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TORNADO PINBALL

a novel

by

CHRIS KRIDLER



SKY DIARY PRODUCTIONS

Rockledge, Florida

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PART I

THE TWISTER TRACKER

 The tornado siren filled Jack's ears when he wasn't listening. It crept into moments of silence when his mind wandered off into that dark place without permission. He heard it the way the storm's victims hadn't, a vibration more than a sound, a ghost glimpsed out of the corner of his eye. Then a word or a noise or the wind on his face would bring him back, and for an instant, all he heard was the void.

"Jack, it's full."

He looked up, back in the present, to see Michiko eyeing him with her usual wry expression. She was standing under the service station overhang, headphones around her neck, trying to keep her boom mike and field mixer dry. He realized he was still squeezing the gas nozzle's trigger. It had shut off, and so had his brain.

"Where were you?" she asked.

He wasn't going to mention the siren. "Just wondering why I decided to use my PhD to consult for a television show."

"I thought it was for the money." She glanced over at the gas station's store, ready to jump when their star came out of the bathroom. Her dark, spiky hair — not unlike Jack's, he mused, but more shaggy — glistened with tiny drops as the fine rain blew sideways into their faces. "You're pretty bitter considering

we've only been doing this for three days," she said. "We might be doing this for three more weeks."

"Bitter? More like resigned to my fate," Jack said, squeezing a few more drops of fuel into Van One. "And I'm not doing it for the money. He's doing it for the money, and for the fame. I'm doing it because I'm getting paid to chase tornadoes." And there were no desirable forecasting jobs available, he noted to himself.

"What's the difference?"

"I still have my self-respect. He's still an ass."

The ass, or as he now billed himself, Brad "The Twister Tracker" Treat, came out of the gas station's shop clutching an energy drink and a bag of corn chips. Instantly, two high-definition cameras were in his face, ready to catch any whiffle in his expression or any ruffle of his carefully gelled, short brown hair.

"Thanks for not following me into the stall this time," Brad said to the cameramen. His dark eyebrows were scrunched together, perpetually broadcasting his concern over what might happen next.

"I gotta go," Michiko said, pulling on her headphones and rushing over to stick her boom mike above Brad's head. The fuzzy microphone dangled like an orbiting rat.

Gas nozzle stowed, Jack leaned against the white van, lit a cigarette against the advice of all signage and watched with amusement as a petite figure in a bright blue rain jacket hopped out of a sport-utility vehicle and got into the fray. Wynda, their rosy-cheeked producer, spit out staccato orders in a persuasive English accent.

"Brad," said Wynda, whose red hair kept escaping from her hood in the wind, "we need you to talk with Saffire and Devlin

on camera about getting the Bubble into the storm. You know, talk about your strategy and your forecast and what you plan to do.”

This was Jack’s favorite part, watching Brad perform, knowing how little Brad knew. How Brad had to be rescued, despite the myth he’d created about himself online and in interviews. How Brad let his tour van be sucked up by the Prairie Rock tornado, even though he claimed the dash-cam footage he later retrieved was completely intentional. How Brad agreed to become a human tornado probe for this documentary miniseries despite his almost beautiful ignorance of what he’d let himself in for.

“Where’s my team?” Brad shouted. He was getting pretty good at playing the demanding leader.

Devlin, an engineer with a minor in meteorology, and Saffire, known more formally to her fans as Saffire Soulliere, were sharing a bag of popcorn inside Van One. Upon hearing the call, Devlin was the first to emerge. The staff geek sported a thin shock of light-brown hair, black-framed glasses and a small build that hid an enormous brain.

Saffire was next. She ran a hand through her loose, honey-blond curls as she brushed past Jack, offering him a modest smile. He got a whiff of her scent, a touch of lavender, fresh and subtle, as she parted his cloud of smoke. An entertainment-show host until recently, she was, Jack presumed, their series’ requisite eye candy. He had to hand it to her. She was a pro, and she was immediately “on.”

“So, Brad, where are we headed? This rain doesn’t look good, and it’s bad for Devlin’s hair,” she joked with a twinkle.

“This storm has petered out, so we’ve got to choose our next target,” Brad said, a little too loudly for the sensitive mikes. “We

have to look at radar and figure out where to go. Devlin, what's the latest?"

