



**STORM
RUNNERS**
THE SURGE

ROLAND SMITH

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Summary: After barely surviving a terrifying hurricane, Chase and his friends Nicole and Rashawn have made it to the safety of Nicole's family farm, which is also the winter home of the Rossi Brothers' Circus, where floodwaters are rising and dangerous circus animals are on the loose.

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The background of the image is a dark, vertical-grained wood texture, possibly a door or a wall panel, with a rich, dark brown to black color palette. The wood grain is prominent, showing natural knots and variations in tone.

**FOR CHAD MYERS,
THE GUY I TUNE IN TO DURING
WEATHER DISASTERS**

12 HOURS

Chase Masters looked at his watch. It was hard to believe it had only been twelve hours since he, Nicole, and Rashawn had gotten on the ill-fated school bus at Palm Breeze Middle School.

During those terrible hours, the bus had sunk, its driver had died, and they had nearly drowned. Chase had broken a front tooth, his shoulder had been smashed by a falling chunk of asphalt road, and a thirteen-foot alligator had attacked him.

But we're alive, he thought. Hurricane Emily didn't get us . . .

The wind slammed into the side of the metal barn where they had taken shelter.

. . . yet.

Rashawn and Nicole jumped.

"What time is it?" Nicole asked with a nervous laugh.

Chase told her. . . .

03:51AM

“Sounds like we’re trapped in a steel barrel and someone’s poundin’ on the side with a sledgehammer,” Rashawn said, covering her ears.

That’s exactly what it sounds like, Chase thought, tempted to find a steel barrel, curl up inside, and stay there until Hurricane Emily blew herself out. He ran his tongue along the jagged edge of his front tooth and stretched his shoulder — both still ached. He’d hoped that when they finally reached the farm the nightmare would be over, but it wasn’t. A leopard named Hector was running around the property with Nicole’s grandmother’s pet monkey, Poco, dangling from his mouth, and her family’s house looked like it had been crushed with a wrecking ball. At first they’d thought that Nicole’s grandmother, Momma Rossi, had been trapped under the rubble, but she had taken refuge down the hill in the barn just before the house collapsed.

Momma Rossi was a little person, like Nicole’s father, Marco. The dwarfism gene had bypassed Nicole, so she was regular height. Chase glanced at Rashawn, who was alternating her gaze between Momma Rossi and the very large

elephant chained in the middle of a sawdust-covered circus ring. It was hard to say which sight confused Rashawn more.

Momma Rossi fixed her brown eyes on Chase. “How are my treasures?”

“Uh . . . I don’t know. I didn’t get a chance to check,” he replied. Momma Rossi had predicted that the house would go down in the storm. A day earlier, she’d asked Chase to transfer dozens of boxes of memorabilia to a storage container near the swimming pool in back of the house. He’d caulked the container and wrapped it in tarps, but he doubted it had held up to Hurricane Emily’s fury.

“What’s important is that you’re all okay,” Momma Rossi said.

“What *is* this place?” Rashawn asked.

“Our farm is winter quarters for the Rossi Brothers’ Circus,” Momma Rossi explained. “Normally this time of year the farm would be filled with show animals and performers, but they managed to book some additional dates in Mexico, prolonging the season. Nicole’s mother runs the show and her father — my son — Marco runs the farm.”

“Why’d this elephant stay behind?”

“Pet? She’s pregnant with her first calf,” Momma Rossi said.

“Why’s she chained up?”

“So she doesn’t float to the ceiling,” Nicole and Chase said in unison and laughed.

“You guys are hilarious,” Rashawn said, rolling her eyes. “I bet she’s chained so she doesn’t tear this building down.”

“You’re right,” Nicole said. “We don’t have an elephant-proof building. The show elephants spend their winters in Texas with our trainer. Pet would be there now, but we didn’t want to move her this close to having her calf.”

“I hope the building is hurricane-proof,” Rashawn said.

Chase had never been in a hurricane, but he’d seen plenty of dangerous weather. Following his father from disaster to disaster the past two years had shown him that no building was stormproof.

At that moment something heavy slammed into the side of the metal circus barn. They all jumped.

“What was that?” Rashawn shouted.

“I don’t know,” Nicole said. “But it sounded like it was shot out of a cannon at point-blank range.”

“Storm debris,” Chase said. “Probably from the house. It’s upwind.” By the loudness and density of the hit, he thought it might be one of the house’s toilets. His father was always giving him articles about people getting killed by unusual WPPs, wind-propelled projectiles. “I think we’ll be —”

The first thud was followed by a salvo of WPPs. Everyone covered their ears and backed away from the wall. Nicole huddled closer to her grandmother, and Rashawn was shaking. Chase stood frozen in place. The barrage went on for several minutes, then suddenly stopped.

