

Chapter 3: Wake

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Dani kept her eyes glued to the rear window, praying for a stray glint of high beams to magically escape the void. She didn't turn around until a distant, brief flash of twisted sheet metal sparked against the asphalt near the tornado's churning base. The violent realization brought a wave of dread that finally forced her to look away.

"Dani!" Zack called firmly, snapping her attention back toward him. "Listen to me. I need you on the lookout for debris. I know you probably can't see shit and you're worried about those people in that Tacoma, but we need to make sure we are safe first, you got me?"

He glanced at her expectantly, eyes bouncing back and forth between the shock on her face and the roadway ahead. She forced herself to breathe, sliding the sunroof panel open, hoping a flash of lightning would expose any power lines or debris sailing above them. Zack yanked the laptop cradle toward himself and used the trackpad to bring up the live GPS system, attempting to prepare himself for the inevitable curve in the road somewhere ahead.

"What are you seeing, Dani?" he called out again.

Dani took a sharp breath. "We're making a little distance. It's too dark for me to see any debris clearly."

Zack nodded. "Alright. Navi first, then radar. How far until that south turn?"

Dani slid the laptop mount back in her direction. The cursor shook beneath her fingers as she zoomed ahead of their position, forcing her to slow down and regain control over her hand.

"Another mile and maybe a half," Dani answered. "Then maybe another third of a mile before we hit that paved east-west road."

"We turn west, then?" Zack asked rhetorically. "Got it."

Dani overlaid the latest velocity scan, briefly studying the smear of inbound and outbound winds behind them. The data was roughly a minute and a half old, but corroborated what they were seeing with their own eyes. The tornado had shifted its track once again, barreling down the east-southeast farm-to-market road behind them.

Zack shot a glance at the rearview mirror. The white Ford pickup remained several hundred feet behind them, its headlights wandering left and right in the intense crosswinds.

"Here," Zack said as he slipped a finger around the radio microphone cord and lifted it up toward Dani. "Tell them what we're doing."

She reached for the microphone and pulled it up to her mouth. Dani swallowed hard, taking a sharp breath to compose herself.

"White SKYWARN pickup, this is Spotter Seven-Nine. If you're on this channel, stay with us," Dani transmitted. "This road bends south in about two miles, then intersects an east-west farm road. We are going to turn right and head westbound to safely stage while the tornado passes."

Dani paused and looked over at Zack, who remained focused on the pavement ahead while monitoring his mirrors for signs of debris.

“And then we’re going back for that Tacoma.”

The radio remained silent, but the white pickup flashed its high beams twice in acknowledgment. Zack nodded and forced the accelerator farther down to the floor. The engine answered with a sustained roar as the pickup climbed in speed. Every shallow rise in the chip seal road lifted the truck enough for the crosswinds to catch the undercarriage, forcing Zack to fight the steering wheel to keep it from driving them off the road.

“Now tell me where she is. I’ve lost visual,” he said.

Dani dropped the radio into her lap and pulled the latest velocity scan. As it populated from the top of the window downward, it revealed the circulation in incomplete strips. Red and green pixels had expanded far beyond the initial tight couplet they witnessed earlier in the tornado’s life cycle. Tornadic winds now occupied a wide swath around the crossroads, bleeding southeast across the road they were on.

As she shifted to the correlation coefficient, Dani recognized the signature had also widened substantially. What had begun as a tight, compact area of debris return on radar now spread outward as a jagged, uneven mass. She dragged a quick measurement between their location and the center.

“Less than two miles behind us,” she answered.

“Less than? How much less than?”

“Maybe a mile and three-quarters?” Dani responded uncertainly.

The tornado emerged in their mirrors during another rapid pulse of lightning behind it. Dani caught its reflection before twisting around for a direct view. The condensation had widened considerably since the crossroads, no longer resembling the clean, black stovepipe they had observed during its approach. Another flash produced a clear view of several subvortices briefly separating from the main circulation. She witnessed them dance through the dirt and debris wrapped around the lower half of the visible tornado, then disappear back into the larger black column.

