveying the machine at the end of the pool. A box a few feet

square was topped by a cylindrical tower perhaps ten feet tall. It had a large head, like a doughnut lying flat, that would be the envy of any robot. From it extended a slender pole that curved over the center of the pool.

Dr. Y laughed. "I heard that, and yes, it is. I wanted you to appreciate the power of a direct hit by a hundred thousand volts. My headgear and the salt water will help protect me."

"As long as I don't have to do this later," Jack said.

"Not quite." Dr. Y donned a long, steel glove that looked like medieval chain mail, clamping to it a cable that came up from under the water. "Besides, this is at most point-one percent of the power of a real lightning bolt. Elena?"

"Yes," said the assistant, who was now off the phone and standing next to them with a control box whose wires snaked into the shadows.

Dr. Y had made it back to the center of the pool, trailing the underwater cable. "Count down and throw the switch."

She counted aloud, perhaps to be clear to everyone when to be scared out of their wits. Dr. Y sank into the water so that only his nose, eyes and metallic cap were exposed.

"... Three ... two ... one ... now," Elena said, flipping a switch.

A brilliant bolt of manmade lightning arced from the Tesla coil's wand to Dr. Y's raised, gloved hand.

Jack took an inadvertent step back.

"Holy shock therapy, Batman," Maribeth whispered.

The bolt danced from the end of the wand to the end of Dr. Y's fingers, until he lowered his hand into the water. Then, ever shifting, the manufactured lightning appeared to shoot through his head and into the pool.

Intellectually, Jack knew what was happening. The metal and the salt water were distributing the charge, with the cable as a backup. But it still made him want to jump into a car or some other structure to avoid getting struck. He'd had close calls with tornadoes, but lightning made him truly nervous when he chased storms. You never knew when it was going to hit you until your hair was standing on end and it was too late.

Dr. Y raised his hand, and the bolt again attached itself to the glove before Elena switched it off.

There was a collective exhale from the audience, the release of held breaths.

"I'm not sure if we should applaud, but that was off the chain," Jack said.

"Off the chain *mail*," Maribeth quipped.

"Thank you, my dears," said Dr. Y, who walked up the pool's sloping concrete beach while removing his glove and headgear. "I wanted you to know how intimately I view the subject of lightning. It is my obsession. It's why I've called you here. Now, enjoy the drinks — my specialty, you know. I'm going to change, and then we'll talk."

Dripping and resembling a bipedal sea lion, their host padded down a sidewalk that curved along the house toward another unseen entrance, and Jack and Maribeth wandered over to the Tesla coil. Jack held up his mug and clinked it against hers, admiring her eyes in the light of the torches.

"Here's to insane employers," he said.

She raised one eyebrow and took a sip through her straw. "Give him a chance," she said. "He's spent a fortune on a research plane. I know, because I've been training to fly it for months. I have a feeling you might find this fun."

"I suppose you're not going to tell me more."

"I don't know everything yet."

"You know how to survive," he said. "I have a feeling that might come in handy."

"Stop it," she said with a wry half-smile. "You're jinxing me."

He watched her walk over to Elena as he took another sip of his drink. Then he wandered back to the tiki bar, where he sat on a stool, had another crab rangoon and observed the women as they talked and joked. They must already know each other, he realized. Maribeth had said she'd been training for months.

Colin wheeled a cart laden with food from his secret lair toward a half-hidden part of the terrace on the other side of the pool. Jack followed him through the palm trees and saw, lit by more tiki torches, a round wooden table adorned with a tropical-print tablecloth and place settings for four. There were candles, flowers and, thanks to Colin's ministrations, bowls of colorful salads, vegetables and rolls. "The kebabs will be out shortly," Colin said to Jack, vanishing again with the cart.

"Dinner is nearly ready," came Dr. Y's voice down the walkway. "Come along, ladies, come along. Ah, Dr. Andreas, you've found the dining room," he said as he stepped into the clearing, flashing those tiny teeth again. He wore a different Hawaiian shirt, long shorts and sandals and carried a Mai Tai.

