



STORM RUNNERS

ERUPTION

ROLAND SMITH

SCHOLASTIC PRESS
NEW YORK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Available

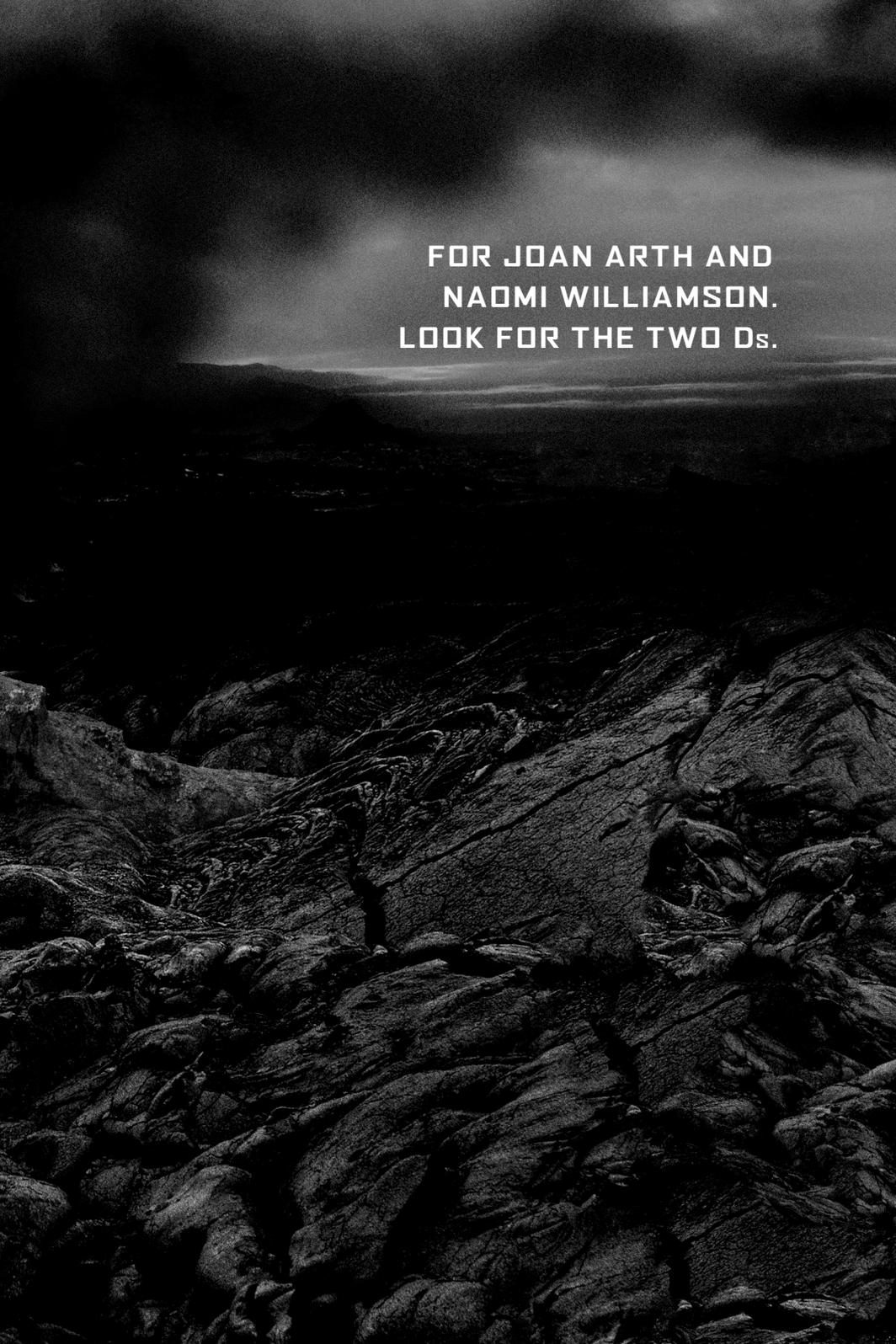
ISBN 978-0-545-08174-0

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 12 13 14 15 16

Printed in the U.S.A. 23

First edition, March 2012

Book design by Phil Falco



FOR JOAN ARTH AND
NAOMI WILLIAMSON.
LOOK FOR THE TWO Ds.