Another gust struck the truck, fishtailing the rear end slightly as the turn in the road ahead came into view on the pivoted laptop between them. Zack’s upper body shifted against the seat while the vehicle drifted to the edge of the road. He corrected it without releasing the accelerator, using several small movements instead of overcorrecting the truck into the drainage ditch on the opposite side.

Dirt and shredded vegetation raced across the pavement ahead of them. Leaves snapped into the windshield and caught themselves in the wiper blades. A cluster of branches shattered against the front bumper and then vanished below the chassis with several knocks.

“RFD surge is expanding,” Dani warned as she checked the latest velocity scan. She reached down and grabbed the radio microphone, clipping it to her collar, and then used both hands to steady the vibrating laptop. “The wind field is expanding toward us.”

Zack’s eyes narrowed toward the road. “That was fuckin’ quick.”

“I think she’s sidewinding down along this road; we can probably expect some erratic gusts,” she continued.

The roar behind them persisted through everything else, a steady vibration they could feel in the floorboards and seats. The sound lacked the bite of thunder or the shifting intensity of ordinary wind gusts. It growled all around them, growing slowly louder despite the truck holding its speed.

Dani closed the livestream chat. The exterior and interior cameras remained live, but the frantic waterfall of messages vanished from her monitor.

“Sorry, chat,” she murmured without switching on the microphone. “Y’all are on your own for a bit.”

A sharp crack smacked into the roof above them.

They instinctively lowered their heads in unison as a length of wood skipped off the roof and vanished to Zack’s left.

“The hell was that?!” Dani exclaimed.

“I don’t know, looked like a bit of... something.”

She huffed. “That’s helpful.”

Zack rolled his eyes as several pale clumps of what appeared to be cotton tumbled through the headlight beams ahead. Then one struck the windshield and spread across the glass, remaining stuck beneath the passenger-side wiper.

“Insulation,” Dani stated as she stared at the pink material.

Zack’s expression hardened. “Think it’s from that building?”

“I didn’t see any other properties nearby,” Dani responded.

She returned to the correlation coefficient screen. The debris signature remained just east of the crossroads, although a long plume of fallout extended east-southeast, drifting directly over their path. Variable winds at different levels had begun to separate the lofted material by weight, shooting lighter materials far beyond the tornado’s edge.

“The TDS is huge,” Dani remarked with subdued disbelief. “It’s carrying debris several miles downstream.”

Zack groaned, fighting off another gust attempting to turn the truck sideways as he spoke. “How high?”

Dani flipped through different radar tilts. "At least... ten thousand feet, maybe more."

Zack growled with frustration. "Okay, so we're definitely not only running away from the tornado."

"No," Dani answered. "We're running from everything it throws our way, too."

Within a few seconds of their exchange, a dark object fell out of the sky ahead of them, flipping end over end through the air above the southern drainage ditch. It did not catch enough of the headlight beams to uncover what it was at first. However, once it slammed into the road moments later and sparked against the pavement, the lights revealed a twisted section of corrugated sheet metal roughly the length of the truck.

"Left!" Dani shouted.

Zack tugged the wheel just enough to cross the center line, fearing an improperly timed gust of wind might use their momentum to send them careening sideways. The sheet metal spun once more within their original lane, lifted partially into the air as they passed, then folded around itself as the inflow dragged it off past the northern ditch. The trailing Ford mirrored their lane shift a minute later.

"They're okay," Dani said.

Zack did not respond. He kept his eyes locked on the darkness ahead, his eyes wide and alert, scanning for anything troublesome that might cross their path. Small debris continued blowing across the road in increasing amounts: leaves, insulation, strips of plastic, and fragments of unidentifiable material whipped ahead of them before vanishing into the dark countryside.

A heavy mesquite branch slammed into the passenger door.