"You can call me Jack."

"Yes, I *could*," said Dr. Y, sounding doubtful. The women appeared in the clearing, and Jack eyed Maribeth as she sat opposite him, with Elena between them. "I suppose you may wonder why I go by Dr. Y," the scientist said to Jack, "and it's not a play on 'Doctor Who,' though that is one of my favorite shows."

"It has crossed my mind," Jack said.

“It’s my rather fanciful name,” said Dr. Y, taking his seat. “Percival Yzaguirre.” A dim bell rang in Jack’s brain; he’d seen the name increasingly mentioned in articles about energy, technology and large fortunes. “A mother from England,” Dr. Y continued, “where I received some of my early education, and a father whose father was from Mexico. They met here. The great Melting Pot of outlandish names. I certainly didn’t wish to be known as Dr. P.”

“Maybe if you were a urologist,” said Maribeth.

“Ha!” said Dr. Y. “Perhaps, my dear. But I’m not that kind of doctor. Physics is my game. I started with NASA — I knew your father briefly at Goddard when I was just out of school,” he nodded toward Jack. “A brilliant fellow. Retired now, yes? I trust you have his genes.”

Jack was taken aback by the mention of his father and even more so by the comparison. He didn’t like to think of himself as anything like the man he barely spoke to, the volatile alcoholic he still blamed for the wreck that killed his mother so many years before.

With effort, Jack kept his reply neutral. “I’m no geneticist. Meteorology is my game,” he said, gently mimicking Dr. Y.

“Ho ho! Yes, indeed. Point taken,” said their host. “Well, my dears — ah, here’s Colin with the kebabs — I’ve brought you here to discuss a research project that I plan to launch this spring in Tornado Alley. As you know, I’m fascinated by lightning, and to that end, I have used my own money to have a slightly used A-10 Warthog expertly refitted to conduct lightning research. The one they also call the Thunderbolt. If the National Science Foundation can have one, why not me?” His eyes twinkled as Colin served up the food. “I am especially concerned with up-

ward lightning. You know a bit about this, Dr. Andreas?”

“Lightning produced by tall objects. Essentially, lightning that shoots up rather than down.”

“Indeed, and here’s the rub — we still know so little about it,” Dr. Y said.

“But lightning hits tall objects, right?” Maribeth asked.

“Yes,” said Dr. Y, “but tall objects also can produce upward lightning when there’s a strike nearby. I happen to care about this very interesting area of research not just because I am fascinated by lightning, but because I have a considerable investment in wind energy. In our future. Wind produces just four percent of our energy now, but it could be so much more. The largest of these wind farms holds hundreds of turbines, and wind turbines generate far more of this sort of lightning than anyone has anticipated. Perhaps ten to a hundred times more attachments than we thought.”

“Attachments?” Elena asked.

“Points of attachment are, essentially, where the lightning hits,” Dr. Y said. “The damage can be significant.”

“Because of the blades?” Jack said.

“Yes, in part,” answered Dr. Y. “How do you get adequate lightning protection on spinning blades? But the frequency is also a concern, because these towers are generating upward lightning, not just receiving downward strikes. And there are even more questions. What kinds of chemicals are all these lightning strikes producing? Could they be hazardous? How are trace gases transported by the storm, and what are the effects? What about lightning that fires from tall buildings in cities? What sort of additional dangers can it pose?”

“And I’ll be flying into it,” Maribeth said.

“You’ll be flying into the storm, but you’ll be protected from lightning strikes,” Dr. Y said.

“You’ll have my tin foil hat ready by then, I’m sure,” she said.

