

*The following is a sample of the novel
Funnel Vision. Buy the paperback or e-book online.
Learn more at <http://chriskridler.com/books>*

FUNNEL VISION

a novel

by

CHRIS KRIDLER



SKY DIARY PRODUCTIONS
Rockledge, Florida

Copyright ©2012 by Chris Kridler

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the writer and publisher.

Published by Sky Diary Productions, Rockledge, Florida.

Learn more about the author and storm chasing at
ChrisKridler.com

Jacket design and photography by Chris Kridler.
Additional photos by Maksim Toome and Geber86, iStockphoto.

ISBN: 978-0-9849139-0-9

First edition

PART 1

SPRING RISING



Judy tried to fit the windy world within the rectangle framed by her camera's lens — the crumpled-carbon-paper sky, the wrestling clouds, the inexorable tornado. It snaked downward, stirring up and swirling the red earth. For a moment, as she clicked the shutter, she thought she could keep it there, hold it steady so she could study it and understand why it sprang forth, a vine sown in the sky's garden, like the one so many years ago. It had grown in her imagination, that storm of her childhood. Familiar fear prickled at her neck, rebuffed by the stubbornness that would not allow her to turn away.

She longed to freeze the storm's motion, but on a chase, that's not how it worked. Standing beside the rocky road, she looked up and watched as the twister moved out of her frame and closer. She let the Nikon hang loose around her neck so she could lean over the tripod and adjust her video camera. The wind shifted as the edges of the circulation enveloped her. A thousand bits of color snapped and popped through her peripheral vision: the whipping trees, the rippling grass, and a car moving her way, somewhere beyond the dust rushing along the ground and into

the funnel's base. The storm would not be confined. She could not hold it there. Part of her wanted to make it safe and small, beautiful in the lens of her camera, but it was never safe. She longed for it to be so safe she could walk up and touch it, remember what happened, contain it and put it away, but then, she wouldn't feel like this. She loved this sensation, wild and vast and uncontained, spawned by the sky, the tornado, the implication of infinity, and the wind caressing her cheek.



Jack heard it more than he saw it, the flapping metal octagon whizzing by his ear like some crazed aluminum bird. "Get in the car!" he told Dennis. He grabbed his video camera, tossed the tripod in the back and slipped behind the wheel as he kept an eye on the tornado. He was already rolling the sedan forward as his passenger slammed the door.

Dennis was breathless. "Do you think that stop sign was trying to tell us something? Maybe we should go back."

"That was just an inflow jet." Jack stole a glance at the writhing funnel on their left as he drove the car hard, trying to keep pace. "Do you have any idea how lucky you are right now? You can't bottle this, Dennis. Drink up while you can."

Jack lived for moments like these. Every day without storms the rest of the year beat a dull metronome in his head, the routine of bar-hopping, women, grad school. Sunshine depressed him. This was what he waited for: spring. Storm season. The scientific allure was strong, but for him, there was more to the chase. He wanted to catch what he pursued, to lose himself in

that moment when he forgot everything else. He couldn't turn back now.

He dodged another pothole on the gravel road, then aimed his video camera at the swirling plume of dust.

"Let me shoot the video." Dennis, pretending he wasn't worried, took snapshots with a digital camera as the car bumped along. "This is why the mesonet is better. One person drives; the other does the video and the data."

Jack snorted. "This isn't the mesonet. Next week, we'll have the mesonet. This week, you shut up and navigate."

"I'm glad I'm not riding with you next week."

"Yeah, Marcus isn't a mean bastard like me." Jack laughed.

"He's pretty cool for a dweeb, but it's the hail-catcher I'm excited about."

A paunchy undergrad on the five-year plan, Dennis had wavered before capitulating this morning when Jack asked him to be his navigator. Most of the research team saw Jack as intimidating, fearless or unnaturally lucky, and those who had chased with him knew that he would push them to their limit, just to see them squirm.

Jack was aware of his rep. He didn't care. He had seen the sky's spinning gears crank out more tornadoes than he could count, but the first one of the season was one he couldn't miss. The late-April tube kicked up ruddy dirt, Oklahoma style, as it hurried east.

"It's starting to turn," he said, eyeing the now-leaning tornado. The rural highway was turning, too, curving gradually north, its power poles stretching like a necklace to the horizon. He popped his video camera into the dashboard mount so the

lens would point out the windshield. "I think it's going to cross the road."

"Then shouldn't you slow down a little?"

"In a minute." Jack smiled, enjoying Dennis' discomfort. He liked to get right to the edge of where he shouldn't be. This was it. He engaged the brakes, and the car crunched to a halt, idling as the tornado began ripping through a hedge line a half-mile from them, tossing trees in the air.

"Unbelievable," Dennis whispered.

As it crossed the road, it appeared to weaken, but power flashes bore witness to its violence as it hurled down a couple of poles. The grinding column of red and black undulated as it eased east, and small rocks and grass on the fringes of the circulation smacked against Jack's car. The urgent, pattering sound tapped a primal center in his brain, the one that said *flee*, the one he always resisted.

