



STORM RUNNERS

ROLAND SMITH

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Summary: Twelve-year-old Chase Masters travels the country with his father, a "storm runner," but he is tested in ways he never could have imagined when he and a new friend are caught in a hurricane near St. Petersburg, Florida.

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FOR NIKI



ONE YEAR EARLIER...

Chase Masters decided it was time to repair the tree house in the backyard. It had been his little sister Monica's favorite place. She'd spent so much time up there they'd nicknamed her Little Monkey — a nickname Monica had liked.

He started by tearing out a couple of rotted support beams and replacing them with treated four-by-sixes. He was going to fix the roof next, but he never got to it.

The next morning, he and his father, John, were sitting in the kitchen, eating breakfast. Eggs, pancakes, bacon — a Sunday tradition since Chase had been born.

"Want some more grub, Chase?" his father asked.

Chase shook his head. He'd already eaten five eggs and a half dozen strips of bacon, and he was still working on a stack of pancakes tall enough to sit on.

His father poured himself another cup of black coffee, sat down at the table, and looked out the back window.

"Thunderstorm," he said. "After we clean up I better head out to the jobsite and double-check to make sure everything's tied down and covered. Want to come?"

"Sure."

Large raindrops began to splatter the backyard.

Chase's father leaned closer to the window. "Are those tools lying outside?"

What his father was really asking was, "Why in the BLANK did you leave those tools outside?"

Tools were like religious artifacts in the Masters house. After each use, they were to be cleaned, oiled if necessary, and put away in their proper place — and each tool had only one proper place.

"Sorry." Chase jumped up from the table.

"Relax. I'll get 'em. Finish your pancakes. It'll give me a chance to see what kind of job you did on those supports."

"I did it right."

Chase's father grinned. "I have no doubt. You were trained by the Master."

Chase returned the grin. And it wasn't because of his father's terrible pun. Chase was relieved that his father wasn't upset that he was fixing the tree house.

When Monica was five years old she'd wandered off, sending the whole family into a terrified panic. They had searched for hours. Chase's mother had called the police. They were about ready to issue an AMBER Alert when Chase found Monica sound asleep in the old oak tree in the backyard. If she had rolled over, she would have fallen twenty-five feet. Chase and his father (mostly his father) had started building the tree house the next morning. Soon Monica was spending almost as much time up in the tree house as she was in their real house.

The tree house had been sitting empty for a little over a year

now, and Chase had not mentioned his repair plans to his father. There was an unspoken rule in the Masters household: The deaths of his mother and sister were not to be talked about, because the subject opened sores that hurt for days.

As far as Chase knew, his father hadn't set foot in Monica's bedroom since the accident. It was almost as if he thought she was still in there and would come running out one day, filling the house with her wild, uninhibited giggling. Chase would have given almost anything to hear that laugh again.

Chase watched his father walk across the yard in the now pouring rain. John Masters hadn't bothered to put on a coat and he was getting drenched. His lightweight cowboy shirt clung to his lean, ropy muscles. His brown hair had turned black in the torrent. He climbed the slick rungs screwed into the gnarled trunk and inspected Chase's work as if he were a structural engineer, which he wasn't. He was a builder. One of the best in the city. He had built their house, and several other houses in the neighborhood too. After he'd married Chase's mother, he'd started a construction company with her brother, Bob.

Chase's father climbed down from the tree and gave his son a thumbs-up sign, which Chase took to mean that he could continue with his renovation and maybe, just maybe, they could put the past behind them and get on with their lives.

It turned out that they did get on with their lives, but it wasn't the life Chase had been expecting.

Chase's father reached down and picked up the nail gun. He shook the rain off of it, looked up at the sky . . .

Chase was still a little shaky about what happened next.

There was a blinding flash of white light followed by a deafening explosion that shook the house. When Chase's eyes cleared from the flash, he saw his father crumpled beneath the tree. His clothes were smoking. Chase ran out of the house, yelling. The sharp stench of ozone filled the backyard. His father wasn't breathing. The snaps on his shirt were fused to his chest. People showed up from all over the neighborhood. A couple of them were doctors. They started giving him CPR.

Chase couldn't watch.

He looked up at the tree.

His father's left boot was dangling by its shoelace from a lower branch.

Two days later his father came out of his coma.

When Chase told him how terrible he felt about leaving the tools outside, his father laughed and said, "That bolt of lightning was waiting for me my whole life, Chase. If it hadn't nailed me in the backyard, it would have gotten me in the front yard, walking to my truck, or later at the jobsite. You can't hide from your fate."

On the road with his father over the past year, Chase had thought a lot about the word fate and decided that it was one of those little words with a big meaning. . . .

01:58 PM

When my father got struck by lightning, so did I, Chase thought. When Mom and Monica died, so did I . . . a little . . .

“I guess you can’t separate your fate from those you’re with,” Chase said quietly.

“What?” his father asked.

Chase jumped. He hadn’t meant to say that last part out loud. “Nothing . . . uh . . . just thinking about a song.”

“You want the radio on?”

“No, I’m fine.”