“Ha! Of course, my dear,” he said with a smile. “Your plane may trigger lightning, but what it will do is study the bipolar nature of lightning bolts and a little chemistry with sensors and cameras. A thoroughly documented bipolar strike initiated by the airplane would be very desirable. For so long, the discussion has been of positive bolts and negative bolts. But what we’re coming to realize is that lightning has positive and negative ends. And, of course, we also want to photograph upward bolts with high-speed cameras.”

“You don’t want me in the plane, do you?” Jack asked.

“Oh, no,” Dr. Y said. “That’s a one-woman job. I need someone to run our mobile research on the ground. Chase the storms. I hear you have a bit of a knack for that.”

If only he knew, Jack thought. “Tell me more.”

“The trick will be catching the storms in my defined areas of research,” said Dr. Y. “We have free rein to operate in two main areas in Kansas and Nebraska where there are wind farms. I’ll have radar and instruments in each to measure various criteria and map the lightning in three dimensions. When storms are in those areas, we’ll operate the plane as well. This is my highest area of interest. However, on days when the storms are elsewhere, we can do mobile lightning research and photography. If you’re available, we’ll spend the next two weeks here going over my plans. Are you available, Dr. Andreas?”

“Definitely available,” Jack said as he glanced at Maribeth and caught her eye. Amusement danced across her face before she looked away.

“Excellent! I have a team of technicians and engineers working on the sensors and cameras,” said Dr. Y. “Let me go over some of what we’re looking for . . .”

Jack heard the physicist but kept watching Maribeth as she listened to Dr. Y. The pleasing angles of her face were lit by the fires of the torches, and her gray eyes held a blaze of excitement as she absorbed the details of the research. A most unusual storm-chasing partner. This, Jack thought, is going to be an interesting spring.



Aurelius Zane knew his career was in the toilet when he saw the vehicle he’d have to drive for the new TV show.

Sure, he’d snagged the drone tornado footage he’d wanted for his last epic documentary, but it came at a great cost, and though his debts were not as titanic as once they were, the credit card bills kept coming. And no one really gave a damn about his old show after they saw the incredible human tornado probe flown by his now-co-host, Brad Treat, in the documentary mini-series produced last year by Aurelius’ former paramour.

“I just want you to know I’m slumming between gigs,” Brad had said when they’d met up for the first phase of “Zany Weddings” on the west coast, “and I’m getting paid twice as much as you are.”

Sure, the show was named “Zany Weddings” to play on Aurelius’ surname, and to try to separate itself from the other nutty nuptials crowding the cable networks, but the production company thought snagging Brad was a real coup. And so the star, Aurelius Zane, had become the co-star.

Aurelius fumed, but he'd made a gamble and lost, and this might be his one chance to resurrect his career as Adventurer Deluxe. As he meandered into his late thirties, he'd been wondering why he did it at all. Was it the thrill? The fame? He'd started to realize it wasn't so much about the grandeur of nature. The prospect of facing the austere plains of Tornado Alley again was almost painful, no matter how many twisters they might see. Especially in this vehicle.

The silver "Zany Weddings" production van followed them around in their quests to get couples married in crazy situations — on top of a volcano, whitewater rafting, diving on a wreck, jumping out of a plane, or in the lion enclosure at a down-and-out zoo — and the company wanted the transitional shots to look good. So it had wrapped a large, white SUV in such a way that it resembled a wedding cake, especially with the highly decorated layers they'd added on top, which they used for storage and cloaked cameras. At the summit was a small sculpture of a bride and groom in hiking gear, as if they'd just climbed the mountain of a car. "ZANY *Weddings*" was emblazoned on the sides in a mix of brash capitals and elegant script. The cake car was even more obnoxious than the proliferating fleet of storm-chaser tanks on the road.

Aurelius had tried to explain to the producers that getting a couple married in front of a tornado wasn't as simple as scheduling a weekend shoot. They would have to find the tornado first. The company, which saw this episode as the one that would clinch ratings, agreed to put a few weeks into it, provided the crew could pick up one or two weddings in between. There was a couple who wanted to get married while riding an angry bull in a rodeo in Texas and another who wanted a pagan rockabilly wed-

ding at Carhenge in Nebraska. There would be a lot of driving.