As the conversation continued for the cameras, Jack's smartphone buzzed. He pulled it out, noted the alert and flipped to a radar image, trying to quell his desire to jump in the van and leave these posers behind. These posers were paying his tab, he reminded himself. As much as he longed to be alone with his supercells, instead of alone in his thoughts, he was woefully short on gas money.

"We don't want to deploy the Bubble in these gusts without a reason," Devlin was saying. "You'd probably just get seasick. We've got to find a tornado."

"I love it," producer Wynda cut in. "Just dumbed-down enough for the audience. You're getting better at that, Devlin."

Devlin scowled. "Gee, thanks."

"Jack Andreas!" Wynda shouted.

Jack walked over to the group, noting the lenses were aimed nowhere near him. Usually, he manned the computer in the back of the van and was almost never on camera. Yet he was the consultant, the only guy who knew how to chase tornadoes.

"I suggest we go here," he said, showing them the image on his cell phone.

He'd zoomed in so they could see the first words of the bulletin superimposed on the radar: "TORNADO WARNING."

"Really? Let's go!" Wynda shouted, then stopped herself. "Wait! No, you guys film Brad getting in the van. Actually, you film Brad telling everyone to get in the van. Brad, say something, you know, really boffo action stuff about how you've just heard there's a tornado, then run to the van."

Brad looked pale. "Fuck," he said.



Van One was starting to smell like Doritos. It was inevitable, even after a couple of days, as the storm-chasing crew found itself grabbing meals wherever it could on the road, most often at truck stops and convenience stores.

Now, with the weather radio periodically screeching and the regular radio turned off — it was so tough to clear TV rights later for all those pop songs — official hero Brad drove. Riding shotgun was the photogenic Saffire, whose cleavage, as captured in the wide-angle cameras mounted above the windshield, looked as if Julie Andrews should be running atop it, singing emphatically that the hills were alive.

Destination: the possibly even more hilly jungles of northeast Oklahoma, one of Jack's least favorite areas to track tornadoes. Still, chasing a tornadic storm was better than those five days of shooting B-roll in March, when he'd led Wynda and the cameramen around the prairie. They'd shot fields and barns and clouds that would never in a million years produce a raindrop, let alone a storm. This was the most interesting weather they'd had since their May shoot began.

Seated in the third seat of the large minivan behind a laptop mount, Jack used an Internet connection that wavered between a cellular signal, when he could get it, and a much more costly satellite link. When he wasn't forecasting, he kept an eye on the radar and their position on the map. It was a lot like the university research he used to do, only less satisfying. They were forever interrupting the chase so they could get a drive-by shot of the

vehicles or a thoughtful sequence with Brad standing along a country byway, looking concerned.

Next to engineer Devlin in the middle seat was shooter Andre, ebony-skinned and handsome, trying to catch with his camera any rare pearl Brad might drop. Andre twisted back and forth to film conversations as if he were covering a tennis match.

“Brad?” called Devlin.

“Yes, boy genius,” Brad answered.

“This landscape doesn’t lend itself to safe recovery of the Bubble,” Devlin said, “but if we find a good spot, we should probably try to deploy it and see how long it takes to get you inside and strapped in.”

And then we leave him there, Jack thought, and chase some storms. He picked up his CB, one of two in the van, and spoke so the crew in the other two vehicles could hear. “It looks like this cell has a mean core. Let’s get east of Bartlesville and then get north, and by all means, let’s avoid the Interstate.”

“I like the Interstate,” Brad said.

“It’s great if you want to get shredded by a tornado or hail with no exits at your disposal,” Jack replied. A little tic in the back of his brain brought up fleeting images of car wrecks and terrible losses and things he’d rather not remember before he pushed himself back into the red and green of the radar, figuring out their next move.

The convoy zigzagged through the south side of Bartlesville, whose meager skyline claimed a little class from Frank Lloyd Wright’s only skyscraper. “It was finished in 1956, just three years before he died,” Saffire noted, playing tour guide. “But if you really want some history, you’ll have to visit the oil well.”

"We're going to see plenty of them if we ever get back to Texas," said Brad, a note of homesickness in his voice.