Chase and his father were in Florida speeding down a road along the Gulf of Mexico. Chase’s father had one hand on the steering wheel of their 4x4 truck. In his other he held a travel mug of black coffee. Chase’s job was to replenish the mug from the Thermos at his feet, which he had filled four hours earlier in the weather-battered fifth-wheel trailer they were pulling. His father called the fifth-wheel the Shack. It was where they lived. It was nicer on the inside than the outside. The rough exterior was the result of a hailstorm in Oklahoma two weeks ago. Chase had been inside the Shack when it hit. The worst part had been the sound. His ears had rung for

twenty-four hours after the ten-minute pounding. When he'd opened the door, the ground had been covered in golf-ball-size ice pellets for as far as he could see. A mile away a farmer had been killed running from his John Deere combine to his house. He should have stayed inside the combine.

“What time is it?” his father asked.

His father did not wear a watch. The perfectly running clock on the dash had been covered with black electrical tape. At the top of almost every hour (when they were together) he would ask Chase, who wore a radio-controlled atomic-time watch, that same question.

“Two o'clock,” Chase said. “Exactly.”

“Perfect.”

The Internal Clock Game. This was just one of the games his father played during their frequent long drives. Another game was How to Get Out of Doom City. This consisted of his father picking a random street in a random city, and a disaster like a flood. The goal was for Chase to quickly find high ground, then plot a route that would get him out of town before the disaster caught up with him.

Chase wondered if Tomás played driving games. He doubted it. Tomás was behind them, driving the Shop — a forty-foot trailer pulled by a Mack semi tractor — by himself. Tomás's living quarters were in the front part of the trailer, with a separate entrance. The rest was filled with two dirt bikes, an all-terrain quad, and enough tools and supplies to build a three-story home. Behind the Shop, Tomás was pulling a second 4x4 truck.

Signs on the sides of all the rigs read, M.D. EMERGENCY SERVICES, followed by a 1-800 number.

Obviously the *M.D.* didn't stand for *Medical Doctor*, but sometimes the authorities thought it did and Chase's father didn't correct them. *M.D.* stood for *Masters of Disaster*. In his father's world, everything had a double meaning.

About a week after the lightning strike, the economy was struck by recession. The building industry tanked. Chase's father and uncle's business was on the verge of bankruptcy. Uncle Bob was on the verge of an emotional collapse.

Chase's father wasn't worried at all. He had other plans. He sold everything they owned, including their house and their vacation cabin on Mount Hood. With the proceeds, he bought the Shack and the Shop, paid off his half of the construction company's debts, then signed the company over to a grateful but stunned Uncle Bob. . . .

"What are you going to do, John?"

"Start over. See the country."

"What about Chase?"

"He'll go with me, of course."

"What about school?"

"He'll go to school."

Chase had been to three schools in the past year and was heading toward his fourth, provided it wasn't wiped off the face of the earth by Hurricane Emily, who was whirling her way counterclockwise across the Gulf of Mexico.

Emily had started out a few weeks earlier as an innocent little thunderstorm in Ethiopia. She moved west over the Sahara Desert, picking up sand and heat, then swept out into the Atlantic, where she became a tropical storm and got her name. As the trade winds pushed her farther west she gathered humidity and power. At seventy-four miles an hour she graduated from a tropical storm to a hurricane.

Which is more than I'm going to do if we don't settle down in a school for more than two months, Chase thought.

He had just gotten used to the school in Oklahoma when his father pulled the plug and started them toward Emily. Coincidentally, or maybe not, Emily was his mother's first name. His father still had work when they'd left Oklahoma. Chase wondered if the hurricane's name had anything to do with their leaving so quickly, but he knew better than to ask. Nothing could shift his father's mood faster than bringing up his mom or sister.

Chase looked over at his father. He used to know him face-on. Now he knew him mostly in profile from the passenger seat. About the only time they were together anymore was in the truck driving to a disaster. When his father and Tomás were working, they slept in hotels, only coming back to the Shack & Shop to pick up supplies. Chase had thought that being on the road would bring him and his father closer together. In some ways it had, but right now, sitting three feet apart, they might as well have been in different solar systems.

Chase's relationship with Tomás was not much better, but theirs was a language problem. Tomás's English wasn't good

and Chase's Spanish was nonexistent. Chase wasn't sure how Tomás and his father communicated so well. A combination of Spanglish and telepathy, he guessed. Tomás had worked for Chase's father for more than twenty years. When his father told Uncle Bob that he was taking Tomás with them, Uncle Bob almost wept.

"I'll have to hire three new guys to replace him," Uncle Bob had said.

"Four," his father had replied.

More like five, in Chase's opinion. Tomás was at least ten years older than his father, but he was a building machine. Tomás never walked between tasks. He jogged, like everything was an emergency. A few years before they hit the road, Uncle Bob had jokingly said that he would give Tomás a five-grand cash bonus if he could frame a two-story house that passed building inspection in twenty-four hours. Tomás did it in twenty-two. The building inspector said it was the best framing job he'd ever seen. Uncle Bob handed over the cash.

Tomás was married and had eight kids, but Chase had never met his wife, or the rest of his family. Neither had his father. They lived someplace in Mexico. Tomás visited them once a year around Christmas, and Chase assumed he sent most of his money down south to them. In his truck he kept laminated photos of all of the kids arranged by age. On top of his dash was a plastic statue of Saint Christopher, patron saint of travelers. Saint Christopher was also invoked against lightning. Tomás had given his father a Saint Christopher's medal when he was in the hospital. So far, it had worked.

On most Sundays, Tomás put his hammer down for a few hours and went to church. Chase had gone with him a couple of times. He didn't think Tomás understood a word the priest was saying, but that wasn't the point.

Chase believed that Tomás went to church for the same reason he had left everything behind to join Chase's father.

Tomás was loyal.