Fortunately, Aurelius' colleagues had driven the wedding cake and production van out from L.A. to Oklahoma City, and Aurelius had flown in after two weeks off — mandatory while Brad hosted a science show on a sea voyage to Antarctica.

After a night in a modest chain hotel, Aurelius drove the cake car to Will Rogers Airport on a sunny, chilly May morning to pick up his co-host, the crew van close behind. Most brides chose spring for its pleasant weather, but this was also prime time for tornadoes. For their bride, Aurelius hoped the skies would produce the latter.

"It's great to see you again," he said as he helped Brad load his bags into the SUV, but his tone said anything but. "How was your flight?"

"There were many flights to get here from Argentina, but mostly I sat in first class, so I can't complain," Brad said. "Besides, flight attendants really like me."

"Your shirt *is* a conversation piece. Have you changed it in the last two weeks?" Brad had taken to wearing T-shirts everywhere that said "I fly into tornadoes." Usually, it evoked a reaction along the lines of, "Hey, you're *that* guy!" followed by women squealing and men buying him beer.

"I had to wear coats in Antarctica, genius," Brad said in his nasal tone. "And I have several of these shirts."

Aurelius knew that fact all too well. Brad's wardrobe was driving him crazy. Aurelius opted for a long, double-breasted black jacket, worn open over button-up shirts. Combined with his floppy, dirty-blond hair, it gave him what he saw as a touch of drama. The men were physical opposites. Aurelius was fair and brawny; Brad, with his dark buzz cut, was tall and scrawny.

“We’re supposed to head out directly and pick up our couple,” Aurelius said as they got into the cake car. “The cameras are on.”

“Of course they are,” Brad said, looking around the car’s cabin and noting the colony of electronic eyes rigged to record their every move. He shifted his body almost imperceptibly, getting into broadcast attitude.

Aurelius swallowed his irritation and did the same as he drove them out of the airport, the crew van close behind. He reached over and tapped the laptop computer mounted between the seats to be sure their GPS navigation was on. Then he nodded toward the one camera that streamed a wide-angle view back to the production van so that his co-producer, a reliable young woman named Danni, could monitor the action.

“The couple are Polly Ann and Tyler,” he said loudly enough for the cameras. “They already live together, but this is a first wedding for both of them.”

“That’s unusual.”

“At least on our show,” Aurelius said, recalling the grocery clerk who’d been married four times already when she stepped into the lion’s pen with her true love and hair stylist. It had been the clerk’s, and their show’s, first lesbian wedding. “Also unusual, as you know, is that this wedding won’t be held in a set place. The couple have a license for every state in Tornado Alley, because we’ll have to get it done wherever we find a tornado. And we can’t bring a whole wedding party with us.”

“Just the essentials,” Brad said. “Our crew will act as witnesses, and the reception will be spontaneous. Who’s going to marry them?”

“They’re marrying each other, of course.”

“Ha, ha,” Brad said, attempting to act as if he were amused and failing. “Who’s administering the vows?”

“I am,” Aurelius said. “I’ve passed a very difficult five-question quiz online and become an officiant in the Digital Church of the Light-Emitting Deity. I’m fully authorized to marry anyone.”

“The Church of the L.E.D.?”

“It’s one of the top twenty Internet churches,” Aurelius said.

“Congratulations,” Brad said.

“I do whatever is necessary to accomplish my goal, whether it’s climbing over hot lava or chasing a typhoon —”

“Just don’t fly into a tornado, OK?” Brad said. “That’s my job.”

Aurelius gave him a sidelong glance as they headed west and noted with annoyance Brad’s wicked smile. “Why don’t you tell me more about what that was like?” he prodded.

“This show is about making people’s extreme wedding wishes come true,” Brad said. “Let’s stick to the story of Polly Ann and Tyler.”