"It's roping out," he said, making sure his camera was centered on the dwindling tornado. Now it was a ghost of its former self, and soon the dust rotating on the ground seemed broken off from the skinny funnel lifting into the clouds. Then there was no more dust.

Dennis squinted out the window. "It's gone."

"There might be another." Jack sighed. One was never good enough.

He pressed the accelerator and noticed another car parked on the left, a couple of miles ahead and facing them, on the other side of the tornado's track.

Dennis noticed it, too. "They had a great view. Looks like another chaser."

“Looks like a woman,” Jack said with interest. As they closed the distance, he rummaged in the camera bag between the seats for his cigarettes, then checked the matchbook tucked in the pack. Empty. “Damn it. Do you have any matches?”

“Nope. Doesn’t this car have a lighter?”

“I lost the cap, and my laptop’s usually plugged into the outlet anyway. Let’s ask this girl.” As they got closer, Jack could make out golden hair and an attractive figure. “Besides, she’s beautiful. I have to talk to her.”

“Oh, no, not again,” Dennis said.

“We have a second. There’s not even a wall cloud yet.” Jack pointed to the new rotation developing in the storm, hoping Dennis would accede to his experience and buy his delay tactic.

“Whatever.” Defeated, Dennis pulled a cell phone out of his pocket. “I’m calling Marcus for data.”

Jack brushed a hand through his short, dark hair. She would like him. They almost always did.

He loved to meet women on the road. He loved to meet women any time, really, but it was rare to meet a woman who chased storms. She looked as if she belonged out here on the windswept prairie. He pulled up by her small, silver SUV and saw she had dark blond hair with long, thick braids, a pretty, unusual look. She wore close-fitting khakis and a short-sleeved, sky-blue blouse that whipped in the wind, clinging to her curves. The blue matched her eyes, which were dreamy with the storm, still staring up at the clouds — she wasn’t breaking away to acknowledge him, wasn’t stopping her shot until she was ready. Parked on the shoulder and standing behind a sturdy tripod, she filmed the fading mesocyclone with rapturous attention. A serious 35mm camera hung from her neck. Jack felt a familiar

desire, the yen for conquest, along with something else, more unusual, a kind of recognition. She was an elemental force on this elemental day, or was it his adrenaline talking? It almost felt as if lightning were about to strike.



Judy was so engrossed in shooting the last tendrils of the tornado that she didn't realize the car was there until its trailing dust cloud wafted past her camera. She finished her shot, hit the button and glanced over. Antennas on the roof. Dashboard cam. Chasers. The passenger was on the phone, a bit disheveled and plump, with limp brown hair and a rumpled college T-shirt and jeans. The driver was a different story, in his crisp, white T-shirt and long shorts. He had a great smile, an angular face, spiky black hair and eyes as green as young wheat. A handsome devil, she thought. Impulsively, she grabbed the camera that hung from her neck and snapped his picture, a wide-angle shot that captured the scudding clouds of the storm.

"Nice to meet you, too," he laughed.

"I have to take pictures when I see a good subject," she confessed, slightly embarrassed at being caught. "Those clouds looked incredible behind you."

"A sky like this makes me think anything is possible." His voice was pleasantly deep. "Wasn't that a great tornado?"

"Fantastic!" She was happy to share the thrill of the moment, still high from the storm. Somehow, this man was part of it, and made infinitely more attractive by the association.

"Got any matches?"

It wasn't exactly what she expected him to ask, but Judy held up a finger, silently telling him to wait while she opened her passenger door, leaned in and sifted through the glove compartment. She pulled out a glossy white matchbook embossed with red foil hearts and the names "Hank and Emily," then walked back around her car and tossed it to him. "Keep them."

He caught the book with one hand and glanced at it, then ripped out a match and lit his cigarette before turning to her again. "You Emily?"

"No, I picked that up at a wedding."

"Not your wedding, then?"

She laughed. "Oh, no."

"Thank god. Want one?" He held up the pack of smokes.

"No, thanks. I just like to play with matches."

"Lucky for me."

His passenger got off the phone. "We have to go *now*, Jack. Marcus says this circulation's really getting its act together. It's about to do it again."

"OK, OK," Jack said, turning toward the passenger to impale him with a pointed glare. Then he looked out his window at Judy and winked. "We'll meet again." He flashed her another smile as he drove off.

"I certainly hope so," she said to herself. He looked like trouble. Like the tornado, possibly irresistible trouble.

The dust kicked up by the car formed little sparkling clouds that tumbled and fell back to Earth.

A week without tornadoes passes like a glacier when you're stuck on the road. Jack tried to speed it along with beer, but beer just slowed it down.

At the hotel bar, he let the Oklahoma tornado and the pretty girl play in his head like a movie reel. Now, they were last week's memory, and he tried unsuccessfully to use them to blot out today's poor chase.

The early-season low had sped off to the east, and the next system, which had looked so promising, was falling apart all around them — had fallen apart, in fact, as the research team chased it that afternoon. With the downturn in the weather sank his mood. Not willing to endure Marcus' god-awful snoring in the room, not motivated enough to work on his dissertation, and not sociable enough to join the others at the all-night trucker cafe by the highway, he chose the bar instead.