THE ONLY EASY DAY WAS YESTERDAY...

Chase Masters sat on a hay bale next to his father, John. His broken front tooth hurt, his shoulder ached, and he was exhausted but oddly content.

Not many people survive a Category Five hurricane, a bus sinking, a lion attack, a leopard capture, a torrential flood . . . oh, and a thirteen-foot alligator. *He shook his head in wonder. And now we're heading to Mexico?*

His father was staring at the elephant and its calf as they paced around the ring. Rashawn was scooping grain out of a fifty-gallon barrel. The Rossis were examining Momma Rossi's injured monkey, Poco. Cindy and Mark were reviewing the video footage Mark had just taken.

His father stood up and stretched. "I guess we'd better get moving. We have a lot of work to do before we head to the airport." He looked at Chase. "Nine thirty?"

Chase looked at his watch.

"Exactly," Chase said.

09:30 AM

Nicole, Marco, and Momma Rossi started arguing.

“Let’s give them some privacy, Chase,” John Masters said quietly. “Cindy, Mark — you too.”

“We’ll go out back and shoot some B-roll of the damage,” Cindy Stewart said.

“Always thinking of your next story!” Cindy’s camera-man, Mark, rolled his eyes. “That’s why you’re in front of the camera, and I’m behind it. Where did Richard go? Doesn’t the Number One News Anchor in Saint Petersburg, Florida, want to take over this story too? I can see it now: ‘Hurricane Emily: A Journey through the Aftermath with Richard Krupp.’”

“He headed home to see if his family is okay,” John said. “That’s why he came with us to Palm Breeze.”

“Yeah, yeah, and to steal our hurricane footage,” Mark said as he followed Cindy out the door.

“I guess I’ll go to the bunkhouse to rustle up some food,” Rashawn Stone said. “I worked up an appetite dodging that leopard. Can I borrow your satellite phone, Mr. Masters? I’d like to see if I can get ahold of my daddy.”

John handed her his phone.

“We’ll meet you at the truck,” Chase told Nicole as he and his father headed to the far door.

Nicole stopped arguing with her father and grandmother just long enough to holler, “Remember Simba’s locked in there!”

“Funny girl,” Chase’s father said. “I have no intention of getting the generators out of my truck until that lion is out of my rig. How big is he?”

“Big enough,” Chase said, shuddering at the thought of seeing Simba again. He looked back at Nicole. The Rossis presented a strange sight. They stood at the edge of a dimly lit circus ring, an elephant with a newborn calf rattling her chains behind them. Nicole wasn’t that tall, but she stood at least two feet taller than her father and grandmother. Marco and Momma Rossi were little people.

Outside the circus barn, it looked as if the world had been tipped upside down and shaken out onto the ground. Tomás was walking around the paddocks, talking on his satellite phone while he picked through the storm debris.

It was a beautiful Florida morning — warm, a slight breeze, not a cloud in the sky. If it weren’t for the debris scattered everywhere, it would be hard to believe that Hurricane Emily had swept through a few hours earlier, grinding the community of Palm Breeze into splinters.

“Looks like you picked the best building to take shelter in,” Chase’s father said.

The circus barn was the only building on the property with minimal damage.

“It was luck,” Chase said.

“Fate,” his father said.

“What’s the difference?”

His father shrugged.

“What now?” Chase asked.

“Tomás is talking to Arturo in Mexico City. We’ll meet him there tomorrow and head south.”

“What about Nicole?”

“She’s welcome to come if she can talk her dad into it, but I wouldn’t hold my breath. We’re not going down there on vacation. I can’t guarantee her safety, and neither can you.”