For someone who was so into trumpeting his feat, Brad sure didn’t like to discuss the details, thought Aurelius.

They talked about the couple’s obsession with severe weather for the cameras, then lapsed into uncomfortable silence for the last thirty minutes of the trip. Several miles off the Interstate, well west of Oklahoma City, they rolled up and down low hills, trying to follow GPS navigation to the couple’s home.

“This looks less than promising,” Brad said as they passed a dilapidated trailer park.

“We aren’t here to judge,” Aurelius said, thinking the trailers were at least roomier than his Pasadena apartment. “Anyway, we have another turn before we get there.”

“Where is this place?” came Danni’s voice over the CB radio. Aurelius wasn’t unhappy to have her as his fellow field producer. She was efficient and made it easier for him to handle his co-star duties. At least he was a producer, even if his star had been outshined. He needed the money.

“Somewhere past these cows, I think,” Aurelius said into the radio as they made the turn. A cluster of brown cows stood watching them from behind a fence, swishing their tails. They stared hard at the confectionery car, looking as if they might enjoy a slice of wedding cake.

“Kinda creepy,” Brad said.

“You can’t fly into a tornado and then be scared of cows,” said Aurelius.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Brad said, less than convincing. Aurelius made a mental note of Brad’s bovine fears as they came upon the end of a driveway at the bottom of a hill. There was a barn-shaped mailbox and no immediate sign of a house.

“We turn here,” Aurelius said into the radio.

The two vehicles climbed the driveway, which curved around the hill, and they found themselves facing a circular parking area next to garage doors that were built right into the slope. A long row of shallow windows peeked out of the hill above the garage, and bits of structure stuck out of the grassy ground. There was modest landscaping, too — a couple of trees and patches of flowers. A gravel walkway of pale yellow river rock extended from the parking area and up to a door built into the side of the hill.

“Is this a Hobbit couple?” Aurelius asked.

“What?” asked Brad.

“Underground house. Don’t you ever see movies? Read books?”

“I’ve been busy,” Brad said pointedly.

They all disembarked. Danni and shaggy Scooter carried cameras, and the black-clad, forty-something audio man, who in his other life was a DJ known as Vinyl, held a microphone boom.

“Time to knock,” said Danni, a redhead with a pixie haircut and a flat Illinois accent.

The crew followed Aurelius and Brad up the hill, and they made a big show of rapping the horseshoe doorknocker five times.

A beaming little blonde threw the door open. “Honey, they’re here!” she said in a classic Oklahoma twang, and almost instantly, a stocky young man, barely taller than the diminutive Polly Ann, was at her side.

“Well, howdy and welcome!” said Tyler.

“Tyler and Polly Ann, are you ready for your Zany Wedding?” asked Brad. While a lackadaisical host, he seemed to relish saying the big line.

“Hey, you’re the badass who rode into that tornado!” Tyler said.

Aurelius sighed in exasperation.

“OK, cut,” said Danni. “We’ve got to do this again with me inside. You kids mind?”

Kids, Aurelius thought. Danni, made even more youthful by her fine features, was barely older than the couple. Hobbits, meet your elf producer. And get ready for a long three weeks.

Even if Maribeth weren't comfortable flying the A-10, she'd never admit it. Never admit weakness. The Army had taught her that. Or rather, being in the Army as a woman had taught her that. Any hint of weakness could have meant the death of her career, before she decided to leave on her own, that is.

The truth was, she was quite comfortable with the Warthog, though she hadn't flown warplanes for the Air Force. She'd flown helicopters for the Army in Iraq — nothing like this compact, chunky tank-killer.

And then, after she'd learned to love chasing storms in a helicopter as a civilian, the TV station had dumped her. It didn't matter that the accident hadn't been her fault; her bosses just didn't want to crash any more expensive hardware. They'd wished her well and spent the insurance money on another news van.