"I'm talking about the Nellie Johnstone, Oklahoma's first commercial oil well," Saffire said, adding choice facts for the camera. She'd made it her mission to study up on the attractions, an effort Wynda encouraged so they would have something to fill the show if they didn't catch enough tornadoes. Jack could already foresee a return trip so they could shoot the rickety old well structure from every angle in order to get five seconds of video to lay over Saffire's chatter. As much as he despised the filler, he had to confess he could listen to her talk for hours, and more and more, she surprised him with flashes of wit that belied her Hollywood rep. His studied disdain eroded each time she uttered one of her melodic monologues. In her voice was the place where bourbon met vanilla ice cream.

While he could get almost enough bourbon, he could never slake his thirst for women. They were usually easier to chase than tornadoes, given his good looks and sinewy figure, but he had other things to do right now. *Focus on the storm, Jack. That's why you're here.* And it was starting to get interesting, even if it was losing its tornado signature. A hint of a second rain core had appeared on radar, and he wondered if the storm might be splitting. A splitting storm could complicate their approach. Jack smiled.

They were out of town, now, and into the country. The hills and trees threatened any chance they had of seeing anything, and with so few arteries to carry residents from place to place, the road was surprisingly busy. Oklahoma rush hour. Jack noted a few chaser cars on the road, too, easily spotted with their antennas and spinning anemometers.

It had been several minutes since there'd been word from Wynda. As a rule, she didn't like to talk over whatever cinematic action might be happening in Van One. She rode in the support SUV with sound gal and frequent driver Michiko, along with unkempt cameraman Razor, whose abundant tattoos had started to creep onto his bearded face in the form of an uncoiling snake.

Bringing up the rear was their prize: the Bubble, secured in a modest cargo truck Wynda insisted on calling the Bubblevan, driven by meteorology dropout Paul Pole. He had a hint of a receding hairline and the sunglasses of a 1970s TV cop. Like Van One, Pole's truck was wired with cameras, and all his activities would be captured on film, from his skittish rest-stop dashes to his meticulous nail-biting.

Their target storm was finally in view, but it was splitting in two, its updrafts conjoined twins that were ripping themselves apart. The edge of a ragged anvil blew off the top of the clouds, forming a feathery disc in the late-afternoon sky. The radar-indicated tornado warning hadn't verified, as far as they knew, and Jack doubted there was a tornado in there now. Still, they potentially faced two severe storms, with hours of daylight left for the chase.

"All right, team," Brad said. "We paid our quarter. It's time to play."

It was a punchy line. If only Brad had thought of it himself. Jack had spotted it on the loose script provided by Palatable Productions.

Van One, Wynda's crew car and Pole's Bubblevan approached the splitting cells like a squadron of ants about to tackle a pair of layer cakes. Jack could see lightning in the clouds, espe-

cially in the burgeoning southern storm. A look at the quickly changing radar made it clear that north wasn't the way to go.

"Change of plan," he said over the CB. "We're going to turn south, before Nowata if possible. This storm is splitting, and the right split should be our boy."

Their turn would be precariously close to the substantial hail core. They were already getting rain. They had to edge south and get east of this beast before it ate them alive. Jack liked his adrenaline rush as much as the next guy, but putting their convoy through a hail grinder was not his idea of a wise move. Besides, they had to stay intact if they wanted to catch a tornado. If they actually succeeded and launched Brad in the Bubble, Jack would get a sizable contractual bonus. It should be enough to buy him some chase time on his own, and that was all he wanted.

Just before they made the turn, a stray, icy baseball slammed into the windshield.

"Awesome!" Devlin exclaimed as the spider crack made its initial march across the glass.

"A palpable hit," Saffire said.

Pole radioed: "Did I just see a projectile cross your path?"

Brad grabbed his CB mike. "Hail! Wynda, should we turn around? Should we turn around?"

"No," Jack said to the group, keying his own mike so everyone would hear. "We keep going. We should be able to get around this and get east. Otherwise, no tornado. No happy stormy fun time."

"And no shot," Wynda's voice came back. She still had the mike keyed as she said, "Michiko, drive faster." Through the back window, Jack could see the support vehicle right on their ass, with Michiko driving, Razor shooting in the passenger seat, and

Wynda peering from the back. So they *were* still alive. We'll see how long we can keep that up, Jack thought.

The caravan turned to get on the main route heading south and soon crept up behind a two-vehicle convoy whose lead van, a silver one, was plastered with logos for Zane Films.

"What's that?" Brad asked into the radio as they got closer. The extended-cab pickup truck that rode behind the Zane van had a machine mounted in the bed.