“Nicole can take care of herself. I wouldn’t count her out. She’s tough.”

“After what you, Nicole, and Rashawn lived through last night, I have no doubt about that.” His father continued, “You don’t have to come with us. I’m sure Mr. Rossi would be happy to put you up. There’s plenty to do here, and he could use your help.”

“You want me to stay?”

“No, but you’ve been through a lot over the past twenty-four hours.”

“So have you.”

The all-night trip to reach the Rossis’ farm had cost John Masters two trucks and nearly his life. On the way, his partner, Tomás, had gotten a call from his brother, Arturo, in Mexico City. Arturo had driven a load of animals south of the border for the Rossi Brothers’ Circus, but the circus hadn’t been there to meet him and he’d been unable to reach them

by phone. Arturo thought the show was stranded in the mountains outside of Puebla, close to the village where Tomás's wife and children lived. While Emily had been smashing Palm Breeze, a 7.5 magnitude earthquake had been crushing Puebla.

"It's your call," Chase's father said.

Chase wanted to say that he'd go if Nicole went, but whether she went or not was out of his control and, he had to admit, out of the question. He was going to Mexico.

"I'm in."

His father nodded.

"What about the reporters?"

"They're going too."

"Why?"

His father avoided Chase's gaze and looked toward the debris-ridden path. "I'm not exactly sure," he finally said. "I guess we got close during the hurricane. Extreme danger does that to people."

Chase had seen how Cindy Stewart looked at his father, and how his father looked at Cindy. As far as he knew, his father hadn't been on a single date since Chase's mother and little sister had died two years earlier. Chase didn't object to his father's new relationship, if that's even what it was. *It just feels a little sudden*, he thought. Less than forty-eight hours ago, his father and Tomás had headed off to Saint Petersburg to look for work. A few hours later, he'd seen his father on television being interviewed by Cindy about disaster preparedness. Then she showed up with his father at the Rossis'

farm. Now she and her cameraman were going to Mexico with them? Chase was having a hard time wrapping his mind around it.

“Cindy’s making a documentary,” his father said.

“About what?”

“Hurricane Emily, for one thing. The earthquake in Mexico. Natural disasters . . .” His father hesitated. “And me, I guess.”

“You?”

His father knew a lot about natural disasters and was an interesting guy. *But a documentary about him?*

“She was curious about me getting struck by lightning,” his father said.

Chase was surprised to hear that his father had told someone he’d just met about the lightning strike. As far as he knew, his father had never told anyone. It had happened a year ago, in the backyard of their home. Chase had seen a blinding flash, and the next thing he knew, someone was giving his father CPR. His father was in a coma for two days. When he woke up, he sold everything they owned, including their home. Then he bought a semitruck to carry building supplies, and a fifth-wheel to live in. He and Chase and Tomás hit the road, running after storms, charging desperate victims a fortune to repair the damage. Chase looked at the gold lightning bolt earring in his father’s earlobe.

Did he also tell her the bolt was made from his wedding band?

“It might help us to have a news crew from the States,” his father continued.

“How so?” Chase asked.

“For Mexico to get aid, they need to get the word out about the earthquake. The news here is going to be about Hurricane Emily twenty-four-seven. Natural disasters compete with each other for money and airwaves. I think the officials in Mexico might be more lenient about letting us into restricted areas with a reporter and a cameraman on board. They need to get the word out.”

His father was probably right. Chase and his father didn’t watch a lot of television, but when they did, it was always weather and disaster related. They were well versed in the tragedy and politics of natural disasters.

“Just the opposite of here,” Chase said. “How did you get past the roadblocks?”

“Tomás found a way around them.”

“He always does.”