She loved helicopters, but she had never stopped flying planes. Fixed-wing aircraft had been her first love as a girl, and flying just about everything had been her second job with her father's company. So when a headhunter came to her dad shortly after the helicopter gig ended, asking if he knew any pilots who could fly a private jet for a corporate bigwig, she decided she might like the travel. It turned out the jet she was hired to fly was Dr. Y's.

"I've been looking at your resume, Ms. Lisbon," he'd told her after a couple of months, visiting her in the cockpit during a runway delay on a foggy San Francisco evening, "and you have some unusual skills."

"If flying is unusual," she said.

"Only if you do it wearing a cape," he joked as he leaned

against the cockpit doorway. He made a habit of chatting with his crew. Always informal, he wore one of his vintage Hawaiian shirts, though she knew for a fact he'd just come from a business meeting. Money talks more than clothes, she supposed.

"I'm looking for a pilot used to dealing with unusual circumstances," he continued, "and it seems to me you qualify." She briefly imagined him running a private air force somewhere when he added: "I've managed to acquire a retired warplane for a little weather research project of mine. Have you ever flown an A-10?"

She'd tried not to let him know how excited she was. "I've been around them. I'd need some training, but I'm sure I can do it."

Her quick response might have exceeded her actual confidence, but the mission seemed like just what she needed. She was already burned out from being constantly on call for these smooth, stormless cross-country flights. Except for one jaunt to Hawaii, the travel had been less than exotic. As much as she craved normalcy after her military life, routine bored her, and she found her days too often empty. This mission could fill the chasm. And so she'd been paired up with an instructor and a simulator and spent several intense months preparing for an adventure that was almost a reality.

Now she felt the plane's power enshrine her as she flew over the area where the hills of eastern Kansas started to flatten into the pancakery most people associated with the Land of Oz. The state's elevation increased toward the west, but a driver would mostly see the plain. From her perspective, she could see much more — countless channels, wet and dry streams, carving out the state's meager peaks and valleys.

It wasn't the fastest plane, but it was solid and responsive, especially after the retrofit. The gleaming cockpit had all the technology the original model didn't. This is my office, she thought, hurtling through the air at a modest three hundred fifty miles an hour at 10,000 feet. The altitude meant she didn't have to wear the bulky oxygen mask a fighter pilot might, just a boom mask — essentially, oversized sunglasses with a microphone attached to a helmet, the same kind the Blue Angels stunt pilots used.

She turned to the west, heading back toward Salina and the wind farms beyond. This was a test run, yet another test run, as Dr. Y and the team tried to work out all the problems they'd been having with their experiments. No storms awaited her on the horizon, just isolated, puffy cumulus clouds, tinged with gold as the sun declined, and the brilliant white of cirrus clouds, heralding an approaching front. She spied a sun dog to the right of the sun, a splash of refracted color in the cirrus' ice crystals.

Below her, a ring of six high-speed cameras and wing-mounted instrument pods, holding gadgets from a radiation detector to a current sensor, took the place of weapons, and hundreds of pounds of electronics and servers were mounted in the belly. They were accompanied by ballast to make up for the removal of the A-10's massive gun, which weighed some four thousand pounds when fully loaded, so heavy that the plane's balance depended on it.

The bubble canopy had been hardened with a fine, nearly invisible metal mesh to shed dangers such as lightning and hail, and that meant she couldn't eject as a wartime pilot might. That was OK with her. This seat was a lot more comfortable, and she had no plans to eject. The only enemy firing at her plane's armored skin would be Mother Nature.

The one thing about the Warthog that made her cautious — not nervous, she reasoned, cautious — was the turbofan engines. They could easily suck in hailstones, and that would be a bad thing. The plane could survive a lightning strike, she reasoned, but perhaps not a hail barrage. She didn't plan to test its hail endurance, either. It's all about controlling the input, she thought. Control your environment, and you control your destiny.

