

Chapter One

Hurricane tracking station, Tampa, Florida, mid July.

The overweight man bent towards the computer scope and watched the green lines trace the storm's progress across the grid, punctuated by an electronic beep every time the eye of the disturbance was located. Concern etched his haggard face and mechanically he rubbed his brow with a sweaty palm. In over thirty years this storm was the worst he had ever seen. Sighing dejectedly, he leaned back in his chair, its springs and rollers protesting audibly to the great bulk shifting uncomfortably. Several people in the room glanced his way.

The hurricane had been given birth just off the southern coast of Africa. It is there where the Indian and Atlantic Oceans meet in a chaotic battle of wind and water, each vying for supremacy. The Agulhas Current, much like the Gulf Stream flanking the eastern shelf of the continental United States, moves the warm waters of the Indian Ocean south along the east coast of Africa. The Benguela Upwelling churns the cold waters of the Atlantic against the southern and western shore of Africa, where the two systems meet in a battle of titans. Only the bravest souls dare to sail around the Cape of South Africa.

With no land mass to impede its progress, the hurricane had swept out of the southern Atlantic, gaining speed and increasing in size. When she left the open ocean, a swath of destruction was carved across the landscape. Classified as a force five, she was the worst to ever strike the Caribbean and the United States. Antiquity had provided the deadly lady an elegant name: Hurricane Cleopatra. She had already laid waste to the Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico and Cuba; she then had taken a nasty turn north and struck Key West before skirting into the Gulf of Mexico. Where would she land again?

Five years ago, four hurricanes had struck Florida in a matter of weeks, lying waste to vast areas of the peninsula. Along with the destruction to buildings, roads and bridges, many lives had been lost. For months, families were without electricity and water. The modern amenities a civilized society has come to take for granted were no longer there, snatched from them by the violence of nature. Federal

assistance had come, but the rebuilding had taken time. These thoughts had been echoed in the room since the storm watchers had started tracking her. Would Cleopatra hit the Florida mainland? Would she be as devastating? Only time would tell. Time.

The large man in the chair looked at several sets of monitors above his head situated in a corner of the room on metal lattice work, the bigger screens on the bottom. Two of the monitors picked up images from cameras stationed on the roof. The sky was a pea soup grey, with dark clouds scurrying by in a random pattern, occasionally pausing and then rushing away. It had rained earlier, but now had stopped, with only the wind remaining. The wetness, along with the darkening horizon, gave the appearance of impending doom. The man felt a chill run up the base of his neck and the hairs on his head stood on end. Surely, they could anticipate her movements. Part of the Florida rebuilding campaign had been to upgrade storm warning stations and the latest in hurricane tracking technology was represented in this very structure. Casually, he stole a furtive look at the men and women busy at their jobs. They were the latest in technology, too. The technicians had been trained at the best schools, graduating at the top of their class.

It was the responsibility of the men and women in this room to track Cleopatra's every movement, anticipate her next turn and warn humankind of the awesome disaster spiraling their way. A large viewing screen, occupying the entire breadth of one wall, tracked the spinning monster on its erratic course from Africa to America. A second screen depicted images taken by reconnaissance aircraft, showing the whirling bands of weather comprising the storm, with the darkest rings indicating rain.

The multitude of aerals jutting skyward from the rooftop were ultra sensitive and linked to orbiting satellites. Even with the latest in technology at their fingertips, they still felt like a child trying to anticipate the path of a marble over rocky ground. There were too many factors affecting the probability of a projected course: wind, sea temperature, cold fronts, the Gulf Stream. All of this information was fed into several different computers and various destination horizons were suggested. As data came in, the estimated directional line could and, generally, did change.

At least the building was built to withstand storms even more powerful than Cleopatra. The walls were over two feet thick and they were several stories underground, sequestered from the outside world, their only link the monitors. If the storm hit Tampa, at least they would be spared the devastation that had befallen Key West.

The overweight man rubbed his eyes when he thought about the destruction. Key West had been left in ruins. The island had been reduced to barren coral in a turbulent sea. The devastation had been total and complete. Hurricane David of years past that had struck Homestead and Miami was nothing compared to this brute. With winds approaching 225 miles per hour, nothing could withstand her fury. The seas had been churned to a violent froth and had washed completely over the islands, inundating everything in their path. The storm surge had broken all previous records and had washed away bridges, roads. The man rubbed his face a second time in just as many seconds. When would she die?

The death count was already over two thousand and rising. How many more people would lose their lives before she was recorded in the annals of history? The man looked at the cities in Cleopatra's path and a knot formed in the pit of his stomach. He was not aware he was squeezing the arm of his chair until his fingers went numb. They could not get a break.

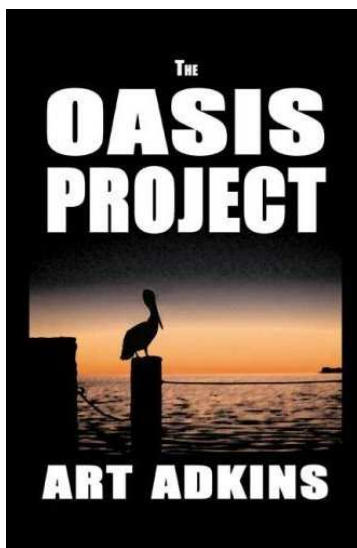
Just when it appeared she was losing her ferocity, Cleopatra had entered the Gulf of Mexico and stalled. This was not a good sign and everyone had held their breath waiting for the inevitable. The wait was not very long. With no land mass near the storm to impede her violent winds, and the wind currents from the Gulf of Mexico and North America feeding her, she soon eclipsed her previous wind speed. She was now spinning near 230 mph and growing in size. Her appetite was insatiable, her power indescribable. She had become, in the vernacular of forecasters, a Megacane. But he knew the worst was yet to come: within the last two hours she was moving.

Scott Jones looked at the green scope on his console that seemed to be mocking him. The satellite images did not lie – Cleopatra was headed for the United States. Initially, upon entering the Gulf of Mexico, it appeared as if she was going to track due west towards Mexico. That was before she had stalled. Within the last

two hours she had turned and was tracking north towards the continent. Her speed was thirty-five miles per hour. Cleopatra was only eighty miles off the west coast of Florida and currently due west of Naples. This put her on the southern southwest tip of the Florida peninsula. If she tracked true north, every coastal city on the west coast of Florida would feel her effect. Already, the constant rain accompanying her had created flooding across most of the southern part of Florida. Miami, Homestead, and Ft. Lauderdale looked like inland seas with portions of buildings protruding from the rising water. Naples was already flooded. Lake Okeechobee had breached the dykes surrounding the lake's southern side and the flooding waters had destroyed all the sugar plantations. It was impossible to navigate by roads and boats were the only means of transportation. If she moved north, the rains would come.

Turning to the map of Florida on one of the screens in front of him, Scott stared at the bright red line projecting where Cleopatra may make landfall: Tallahassee, Florida. Scott sighed once before picking up the phone. Notifications had to be made so evacuations could be started. If Cleopatra continued to gain strength she would impact Tallahassee with speeds never before faced. Scott slammed his eyes shut as he waited for a connection. He did not want to think about the possibility of death and destruction.

The connection was made. "I've got bad news." Everyone's head in the room looked at Scott as he spoke to an official in Tallahassee.



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