One dangling, bubbled globe of amber glass saved it from shadow, mocking his memory of the prairie light, the way the golden rays shot beneath the storm at sunset. The cell had collapsed with the day, leaving only fragments of structure, rain, and not a hint of the slim tornado, which had fizzled almost as soon as it touched down.

The dark wood of the bar absorbed most of the lamp's sickly glow, except for a little glimmering in his clear, square ashtray and the dew on his brown bottle. A few dust motes drifted, stirred by the beige, plastic fan bolted to the wall next to the shelves of liquor. It was too cool for it, since the front had moved through, but its blades made a futile attempt to keep the air moving in a smoky bar from which smoke had no escape. It was not unlike the general air of oppression in this town, one of so many built along a strip with a Pizza Hut and a Dairy Queen and

a sign on the outskirts from the last century claiming bright hopes for the next, only the next was here, and the chamber-of-commerce colors were peeling. Nebraska. The Good Life, as the border crossings kept reminding them.

He lit another cigarette, contributing to the noxious weather of the bar, the clouds wafting from his lips and dissipating. After four days of touring, this was their first real storm. It was a weak start for their research, which after all the thousands of miles came down to giving people without basements a few more minutes to lug a mattress and the babies into a closet and huddle beneath the big, square cushion and pray it all isn't ripped away in one screaming inhalation of nature. They were barely speed bumps for the tornadoes, he thought. They weren't like him and the others, rolling ahead of the beast, dancing around its claws. That was the romantic version, anyway. The others waited for fate, and sometimes, they died.

What time was it? 11:21 p.m., the digital clock next to the whiskeys said. The red numbers glittered in the walls of the glass vessels, the dreamy brown liquids looking back at him. He could almost see the watery outlines of his taut, narrow face. And something else. Another face reflected.

He looked to his left, around the corner of the L-shaped bar, and saw a woman there, staring at him. She had brown eyes and brown hair streaked with blond, curly in the everlasting fashion of the Plains, a couple of decades behind. Soon, it would be hip again, and she would never know as the global style rotated on its pointless axis.

"Are you one of those storm watchers?" Her voice sounded raspy. A cigarette stub glowed in the ashtray next to her. God,

did he sound like that? She shifted closer, into the light. She was not as young as she first appeared.

"Yes, I am." He knew they were obvious wherever they went. If it wasn't a blatant logo on a T-shirt, it was the fleet of cars with instruments sprouting out of the roofs, like deformed bike racks.

"It came right past our farm today," she said. "We lost a fence, but it wasn't too bad. I've seen worse." She wore a white blouse and a brown overall dress with ruffles. Was everything brown here? Restaurant uniform. Waitress. Wedding ring.

"You're out kind of late," he said. "I mean, if you have to milk the cows in the morning."

"Oh," she said with a slow smile, nice teeth, moving to sit next to him at the corner, "I work too late to milk cows, even if we had some."

"You on a break?" he asked, knowing she wasn't.

"The Wagon House closed already. Sometimes I need to wind down." She took a sip of her drink. It was red. Vodka-cranberry, he guessed. He tried to stick with beer on the road, unless he was sweet-talking a girl. Beer was cheaper, and he didn't feel as shitty in the morning.

"Bartender, another for the lady." He pointed to his nearly empty bottle, too, and the pale mole-man snapped into slow-motion action.

Her eyes sparkled under the curls and the poufy bangs, still damp from the rain outside. "Tell me about chasing those storms. Why do you do that? It's so dangerous."

"Not if you know what you're doing." He touched her arm lightly as if he were sharing a confidence, enjoying the feeling of playing her. He sensed she might provide the distraction that today's storms could not. She was attractive enough, and by all

the signs, willing. She probably only had a few years on him — he was nearly 30 — but a hard life made it look like more.

“I’m Jack.” He offered his hand and clasped hers warmly, lingering a little. She flushed. The amber light spilled through the air between them and smoldered weakly in her brown eyes. Whiskey light. He heard a roll of thunder far away, the melancholy clatter of the decaying storm. He took a pull from his fresh, cold bottle and started to tell the tale as outsiders liked to hear it.



“Fucking storm chasers,” Greg said to Judy, looking out the window of the hardware store upon the land that Dorothy forgot. Her younger cousin had a push broom in his hands, idle, as he gazed at three sport-utility vehicles in various states of hail-dentedness parked at the library across the street. They had a lot of antennas, but Judy knew they weren’t university researchers. Not enough gear, and too many tacky lights. Their license plates didn’t have the Kansas clouds hers did.

“If it weren’t for all the duct tape they buy, you and Uncle Ray would be out of business,” she teased, drinking in the thin sunlight of early spring. Down the street, she could see it glint off the statue of the Great Pioneer in the circle at the heart of Pancake. Home. Beneath the warm, sweet calm, though, she felt a whisper of unease, a need to get out there and into the prairie wind, to find the storm she sought.