"Yes, what is that?" Wynda asked. "What does Zane have now?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" came a deep voice over the radio, someone not of their crew, as smaller hailstones pinged off the vehicles.

"Aurelius!" Wynda said.

"Aurelius?" Jack muttered. Then, missing his ham radio, he added over the CB: "Looks like a UAV to me."

"A what?" Brad asked.

"Unmanned aerial vehicle," Jack said to the others in the van. "A drone. A remotely flown plane. A *very* fun toy for storm chasing."

Wynda's voice was irate as she spoke into the mike. "Zane, don't bother. Go back to your documentaries about monkeys."

"Oh, Wynda," came the deep voice again. "I did enjoy our time in the jungle."

The silence that followed gave Jack an excuse to see Wynda in a new light, and perhaps in a cheetah-print bikini. But the storm demanded his attention. He looked ahead and saw their east turn. "Forget about it," he said into the radio. "Take the left. We have to get ahead of this thing."

Their storm was developing rapidly, while the left split had become the incredible shrinking updraft — a pretty little corkscrewing thing, rotating anti-cyclonically, a smaller mirror of the storm to the south. The right split they were chasing was developing a series of towers, back-building. Jack hoped it didn't split again. It was meaty and starting to spit out spears of lightning.

One brilliant stroke was followed by an almost instantaneous crash of thunder, and a transformer on the telephone pole Van One was passing erupted with a bang and a flash of green light. The van trembled in the concussive rumble. "Harness that, and you could power your house for a month!" Saffire said.

Devlin nodded in approval. "There's a good way to fry your UAV."

Brad looked pained. "Does the Bubble have lightning protection?"

Funny, Jack thought, that Brad was just asking this now.

"It's built around a lightweight metal frame," Devlin said. "It should shed lightning, a little like an airplane."

Brad still looked worried. "Um, you tested it?"

"Yeah, we got great footage of it in the artificial lightning lab. It'll be like a flying Faraday cage. Well, not quite, since you won't be fully enclosed in metal, but it works thanks to a few tricks. Mesh where you can't see it. Shielded electronics. And wait till you see it bounce. Did you know one of the Mars rovers bounced thirty-one times when it landed? How cool is that?"

Cool or crazy, Jack mused. If the thing ever did get off the ground, which seemed unlikely, lightning would be the least of Brad's worries.

There was a certain arrogance in all this tornado probe stuff. Every time he saw a new armor-clad chase vehicle, he recalled

the loaded hundred-ton train cars he saw tossed by the Pancake tornado. As close as Jack liked to get, he knew a camera wasn't a magic shield against a twister's power.

Just beyond where Jack's crew planned to turn, the truck carrying the drone pulled over, letting the Zane van get far ahead and park. A film crew jumped out of the silver van as a couple of guys emerged from the UAV truck and tinkered with the machine in the back. In a few moments, the tiny plane shot off a rail mounted in the bed and soared in a graceful arc that would bring it toward the top of the storm.

"Christ," Wynda said over the radio, seeing the prospects for being the most extreme tornado show of next season's sweeps in serious jeopardy.

Even Jack was impressed. And Devlin was practically drooling.

"I want that," he whispered.



Aurelius Zane chose his team carefully. First, he needed professionals to back him up on the camera work, especially since all the popular shows these days were personality-driven, and he was the personality. He needed to be in front of the camera, to drive the audience to that place where they would feel electrified and seduced and hungry for more. So he hired two freelance shooters who between them could handle the cameras and the sound and his very insistent direction as they rode in the van. They were a gaunt and listless married couple who eerily, strongly resembled each other. He called them Thing One and Thing Two, to simplify Things.

Next, he needed gophers and sycophants. Enter Ernie, meteorology grad student and chief forecaster, who did indeed understand the importance of being earnest, and Evie, an intern who wanted to document their trip for her college newspaper. She was here for credit, so she had to be paid very little to look gorgeous, her chocolate tresses flying, as she took photos of absolutely everything and wrestled with their gear.