The impact rang through the cab like someone had struck a lit firecracker with a sledgehammer. Dani jerked away from the window and threw her arms over her head. The glass remained intact, though a smaller, more brittle branch hooked around the mirror housing before the wind tore it away.

"Jesus H. Fuck!" she shouted.

"You aight?" Zack asked without taking his eyes from the road. "Window intact?"

Dani looked over at it. "Yeah, mirror might be fucked, though."

Another radar sweep completed. Dani checked their separation and referenced their GPS positioning.

"One point five miles and closing, can't you go any faster?"

Zack sucked in a breath through his teeth. "How far to the south bend, Dani?"

"Just over a mile."

He groaned.

"The tornado isn't coming directly at us," Dani clarified, although her nervous tone did little to comfort either of them. "The center looks like it might be shifting more easterly again."

Zack fought another gust of wind.

"But if you can drive a little faster, that might help!" Dani exclaimed as some more unknown material banged on the roof while a mesquite sapling rocketed across their headlights.

"No can do. Unless you want to end up upside down in a drainage ditch while God-knows-what flies at us. I'm doing the best I can to keep my truck on the road."

Zack slid his right hand down the wheel and slammed the wiper control into the highest setting to swipe away some of the gathering specks on the windshield. Dani extended the track line east-southeast on the laptop and compared it against their current route.

"If both tracks hold, the core crosses maybe half a mile behind us once we turn south," Dani revealed.

"And if either doesn't hold?" Zack snipped back.

"Then we improvise."

Zack gave a quick, incredulous glance. "Fantastic, great plan."

"You got anything better, genius?" she replied with irritation.

Before he could respond, their stomachs dropped as the road suddenly pitched downward a few degrees. Everything behind them was momentarily hidden beneath the rise. Air still rushed over the top of the truck, but the depression gave them some respite from the worst of the crosswinds.

Zack's truck eased back up out of the low-lying stretch while the white pickup and its headlights descended into it. As the road leveled again, another transformer exploded behind them as Dani peered out through the rear window.

The circulation enveloped the entire road behind them, with the power flash illuminating a terrifying portion of the massive wedge. Another sheet of corrugated metal cartwheeled across the farm road in between them and the white pickup, throwing a bright trail of sparks before the panel lifted again and went out of sight.

Dani's breath caught in her throat. The condensation itself remained more than a mile away, but its debris cloud stretched far beyond the core. Pieces of the agricultural building and surrounding objects still orbited inside it, flashing in the electrical light before the darkness reclaimed them.

The sign marking the sharp southern bend ahead finally materialized in the outer reach of the headlights. Dani turned back toward the windshield just in time to catch it.

"There!" Dani said as she pointed. "Hard right, then south."

"How far to the east-west did you say earlier? Third of a mile?" Zack immediately asked.

Dani nodded, then gulped as Zack maintained his speed as he approached the corner.

"Zack, you're doing forty."

He shook his head and sighed. "I'm aware."

"You can't safely make that at forty."

"Dani," he spoke sharply. "I said I'm aware."

"Then maybe start slowing the fuck down," she seethed back at him.

Zack did not lift his boot until the last possible second. He slammed the brakes hard as he yanked the wheel to the right. The truck's nose dipped, and the anti-lock brakes activated briefly beneath his boot as the chip seal loosened at the edge of the curve.

Behind them, the roar grew louder.

Dani switched to the camera feed to follow the tornado after they rounded the bend, although the tornado was mostly disguised by the blackness around it. The exterior image shook violently as the roof mount fought the wind. Even though the tornado was barely visible, the camera caught the white pickup slipping between lanes as it approached the turn.

"They're fishtailing," Dani warned. "Losing traction."

Zack continued at an even pace as his eyes drifted routinely between the road ahead and the laptop screen.

"Hand me the mic," Zack said urgently. Dani unclipped it and set it in his outstretched hand. He let off the gas, coasting the truck, as he spoke.

"Trailing truck, keep the throttle steady through to the curve. Do not lock up your tires; we have extreme crosswinds that could push you over if you send too much weight to one side," he said as the white pickup gradually slowed its approach to the sharp turn.