This weekend was shaping up nicely. A strong system promised to kick into the Plains from the Four Corners, but she

had Eliza Hendricks' wedding to shoot. It would kill her to miss a good outbreak. She'd love to get on the road again.

Oh, hell, the system was two days away. No use fretting. It was the weather. Anything could happen.

She glanced over her shoulder at old Miss Reynolds in the back of the store. The wizened little woman was flipping through seed packets, shaking one and holding it up to the green-tinged fluorescent lights before rejecting it and moving on to the next.

Across the street, three men in T-shirts and jeans emerged from the library, one carrying a road atlas. They walked to the biggest of the cars, pulled another map from its cavernous interior and unfolded it on the hood, chatting all the while. One of them, a lanky, curly-haired guy in a baseball cap, laughed, and Judy could hear the joy in the sound.

Members of her tribe.

"I wish I were chasing." She said it without thinking.

"See? You're a sympathizer," Greg scoffed, going back to his sweeping. He was as close to a rebel as this town would allow — shaggy dark hair with white streaks; a tiny mustache; a glinting, silver, dagger-shaped earring; and a tattoo on one arm that said "Wheat Me," just visible under the short sleeve of his Hale Hardware polo shirt. He was going nights to the community college to be a computer technician.

"Maybe I'm an artist." Judy wouldn't confess it to Greg, but she was a chaser first. She always wanted to be chasing. She sold storm video to TV news or through a stock agency when she wasn't shooting weddings and portraits, removing acne scars and tooth stains with Photoshop, even inserting lost loved ones for an extra fee. Resurrection wasn't cheap.

“They bring the storms with them,” Greg said. “They’re like plague rats.”

“Watch out, then. I think one of them is about to infect you.”

The curly-haired guy was walking toward Hale Hardware, and the jingle of the door heralded his entrance. He nodded at them, a bit bashfully, then wandered into the aisles. Judy watched him, evaluating his sloping nose and slender figure and deciding she approved. As he picked up a roll of duct tape and strode to the front, she had to giggle.

“What?” Puzzlement creased his forehead.

“Duct tape,” she said.

“It is inherently funny, isn’t it? Like it has something to do with ducks.” He smiled at her. “Robinson. I mean, that’s me. Robinson.”

“I’m Judy.” She stuck out her hand and he shook it. “Not much to chase today, huh?”

“Not yet. I wouldn’t worry.”

“I’m not worried. I just wish I were out there, too.”

His brown eyes lit up. “You’re a chaser?”

“At least some of the time. In real life, I’m a photographer. I’m supposed to shoot a wedding Saturday.”

“Oooo, not good,” Robinson said. “I think that’s going to be the big day. We were just checking some of the models. Your library has a smokin’ connection.”

Greg cleared his throat. “You going to buy that?”

“Um, yeah.” Robinson set the roll of duct tape on the counter, pulled a Superman wallet out of his back pocket and plunked down some bills.

“That’s my cousin, Greg,” Judy said. “He doesn’t like storm chasers.”

Greg blanched at her tattle and fished some change out of the register.

Robinson laughed at his expression. "He must like *you*. I mean ... who wouldn't? I mean, because you're related." He cleared his throat. Endearingly awkward.

She smiled awkwardly in return. *You have no idea. I'm a pain in the ass*, she thought, as Greg began to quiz Robinson about the various uses of duct tape. It was no picnic growing up on the Yellow Brick Road, shadowed by Dorothy's tornado. Her parents had even named her for the actress who played the girlish hero. Now her folks lived on an Arizona golf course, scarecrows forgotten, while Shannon, her prettier, scattered younger sister, drifted from job to job in Oklahoma City. And Judy still wore her Dorothy braids, only brighter, a shade of straw; her nose long and straight, her eyes sky-blue, her cheeks touched with a blush of rose from all the time she spent outside in her garden or on the Plains, trying to find the sweet spot between tornadoes and the steel-reinforced concrete bunker in her head.

It was as if Judy were the only one who could bear to live with reminders of the twister that came through when she was 14. For her, being here among the signs — the still-stunted trees, the empty lots, the stark new buildings where old houses once stood — was almost a compulsion. She got her degree in Lawrence, tried a few classes at the Kansas City Art Institute, but had to come back to Pancake. She lived and worked in the house on Main Street that her parents bought after the tornado and later sold to her.

Gone in an instant, the tornado was always there. Memories surfaced with a fierce, pricking force: eight dead, including Greg's mother — her Aunt Kate — and their boxy houses on the

west end of town reduced to splinters. The families' anguish was almost too much to take. Her father worked endlessly. Her mother made martinis, and when she was out of olives, drank straight gin. Or beer. Or whatever was available. Judy lost herself in the search for her pictures, the albums she'd put together of the family reunions and the nature hikes and their long-lost cats. The negatives were waterlogged or just plain gone, launched on an updraft into some Missouri back yard.

She noticed Greg and Robinson staring at her.

"What are you thinking about?" Greg asked.

She paused. Not Aunt Kate. Don't bring up Aunt Kate.

"Cats."