On the panel, a mounted tablet computer indicated a video call from Maribeth's teammates on the ground. Linked to the plane's newly installed satellite Internet connection, the tablet let them circumvent the more formal radio communications she used with the airfield. The satellite link also let them transmit real-time sensor data to the ground, but not the data-hogging video they would be shooting.

Maribeth tapped the screen. "Go ahead," she responded through the microphone in her helmet as Dr. Y appeared.

"How's it going up there, Ms. Lisbon?" asked Dr. Y, who appeared to be in his office at the hangar, its walls covered with lightning photographs. He wasn't usually on the horn. She wondered what was wrong now.

"Nominal so far. You?"

"I'll have Fred explain," he said.

A younger face framed by shaggy, rusty hair and a beard pushed into the frame, his voice faster, Southern and much more frustrated. "The starboard high-speed camera's pictures are fucked up again," Fred said. "Looks like they were painted by a blind man."

"I thought Monet did OK," Maribeth responded.

"It's a goddamn mess, but we'll fix it," said Fred, vanishing off-screen.

“Oh, that’s boy’s language,” said Dr. Y, back on camera. “We’re going to have to take it apart again. It’s another delay, I’m afraid. At least a day.”

“Well, we don’t have Jack yet, do we?” she asked.

“He’s coming in time for tomorrow’s severe weather, which, unfortunately, my airborne cameras will miss. My engineers and I are going to work on the bad one and fine-tune the other gear while Jack and Fred take the van out and give those ground instruments a whirl. Perhaps you should go with them, my dear. They’ll need a woman’s gentle hand.”

“You mean you want her to kick our asses into gear,” she heard Fred saying in the background.

“Whatever gets us there,” Dr. Y said with a smile. “Come back to us, Ms. Lisbon.”

“I live to serve,” Maribeth said. And gently kick ass, she thought, whenever required. As the call ended, she took a moment to savor the waning flight, the peace above the fray. Chasing storms in a vehicle would be frustrating, she thought as she banked around, leaving the setting sun behind. There was no direct flight to a storm on the ground, just roads that never went where you wanted them to go. And Jack would be in charge.

Jack had intrigued her during the two weeks of briefings in Florida. On the surface, he was absolutely the opposite of men she thought she liked, or should like. He was clearly accustomed to having women fall all over him; she’d seen it when the team had gone out to dinner one night by the river, when servers and random women made a point of showing him how available they were. He deftly and politely ignored them without ever losing the thread of his conversation with her. When it came to the work, he was commanding in everything that had to do with weather,

but she had to admit that his authoritative approach seemed justified: He really *did* know just about everything about weather. She'd started out wondering if he was like those men she'd met in the service who wouldn't hesitate to steamroll you to get their way. But she came to realize he offered his expertise only when it was required; otherwise, he stepped back and let the mission proceed, listening to everyone else along the way.

It was confusing to see him again, to rethink her first impression, after her brief encounter with him after the crash last year. He'd seemed so kind then, a calming voice in an anxious moment, but that assessment was colored by the fact that she'd just narrowly escaped death. In Florida, he'd seemed different, on his own beam, wrapped up in the technical aspects of their project, at least at first. And then she realized he was paying a lot of attention to her.

It dawned on her that her curiosity about him, which, she was sure, was both innocent and well-hidden, could endanger their working relationship. So she put up her walls again fast. She was unaccustomed to men knocking on her door. They saw she was all business; there was usually a reason for that. Like this time. She was a pro, and she wanted to do a professional job. But as professional as she was in everything, she was an amateur with someone like Jack, and she sensed he was anything but amateur when it came to women. All of her alarms went off when he was around, along with a faint and not altogether unpleasant buzzing in her nerves.

Up here, such personal discomfiture never seemed to matter. She was flying. She was part of something infinite and perfect. She pulled her microphone aside and popped a cinnamon mint from the tin she kept in one of her pockets. In the coral-gray

light of fading day, she reluctantly said goodbye to the sky and headed back toward the airport.

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end of sample

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