In the rearview, the white pickup leaned hard toward the driver's side as it entered the southern road. Its rear end slid several feet outward, carrying it across the center line and nearly off the far shoulder of the dogleg. The driver managed to counter-steer just enough that the truck remained upright and straightened out as the tires regained traction.

"Go, go, go!" Dani shouted as the Ford's high beams flared and both trucks buried their accelerators.

Both trucks raced south. Less than a minute later, they approached the east-west junction and slowed down. Dani twisted around. The now mile-wide or greater wedge engulfed the sharp bend they both had just abandoned. Zack kept his eyes forward, breathing heavily, staring at the reflective green east-west road sign as it vibrated intensely within the inflow. When the white pickup caught up to them, Zack flicked on the right turn signal and drove a few hundred feet west before pulling over into the gravel alongside the road.

They waited several minutes for the miscellaneous debris to quit blowing around as the inflow subsided. Dani unbuckled her seatbelt and threw her door open before Zack felt it was safe enough, although he did not protest. He rubbed his left hand firmly across his face and eyes before following Dani outside. The loud roar from earlier had become dull and faint as the monster moved on through the Texas countryside without them.

Dani made it halfway to the white pickup before Zack called after her.

“Grab a flashlight first,” he ordered as he left his door open behind him.

“How many damn times do I need to remind you of that?” he muttered quietly to himself.

She doubled back toward the passenger door without arguing. Dani reached into the glovebox and pulled out the heavy LED flashlight they kept inside. The light danced across the floorboard when she tested it, but she tightened her grip around the handle with her other hand until the trembling settled.

The white Ford remained roughly thirty yards behind them on the gravel shoulder. Its headlights cast elongated shadows of Dani, Zack, and his truck down the road. Neither of the occupants had stepped out. Through the windshield, Dani could see the driver still gripping his steering wheel with his head leaning against it. The passenger had their face buried in both hands.

Zack opened the rear driver-side door of his truck and pulled out the trauma kit. He placed it on the front seat while he awaited word from Dani on the condition of the two people in the white pickup. He reached toward the laptop and snagged the microphone by its cable which now lay across it. Then Zack turned the volume up as he keyed the microphone.

“Silver Tacoma from the crossroads, this is Spotter Seven-Nine,” Zack transmitted. “Do you copy?”

Only static returned as nearby chasers made sure to keep the channel clear. “Silver Tacoma from the crossroads, do you copy?” he repeated.

More static. Roughly a minute later, standard radio traffic resumed as he looked over toward Dani.

She jogged toward the white pickup while another handful of insulation drifted across the road and caught against the grass in the ditch. A few cold raindrops began to fall, striking her bare arms as she approached the driver-side window. The glass was lowered several inches, revealing two men who appeared to be in their early twenties. Both looked considerably pale in the glow of the dashboard lights.

“You guys hurt?” Dani asked. She pointed the flashlight toward the gravel rather than into their faces. “Did either of you hit your head, lose consciousness, or get hit directly by any debris?”

The driver shook his head too quickly. “No. I don’t think so. I think we’re good.”

His breathing suggested otherwise. Every inhale he took ended shallowly in his chest, and his fingers remained locked around the wheel. His grip on it bleached his knuckles white. The

passenger slowly lowered his hands from his face, and while dirt streaked both of his cheeks, Dani saw no blood.

"You kept it upright," Dani said softly. Her voice flattened into the calm, smooth cadence she always used with injured strangers. "That curve tried to throw you. But you drove it out and got both of you guys outta there. You did good; take a breath."

The driver looked down at the steering wheel and attempted to follow her instructions. His first breath ended in a shudder, but he broke down on the second one into a sob.

"Hey, it's okay," Dani soothed. "You're okay now."

Zack's voice cracked faintly from his open door as he continued attempting to reach the Tacoma over the radio. The channel remained silent.

Dani gave them another moment before nodding to the storm behind them. "Were you running with the silver Tacoma?"