"Them's good eatin'," Greg said.

Robinson laughed. "My dog would agree. I miss him. One of my buddies is watching him while I'm out here."

"What kind of dog?" Judy asked.

"A mutt. A lovable little guy. He rides along at home. Only slightly scared of thunder."

"Where are you from?"

"I drove out from Maryland."

"That's a long way to come."

"Not for tornadoes. But I envy your commute. Here." He reached into his wallet and fished out a wrinkled business card. "If you think you can get away, give me a call. We can always use a native guide."

"I'll even bring my own duct tape."

"We would also accept a duck, but only if he has gas money."

"You guys staying in town?"

"I think so. Maybe you could join us for dinner later? You can text if you don't want to call. I know some people can't deal

with the sound of the human voice anymore. I don't mean you, though, I mean — I mean, I'm sure — anyway, call me." He was flustered. Awkward, again. Robinson smiled, touched the brim of his cap, turned on his heel and was jingling out the door in a moment.

It was as if a light had left the room. She couldn't believe she'd actually run into a chaser at home. She had more in common with him than she did with everyone else in Pancake.

She'd probably end up like Miss Reynolds, still browsing by herself in the back of the store, shopping for more and better chemicals to further mutate the botanical freak show she called a yard. Why did Judy stay? Maybe it was people like her cousin, or the sunflower farms, or the windmill park on the edge of town. More than anything, she thought, it was her quest to pin the thing down, that desire, that strange yearning to be back in the moment when the tornado tore apart their peaceful lives. It was in all of her photos, her quest to capture the ephemeral light and energy and darkness of that moment in the storm when nature brought everything together into a laser-fine point of undeniable power. It was in the painting on her living-room wall, the mural she couldn't finish, the fine strokes of gold and green and blue and bruised purple that were the boundless, mysterious Kansas horizon. If she could just get that right, or snap that perfect photo, or hone that fiery point within herself, maybe she would understand.



Robinson's face, lit by the pink neon of The Filling Station, shone with bliss as he took another lick of his caramel-drizzled soft-serve vanilla cone.

"I told you it was the best ice cream in town," said Judy, who sat next to him atop one of the picnic tables outside the old gas station-turned-cafe. They'd compared chases for an hour before ordering their ice cream, and now they were among the last customers of the night. The evening was getting dark and chilly.

"I'm so glad you did," he said. "I'm nuts about ice cream. The rest of the guys don't know what they're missing. Too bad you skipped dinner."

"Deadlines. One of my clients wanted to review the portraits I shot for his press kit, and this was the only time I could get it done, especially with that wedding coming up."

"Do you work a lot?"

"When you work for yourself, you never get time off. My boss is a bitch," Judy smiled.

"I don't believe that," Robinson said. "I work for myself, and my boss is awesome. Lets me take Fridays off, buys me gourmet coffee every day and loves puppies."

Judy laughed. "What do you do?"

"Writing. Web design. Graphics and that sort of thing."

As if to prove her point, the phone in her sweatshirt pocket buzzed. He looked in its general direction and held out his hand. "Want me to get it?" he asked playfully. "That's the third time."

She grimaced and pulled out the phone. "Guess I'd better ... Hello, this is Judy."

"It's Madeline Hendricks. We have a problem." Uh-oh. The bride's mother.

"What's wrong, Mrs. Hendricks? I'm all set to go for Saturday."

"Eliza isn't."

"What do you mean?" Judy looked at Robinson and shrugged.

"She's missing in action. She went after Rick this morning when he didn't come home from his bachelor party and hasn't been back since."

Judy wasn't sure why the mother of the bride had called her. "What can I do for you, Mrs. Hendricks?"

"If she calls you, please call me right away."

"It seems unlikely, but I'll be happy to call you, Mrs. Hendricks. I'm sure she's OK." Judy and Eliza had gone to school together, but their friendship was casual at best. She suspected her old friend had sought her out more for the friend discount than for any lasting warm regards.

"What was that?" Robinson asked as she disconnected the call and dipped her tiny spoon into her melting mint chocolate chip.

"Girl trouble."

"You ... you have girl trouble?" His brow creased, and Judy laughed to see what he was thinking.

"No, the bride I'm supposed to shoot Saturday is having troubles, apparently."

"There's something about being a bride that turns women into alien, fire-breathing creatures," he said, starting to crunch into the sugar cone.

"Not all of them. I've met a few calm ones."

"My sister Tess was a raging beast. She sold her car to pay for her wedding, because my parents refused to fork out the

ridiculous amount she demanded. Then she started bicycling to work, lost thirty pounds, then lost her husband. Or he lost her, to be more precise. She left him after two years.”

“As long as she’s happy?” Judy wasn’t sure what to make of this.

“Very much so. Now an avowed divorcee, dating a successful plumber.”

“Maybe people aren’t meant to be together forever,” Judy said, feeling the black truth of it, based on her own pathetic experiences. The phone buzzed again. She looked at it. Eliza. “I should get this.”

“Please do,” Robinson said, amused.

“Eliza, is that you?”