They all stared at the wall. No one spoke. The wind still rattled the metal building, but the sound was nothing compared to the strikes they’d just heard.

Nicole broke the silence. “That was insane!”

“I thought the wall was going to fall down right on top of us,” Rashawn said.

“So did I,” Chase admitted. He walked up to the wall and checked for damage. There were a lot of dents, but nothing seemed to have pierced the metal. “Heavy-gauge steel,” he said, not mentioning that if one of the panels had come loose, it would have peeled off the building like the skin from a rotten banana, with the other panels close behind. “We’re safe in here,” he added with more confidence than he felt.

“Are you sure?” Nicole asked.

Her long black hair was wet and tangled with twigs and dirt. Her usually bright brown eyes were dull with fatigue. Chase wasn’t surprised, after the terrifying journey they’d endured to get to the farm. “Maybe you should sit down,” he said.

“He’s right,” Momma Rossi said. “You look dead on your feet.”

Nicole nodded and collapsed on the curb of the circus ring. “I am. That last swim took a lot out of me.” She looked up at Chase. “You haven’t answered my question.”

“I don’t know if we’re safe or not,” Chase admitted. “There’s water coming in around the door, which isn’t surprising with this wind and rain. I guess I’d better check out the rest of the building, but to do that I’ll need more light.”

“Our generator can only power one of these rings at a time,” Nicole said. “I don’t know how to switch it to the other rings.” She looked at her grandmother.

“I don’t know either,” Momma Rossi said. “The lights were on over Pet’s ring when I got into here.”

“I’ll check it out,” Chase said. “Where’s the generator?”

“In the workshop — connected to the bunkhouse,” Momma Rossi said.

Chase clicked on his headlamp and shined the beam along the wall. “Battery’s just about gone.” He checked the second headlamp. Its beam was worse.

Momma Rossi took a flashlight out of her coat pocket. “Plenty of life left in this one. You should find batteries in the bunkhouse. I’m not sure where they keep them. If you don’t find them in the kitchen, check in the workshop. Marco’s been camping out in the bunkhouse for the last week to stay close to Pet. There should be plenty of food in the kitchen if any of you are hungry.”

“We haven’t eaten for hours,” Chase said. “I’ll see what I can find.”

“Do you think *your* dad can find *my* dad?” Nicole asked.

“If I can get ahold of him.” Chase pulled a plastic bag from his cargo pocket. Inside was a satellite phone just like the one his father and his father’s partner, Tomás, carried. Chase’s phone had died after the school bus sank, but it had come back to life just before they reached the farm. He’d been able to talk to his father long enough to find out that he and Tomás were stranded on the other side of the lake and were looking for a way around to reach the farm. Chase did not expect to see them anytime soon. He pushed the on button. Nothing happened.

“Still dead,” Chase said.

Momma Rossi had set up a small electric heater next to the ring. Chase removed the phone battery, wiped it and the phone off as best as he could, then set both of them near the heater.

Tears formed in Nicole’s eyes. “I hope Dad’s not hurt.”

“Marco is fine,” Momma Rossi said, putting her arms around her granddaughter.

“Are you just saying that to make me feel better?” Nicole asked. “Or do you know?”

“I know,” Momma Rossi said. “Just like I knew you and Chase and Rashawn were in danger.”

Just like she knew the farmhouse was going to blow over and nobody believed her, Chase thought. Just like she knew that Mom and Monica had died in a car crash on a mountain.

“Excuse me, ma’am,” Rashawn said.

“Please call me Momma Rossi.”

“Okay, Momma Rossi. No disrespect, but I just met you a few minutes ago when we stepped into this barn. How could you know about me before then?”

Momma Rossi smiled, but didn’t answer her.

Chase looked at Rashawn. “She just knows things. Do you want to help me check out the rest of this barn?”

“Sure,” Rashawn said. “But first I want to know if Momma Rossi has a bag of rice in that kitchen of hers.”

“I’m sure there is, dear,” Momma Rossi said. “But we don’t have any way to cook it with the power out.”

“I don’t want to eat it,” Rashawn said. “I want to use it on Chase’s sat phone. My daddy is always dunkin’ his cell phone

in the water — he manages a wildlife refuge, so he's outside all day. He just puts it in a bag of uncooked rice and the grains suck the moisture right out of it. Couple hours, the phone's good as new."

"You're kidding," Chase said.

"No joke," Rashawn said. "And when you get that phone fired up, you also need to ask your daddy about *my* daddy. I'm sure he's out looking for me too."

"I will," Chase promised.