"No," the passenger answered. "We ran into them out there. We were all talking on the same VHF channel, though."

"What was the last thing you heard?" Dani asked. "Anything after they tried going east?"

The driver composed himself a little and shared an uneasy glance with his passenger. "They said the transmission was slipping. We saw them pull through the intersection, but they couldn't speed up. The older guy came over the radio and said it wouldn't grab."

The passenger swallowed hard before continuing. "Then just... static. That was it."

Dani glanced back toward the distant storm again. Another power flash illuminated the tornado much further downstream than it was when they parked. The massive wedge had begun condensing back into a tighter, cleaner core as it carved its path eastward.

"Did you catch either of their names?" Dani asked.

Both men shook their heads and looked down toward the floor.

"Okay," she responded. "Stay here and turn your hazards on. Strobes too, if you have them. Emergency crews may need someone to flag the intersection."

The driver looked toward the road behind Dani with watery eyes. "You're going back?"

"Already said we would."

"That... it went right over them," the passenger said. "There's no way they..."

His voice faded when Dani peered back in the truck at him.

"There were two people in that truck," she said. "They might be okay right now, but that doesn't mean they'll be okay just waiting there. Somebody has to go physically check on them."

Neither one had anything more to say. Dani tapped twice against the outside of their door with her knuckles and turned away as the white pickup's amber strobes blinked to life.

Zack was sitting behind the wheel when she returned, the trauma kit now sitting behind Dani's seat. The correlation coefficient scan dominated the laptop, its violent patch still spreading eastward across the Texas plains. He had one hand around the radio and the other braced against the side of her seat, staring at the signature as though attempting to telekinetically dismantle the tornado from afar.

"They don't know much aside from confirmin' some of my own suspicions," Dani said as she hauled herself up into the cab, pausing for a beat to lock her seatbelt back into place.

"Transmission started slippin' once they tried accelerating east. Last call said it wouldn't grab. Then they went radio silent."

Zack looked out the back window toward the white pickup. He didn't speak for a few moments.

"So they were still beside the crossroads when the circulation caught up."

Dani nodded. "Yeah, I... I saw them get overtaken."

Zack stared back at the monitor for another second before switching the radar to reflectivity scans to get a better idea of where the precipitation and potential hail associated with this storm lay. After examining the motion for a few moments, Zack slammed the radio mic back into its holder and buckled his seatbelt.

There was no discussion between them. Dani clutched at her seatbelt as he made a wide U-turn from the shoulder. He kept their speed low as they headed back east toward the junction, headlights beaming over the insulation and foliage scattered across the roadway.

"We're far enough behind the main circulation, but the way back is gonna be a minefield," Zack said as he drove. "If we hit downed wires, we stop. If the road has roofing nails and sheet metal all over it, we're not driving through it. We keep a clear exit at all times. I am not gonna get us boxed in if this storm decides to drop another one."

"I know," Dani sighed, her voice flat as she yanked the radio microphone cord taut.

"Net control, Spotter Seven-Nine," she said. "We observed a silver Toyota Tacoma with two occupants become airborne at the previously reported crossroads. I'll be sending the coordinates again shortly. The vehicle suffered a transmission failure. Took a direct hit from the core. We are returning to attempt contact."

Dani opened the mapping display, read their coordinates, and typed them into her reporting database as Zack turned back onto the farm road. Net control acknowledged the report through some interference and advised that emergency units were being dispatched.

They drove up the dogleg back toward the crossroads. The pavement was now coated by a thin mixture of dust and rain, giving it a dull shine beneath the headlights. Zack pushed forward carefully, keeping the truck below thirty. They rounded the sharp bend leading back to the devastated crossroads. Light rain tapped against the windshield; Zack activated the wipers, smearing the rain and dirt a few times before using the washer fluid to clean the glass.

"How far east is the circulation now?" he asked.

Dani brought velocity back up on her laptop. The couplet was now several miles east of their location and beginning to track north as the tornado weakened over the last few scans.