“Judy, I’m sorry,” came the rapid-fire syllables of her friend. “I’ll pay the cancellation fee, but you won’t have a wedding to shoot on Saturday.”

“You’re not getting married?”

“Oh, I’m married, all right,” Eliza laughed. “Just not to Rick. The asshole didn’t just rent two strippers for his party; he rented them for two days of intimate interaction. I found him and his buddies passed out at a roach motel in Wichita. I told him he could go to hell.”

“But you married — I mean —”

“You know I’ve always had a thing for Ed.”

“Ed Pusher?” He owned a gas station at the western extreme of town.

“We’re in Vegas. Don’t tell my mother.”

“She called me specifically and asked me to call her. I said I would.”

"I'll text her that I'm OK and call her tomorrow. Judy, I'm so excited!"

Obviously. Excited and crazy. "You promise you'll text her? Your mother actually looks at texts?"

"Yeah, it's the only way she can communicate with my brother."

"OK, Eliza. Take care of yourself." Judy heard laughter on the other end. It sounded like a party.

"You know it, sweetie. See you next week."

Judy ended the call and looked numbly at the phone. "Holy cow," she muttered.

"Is something wrong?" Robinson looked concerned. Nice guy, that. And then, she realized, nothing at all was wrong. She felt a smile take over her face.

"Guess who gets to go chasing on Saturday?"



There was nothing a storm chaser liked better than a whirlwind wedding, especially if it set her free to chase an early-season cyclone.

As the bottom dropped out of the low-pressure system pushing into the Plains, Judy Hale Photography went mobile. She was happy as she packed her boxy car with cameras and set out on Saturday morning in Robinson's caravan of chasers, while the first bright, white cumulus clouds began to pop up to the west.

"I like the look of that line," Robinson's voice crackled over the ham radio. His yellow SUV, one of the three she'd seen outside the hardware store, rolled behind her silver one. The

other two were in front. Ahead of them was the vast, green prairie.

“I love the smell of Kansas in storm season,” she replied on the radio, as waving wheat and windmills showed there was warm, moist air streaming from the southeast into the caldron of atmospheric ingredients beginning to mix to the west. Farms, cows and the occasional tree or town zipped by as they pressed west on a minor highway.

It turns out they weren’t total strangers to her, the rest of the guys, but chasers she knew lightly from the online world. She’d learned last night that Robinson had chased some of the same tornadoes she had, and they had seen each other’s storm photos on the Web.

In the lead car, the one with the spin lights and spot lights, was Bruce, the sort of guy who was always in the lead, whether he should be or not. He owned three car dealerships in Dallas. A little burly and a little geeky, with thinning, spiky brown hair, a goatee and a funny laugh that recalled cartoon squirrels, he always made the right forecast, even when he was wrong. Obviously, it was God who was mistaken.

Driving behind him was his best friend, red-headed, soft-spoken and mustachioed Whit, on vacation from his Weather Service job in Texas. He quietly diverted Bruce from his worst mistakes and played practical jokes on him at every opportunity. This morning, it was canned whipped cream all over Bruce’s impeccable black tank of a sport-utility vehicle, topped by at least three jars’ worth of scattered maraschino cherries. When Bruce emerged from his room at the Super 8, a dozen grackles were wing-deep in the mess, slipping as they tried to nail the bright red orbs oozing through the snowy peaks of whipped cream.

Bruce had wailed and flailed his arms at the offending birds while the others laughed and, of course, shot video. They knew he would get over it. After all, it was a chase day, and potentially a good one. They had already paged through data sites on the Web to find the best potential convergence of low pressure, dewpoints, cold front and dryline. West it would be, probably in the northern Texas panhandle. They would check data again farther down the road, just to see what curves the wind would throw.

“Judy, you got your ears on?” Robinson said over the radio, employing a mock drawl. Though Maryland was technically below the Mason-Dixon line, he wasn’t really a Southern boy.

“Still on,” she said.

“What camera gear did you bring?”

“Two digital SLRs, one old film camera just in case, and an HD video camera.”

“Geez,” Robinson said. “We’d better see some tornadoes, then.”

“Stop it!” Bruce’s command came over the channel. “Don’t jinx it.”

Whit broke in. “There’s no jinxing. There’s only science. The sky will tell its own story.” His measured Texas twang quieted them. They felt that subtle tension, the faint vibration of nature’s spring coiling all around them. They had no influence over the energies gathering, like the magical forces in a storybook, often unpredictable, sometimes vengeful, sometimes blessed, always puissant. Wind. The power of the invisible.

Judy, her window open, her thick braids flapping, took a deep breath of the sweet-smelling air, mercifully upwind from feed lots at the moment. There was nothing like that crazy feeling

of hope and awe, borne on breezes and blue sky, kissed with spring fever. Maybe somewhere out there was the perfect picture, the one she knew she had inside her, the one that would transcend all her doubts.