Tomás — short, strong, and quick — hurried across the paddocks toward them, stuffing his sat phone into his back pocket. He had been working at Chase’s father’s side for over twenty years, and during that time, neither had mastered the other’s language. They spoke in what could only be called Spanglish. Tomás was talking nearly as quickly as he’d been walking, but Chase was able to pick out a few words: *quads, compound, lion, generator, steel, winch, elephant, welder, dentist . . .*

The word *dentist* did not usually give Chase a jolt of joy, but today was different. He had snapped off one of his front teeth when the school bus sank. The broken tooth was killing

him. The only way he could stand the pain was by keeping his upper lip wrapped around the jagged edge.

When the conversation ended, Tomás nodded and trotted off.

“Wait!” Chase winced as air hit his tooth.

Tomás stopped and looked back.

“Does he understand there’s a lion in the semi?”

His father laughed. “Yeah, he understands.” He waved Tomás on his way. “He’s going to build a bridge across that gap.”

The night before, during the worst of the storm surge, a river of water had roared between two of the barns, scooping out a deep furrow. Chase and Nicole had managed to wade across the gap twice. They had trapped Simba in the semi-trailer on the other side of the gap. Most of Chase’s father’s tools were in the semi, including the three industrial generators they needed to power up the Rossis’ farm.

Chase and his father walked over to the gap. It was littered with debris, most of which, the day before, had been the Rossis’ farmhouse.

“Is that a dead giraffe?” his father asked in shock.

“Gertrude,” Chase said.

“Horrible,” his father said.

Chase had already seen the dead giraffe and had paid his last respects. What now interested him was the storage container sitting crossways between the two barns. He stepped over Gertrude’s neck to get a closer look.

“What is it?” his father asked.

“Momma Rossi was convinced Hurricane Emily was going to hit the farm. She has . . .” Chase hesitated. He didn’t want to tell his father that Nicole’s grandmother was a psychic, but she had certainly been right about the hurricane. “She was right.”

“Lucky guess,” his father said.

It was more than luck, Chase thought. “I loaded that container with boxes of Rossi Brothers’ Circus memorabilia and other valuables. I caulked it and bungeed a tarp around it. The tarp’s gone, of course, but it looks like . . .”

His father examined the container’s seams and its door. He climbed underneath and checked the undercarriage. “You did a heck of a job, Chase. It looks like it rolled down here. Where was it parked?”

“Behind their house. Well . . . where the house used to be.”

“A house can be rebuilt,” his father said. “But the stuff inside the container is irreplaceable. You saved the Rossis’ past.”

Chase flushed. Praise was something his father did not give out easily, or often.

“If we have time, we’ll try to pull the container out of here with the tractor.” His father looked at the barn to their right. “What’s in this one?”

“More animals,” Chase answered. “Ostriches, zebras, parrots, and a bear named Brutus.”

“Let’s go check it out. Might be room to park the container inside.”

“That’s probably not a good idea until they get Brutus back into his cage.”

“The bear’s loose in there?”

“The last time I looked, yeah. Along with the ostriches, except for the one Nicole had to shoot after it broke its legs running into a wall.”

His father shook his head. “You had a much more interesting night than I thought.”

More terrifying than interesting, Chase thought, but didn’t say it. “Why’s Tomás building a bridge?”

“I thought it might be easier to get the lion out of the semi by backing it right up to the cat cage in the circus barn. Once we have the cat out of the bag, I can hook up the three generators in tandem without moving them out of the truck. We’ll have enough power to run anything we need, including the arc welders.”

“Why do you need the welders?”

“Because Marco told me that he doesn’t have an elephant-proof barn. We’re going to make it elephant-proof before we go to Mexico.”

“When does our flight leave?”

His father smiled. “What time is it?”

The Internal Clock Game. Chase’s father did not wear a watch. Since the lightning strike, he hadn’t needed one. He always knew exactly what time it was — to the minute.

Chase looked at his watch. “You tell me.”

“Ten-oh-two.”

“Exactly.”

“That gives us ten hours before we have to leave for the airport to catch the red-eye to Mexico City.”