“Far away from us... And it appears it might be roping out soon. RFD is weakening as well.”

“So that weather isn’t an immediate problem,” he commented.

Dani looked through the windshield. “No. Everything behind it is.”

She retrieved the flashlight and lowered her window down. The beam cut across the pavement and into the ditches. Debris became visible almost immediately. Shredded tree limbs, bits of fencing, siding, and scattered chunks of vegetation. Dani shined the beam a little higher out into the field and caught the splintered remains of a utility pole resting farther out into the pasture.

The warm scent of inflow and dry dirt had been replaced by the odor of torn vegetation, ruptured earth and something metallic lingering on the wind.

“Be careful,” Dani warned. “Anything could be thrown out here.”

Zack leaned closer to the windshield as he carefully maneuvered around a broad tree limb hanging out from the ditch. Its splintered edge pointed halfway into their lane, forcing them around to the other side. Dani continued to reveal more wreckage with every sweep of the flashlight, although there didn’t appear to be anything larger ahead that could stop their progress completely.

The livestream continued running unattended. At this point, even their two paid moderators didn’t bother enforcing chat rules aside from spam and trolling. Their interior microphone for the chat remained muted, and Dani never reopened the chat window. She panned the rooftop camera forward, but that was more for their own documenting purposes than their viewers’ benefit. Neither of them gave the audience much thought.

Dani pulled old correlation coefficient data to study the signature left behind by the tornado as it passed through the crossroads.

She spoke up. “Now, I’m not positive, of course, but the debris signature is telling me the Tacoma probably didn’t go far. It lofted a lotta shit high in the air, but mostly light stuff as we can kinda see with our eyes right now. If I had to bet, it’s probably within a hundred yards or so of the intersection.”

Dani paused for a moment before continuing. “Although, there was that giant hunk of machinery I saw it tossin’ around, so I may be wrong?”

Zack dropped their speed to a crawl as the headlights caught a series of deep gouges carved into the chip seal roadway. The scars lined up with a pattern of corkscrew-shaped scours entrenching the mud on either side of the road. It was clear several subvortices had chiseled into the field while repeatedly slamming something massive into the pavement before dragging it off.

Dani leaned closer to the windshield and observed the marks. “Could’ve been that combine.”

Zack swallowed down a lump forming in his throat. "Could've been the Tacoma."

Neither of them spoke again for a few seconds.

Rain poured steadily onto the windshield. Water ran through the debris along the shoulders and made little rivers in the cracks to what was left of the drainage ditches on each side. Zack navigated around a twisted length of fencing stretching along the right shoulder, then stopped accelerating the moment Dani's flashlight caught a bright reflection ahead.

"Stop," Dani said.

Zack hesitated a moment over the brakes.

"Stop, stop, stop!"

The truck rocked on its suspension when Zack brought it to a sudden halt. Dani aimed the beam ahead, and several black cables appeared, glistening in the light. They were sagging from one side of the road to the other, draped at different heights across both lanes. One rested directly on the pavement, nearly invisible minus the rain reflecting off its rubber coating.

Zack shifted into park and leaned back in his seat. He followed the cables with his eyes through the windshield, attempting to determine which poles were connected.

"How much farther?" he asked.

Dani checked the map. "Less than a quarter-mile, for sure."

Zack grabbed the radio. "Net control, Spotter Seven-Nine. Our vehicle access is blocked from the southeast by about a quarter-mile. Downed power lines. We're assuming they're still energized and rain is beginning to fall."

A dispatcher acknowledged the report and firmly advised them against attempting to cross. Utility crews had already been requested, but no estimate could be given for their arrival. He lowered the microphone and sighed.

The rain intensified, reducing everything beyond the headlights to shifting curtains of gray. The heavy power line to Zack's left became submerged in the runoff. A crack of thunder somewhere nearby rattled through the truck.

Somewhere ahead of them, less than a quarter-mile away, the Tacoma waited in the darkness.