She pumped up the Propellerheads in her CD player, not quite enough to drown out the occasional chatter on the radio, and then steered with her right hand while grasping a yellow gadget in her left. She held the digital psychrometer out the window, using her fingers to shade the sensor so sunlight wouldn't skew the reading, then pulled it in and hit the dewpoint button. Temp seventy-nine, dewpoint sixty-eight. Not bad at all for this late morning, early in May. As the air heated under the intensifying sun this afternoon, the atmosphere should have all the fuel it needed. All it lacked was a spark. Where they were headed, the match, they hoped, would soon be lit.



"Marcus!" Jack bellowed at the milling team, all atlases and laptops and suitcases, an anthill of confusion swirling around him in the parking lot. He coughed, then took a draw on his cigarette. Looked around again. "Is the van ready?" He hoped Marcus would reveal himself.

They'd had a couple of days off, given the break in the weather, and had mobilized last night to take a strategic position, a hotel on I-40 in the eastern panhandle of Texas.

Once, this had been Route 66, or thereabouts, but there were no leisurely road travelers here now. Trucks roared by on the nearby Interstate as the twenty-five or so students and researchers readied their fleet of cars, bristling with instruments.

This was the mobile mesonet that would attempt to surround whatever storm they found today. And they would find one. Jack was sure of it. He was too superstitious to say the “T” word, though it came to mind unbidden — tornadoes. Tornadoes. He had seen dozens, but never enough.

It was a little cool and cloudy here, but the satellite showed it was clear north and west, and dewpoints and temperatures were already starting to climb east of the dryline.

He heard a rumble and turned to see the white van pull up and crunch to a halt next to him in the gravel parking lot, nearly flattening his toes, which were already threatening to squish out of his worn but beloved generic black high-tops.

“Jesus, Marcus.” Jack was too tired to be really alarmed. He hadn’t been sleeping much, and when he did, in his dreams, he never got to the tornado in time.

Marcus hopped out of the van. He was a topsy-turvy mirror of Jack. Where Jack had short-cropped dark hair, Marcus’ was curly and long. Where Jack had a clean storm T-shirt and long shorts, Marcus had a wrinkled red flannel shirt and stained khaki pants, along with glasses perpetually perched on the end of his nose. Jack was clean-shaven; Marcus had a two-day-old beard. Marcus was what Jack had left behind, young, in his second year of grad school, and not too sure of what he was doing. He was a sergeant in this army. Jack, who was working on his Ph.D., was a captain. The generals would be in the lead van, deploying the soldiers according to their own forecasts, radar feeds, satellite downloads and nowcasts they got from the storm lab, back home in Oklahoma.

“We need gas,” Marcus said.

“Well, get it. Keep the receipt,” Jack reminded him.

Marcus hopped into the van's driver's seat and roared off, across the access road. He had a sweet job. He was driving the hail-catcher, whose roof was affixed with a net that funneled hailstones into a dry-ice-lined cooler on the van's floor. Hail was Marcus' specialty. But despite two years of driving in research projects like this one, Marcus had never seen a tornado. His strange luck had become a running joke among the crew.

Jack would be in one of the cars — on the business end of the storm, he hoped. Usually, that's where he was told to go. He had an uncanny eye for developing tornadoes and knew just when to slip through the curtains of rain and hail to take readings and videotape the show.

He wasn't sure who was driving him today. Oh, Giselle. She sauntered toward him, tossing her short chestnut hair. She was French, an undergrad, here on some sort of research exchange. Whatever. He narrowed his eyes at her as she approached. Too aggressive, he thought. Not driven, not the way he was. Just aggressive. She'd insisted on being his driver. He wondered, with momentary alarm, do they drive on the right side of the road in France?

"Oh, Jack!" She was painfully flirtatious. "Are we going to see a tornado today?"

"If you want to see a hose, that can be arranged."

"A hose? Oh," she laughed. "I understand. Your word for tornado."

Believe that if you want, he thought. God, he needed to get his mind in the game.

"Jack Andreas!"

Now it was his turn to be summoned. He followed the voice to the field control van. At one of the desks in the back, 50-ish,

eternally tan Professor Malik, looking official and handsome in his white storm center polo shirt, was grinning from ear to ear as he paged through screens of data on two laptop computers.

“Got something, Mr. Wizard?” Jack asked.

“Look at the profiles for north of here,” Malik said.

The weather balloon data already showed favorable temperatures and winds, changing direction with elevation. As the low tracked east, the surface winds would back even more. A stacked spiral. A supercell merry-go-round.

“We need a good one,” Jack said, not trusting their luck.

“Don’t worry. We’re due. Tell them to grab a sandwich. We have to get into position. We’ll leave in 20 minutes.”



“We’re in the land of cell phone death,” Robinson whispered.

He and Judy stood side by side on the edge of a dirt road, a few feet from a barbed-wire fence, looking out over the endless land that surrounded them. They had their feet planted in amber-grass earth that rose gently away from the road, providing a limitless view of the flat plain beyond. The late afternoon sun shone warmly on their faces. The breeze ruffled Robinson’s wavy hair. The only sounds were the murmuring of Bruce and Whit, across the way behind them, and the persistent, portentous southeast wind softly whistling through the scrubby vegetation and wire fences. The back of Judy’s neck prickled.

The quiet was saturated with subtle sensation, the magnificent breathing of nature. To the west, the architects of the sky had begun to build their towers.

The cumulus clouds there were getting ambitious. Amid the fluffy field of white, one would throw a pile of hard swells billowing up toward the blue, and there they would collapse and stew before popping upward again. They were bumping their heads against the cap, the layer of warm air that might or might not let them through. The afternoon had become warm, full of energy straining for release.

This bleak expanse was the prairie, and yet beyond, where even wheat seemed impossible, where the idea of hills was something forgotten in the back of a drawer in a beaten-up desk in the dusty office of a gas station that hadn't been open in decades. This was where the edges of land and sky met, where tumbleweeds rolled, where cows lowed with foolish innocence, snorting and mooing and stampeding before every roaring storm.

Here, in the desolate flats of the Oklahoma panhandle, on the other side of this lonely road, gadget freak Bruce couldn't get a cell signal to save his life. Or to help them get online, load satellite data and choose which way to go. They had driven a few hours to get here, including stops for food and data; then, by turns, drove in circles and waited in spots like this for another two hours, searching for signs of hope. Sometimes the best setups produce no storms at all, and they were worried the cap might win. But those clouds, those towering clouds, were tantalizing. They lined up all along the dryline, from the northwest to the hazy, distant southwest. The towers, as they so often do, were building on a boundary between two air masses. The latest surface map they saw, about an hour ago, confirmed that dewpoints west of that line were in the 40s — 20 degrees less than here.

Judy raised her Nikon and snapped a couple of wide-angle pictures, including the road for perspective. She loved capturing this moment, the beauty of the possible.

They were close to the conjunction of the warm front and the low-pressure center. A secondary low was developing to the south, however, and it wasn't clear yet where the best action would be. They had picked a favorable area, Judy knew, but now things were starting to happen. Their choices were crucial. Wait too long, and any storm that formed might be unreachable. Act too soon, and they could pick the wrong one.

"Bruce," Whit said, getting impatient. "Let's just go to the next town, and I'll call the office and get the latest."

"No, I can do this!" Bruce's voice had that squirrelish pitch. "Let me just move the antenna around. Besides, the next town is 25 miles away. I knew I shouldn't have dumped the WeatherWorx this year."

Robinson, who had glanced backward at this exchange, sighed and looked forward again, toward the western prairie. "I don't think radar is necessary at this point. We just need to go visual and pray for a popper," he said quietly to Judy, his arms folded against his flat, narrow chest.

"We may need to go farther south, though," she said. "The towers look more persistent down there."

In the hazy distance, the clouds appeared harder, pushier.

Whit materialized at her elbow. "Judy, I think you're right." Exasperation was evident in his voice. "Tell Bruce. He won't listen to me right now."

Judy and Robinson exchanged glances. Then Judy stepped off the mound of dirt and crossed the road to the big, black beast of a car. She leaned against the driver's side and looked into the

open window. Bruce was inside, tinkering with his laptop, which was mounted in front of the passenger seat.

“Bruce, would you look at something for me?” She had a hint of persuasion in her voice, about all she possessed. Her sister had cornered most of the charm.

He looked up, startled, as if he’d just been awakened. They didn’t know each other very well yet, but her gentle query shook him out of his frustrated obsession with the recalcitrant cellular modem. Sometimes it helped to be just acquaintances. People were more likely to remember their manners.

“Um, sure,” he said. She stepped back so he could open the door and get out. “What is it?”

“I’m wondering what you think of those towers down there.” She pointed to the southwest as she led the way across the road.

He stepped up next to her and the others and gazed that way, scratching his tiny beard. Side by side, they looked, their eyes beginning to drill down to the obvious, a point in the line where a cell was just now breaking the cap. Even as they watched, it began to burst upward. Within minutes, it was blossoming into a cauliflower mass of thermal violence.

“Holy crap,” Bruce said under his breath. Then, more declarative: “You know, guys, I think we should go south.”

Even this far north, perhaps 50 miles away, they could see the hard bubbles of rapidly growing convection were swelling fast. It was exploding.

Robinson and Whit smiled, but not so Bruce could see. “Good idea,” Robinson said, already turning toward the cars with the others. No invitation was necessary.

“This is really going to be a chase, though,” Whit said as he trotted across the road. “Let me look at the GPS. I’ll radio you the best route. We’ve got to haul.”

Judy felt the adrenaline iceberg melting in her brain and gushing warm into her imagination. What would they see today? Where would they end up? She never knew. None of them did. That was part of the appeal.

At least they would be moving, she thought, as she double-checked her laptop on the passenger seat and popped a video camera into the dashboard mount. She wasn’t as patient as some chasers and preferred to go to where the action might be, rather than wait for it. Sometimes it cost her. But right now, there was no clearer beacon than the burgeoning storm to the southwest.

She was sure, just before she turned the ignition, that she heard the first, low rumble of distant thunder.

▽ ▽ ▽

end of sample

LEARN MORE AT

<http://chriskridler.com/books>