Gear was a big part of Aurelius' adventuring, and it was expensive. He'd realized as a boy that he didn't have to act out his quests via video games and science-fiction conventions; he could make them real, as long as he had the right toys. So since he started adventuring, leaving his puzzled parents' rural grocery store in western Pennsylvania, he'd been borrowing. He'd made almost enough money now to break even, but it always took a bigger loan or better begging to make his latest enterprise happen. For this venture, he'd hired a startup to provide the flying drone and its twin, now stored in a garage in Wichita. The miniature planes were owned by two young techies who seemed unworried by knotty FAA rules. To afford the gizmos, he'd had to turn to a Hollywood producer he knew, Rodney Mezner, who lent him the money at an exorbitant interest rate while taking a financial interest in the show Zane Films was shooting for the Excursions Network. Aurelius had to get six episodes in the can in a month of shooting and, according to his contract, he had to get a tornado. Quality footage. Two minutes, at least. Otherwise, no payday, and he would be facing a new assault of debt collectors when he got back to his one-bedroom apartment in Pasadena.

Unlike Brad Treat, he was unclouded by doubts. At thirty-five, he had always survived and flourished, and looked good do-

ing it, with his dirty-blond hair falling over his forehead in smooth, perfectly cut bangs. For this adventure, he'd spent some of Rodney's money on a tailor-made, double-breasted, knee-length black rain jacket that, especially when falling open in the breeze, made him look especially dashing. Success, he'd learned, took looks, guts and a reckless disregard for physics, whether he was flying a helicopter into the crater of an erupting volcano or tying himself to a cement post in Guam in the middle of a Category 5 typhoon. The footage just kept getting better, and when it came to television, there was always an appetite for destruction. More than that, there was an appetite for anything at all, as long as it was shot in high definition, given that the number of TV channels seeking original content grew almost daily.

Chasing tornadoes was a piece of cake after what he'd been through.

"The surface flow is weak," Ernie said from the back seat as they rolled south to a less serpentine east road than the one Wynda's crew had taken. "I don't know if this one is going to do it."

"See what you can do about that," Aurelius said from the driver's seat, and for a moment, gullible Ernie had a scared-rabbit look only enhanced by his wide blue eyes and dark buzz cut. Aurelius laughed and picked up the ham radio they were using for car-to-car communication. He had a CB and a scanner for backup and monitoring, but he liked the idea that fewer people might be listening to amateur radio. "Keep it flying for another twenty minutes, and then get it to the field," he said. They'd lined up a series of out-of-the-way spots, far from official scrutiny, to set up nets to catch their drone. If they had time, they

set up a net on the truck. In a pinch, the drone could skid to a stop.

“All set,” said Duncan, one of the techies, over the speaker. “Our feed looks fantastic.”

“When it gets a tornado, then it will be fantastic,” Aurelius corrected them.

“You’re fantastic,” Evie said cheerfully from the passenger seat, where Thing One and Thing Two and the on-board cameras could get loving shots of her profile as she took photos of Aurelius.

He smiled his best camera smile. “I’m just doing my job,” he intoned deeply, “bringing the most extreme phenomena of nature to the world’s living rooms.” He thought for a moment. That sounded a little too PR-speak. “Try this instead, guys,” he said to Things One and Two. He rolled down his window and stuck his head and left arm out, pointing to the top of the supercell as lightning flashed. “This thing could put down a tornado any minute!” he shouted with authority. There. That could be repeated in any number of commercials. He needed to remember to scream when the time came. They ate that shit up.



Wynda was back on the CB. “Ignore it,” she said in her clipped British tones. “Ignore it. So he has a bloody toy plane. We have the Bubble. Jack, find us a spot to deploy.”

The three-vehicle caravan headed east, now ahead of the supercell. Jack eyed the radar on the laptop. The reborn storm looked powerful but not very well organized. He took a moment and broke away from the computer, craning his neck to look out

of the back of the van, where the towering, knuckled cumulonimbus loomed large and dark against the declining sun. It was pretty, and its shape was suggestive of weak rotation, but he didn't have that tornado tingle. They might as well strap Brad in the Bubble and give it a test run. At least their meal ticket would live to see another day.

"We need a clearing at least," Jack said. The tree-lined secondary road they were on resembled an undulating snake more than a highway. "That might be a challenge here. Let's get a couple of miles ahead of it."

"Find a level spot, a field, a parking lot, anything like that," suggested Devlin.

Jack, envisioning their very round piece of gear, couldn't help responding with sarcasm. "But a hill would be so much fun."

Andre put down his camera for a minute. "Now, I'm no director," he said, "but you have to remember, you're on. This deployment sequence could be important to the show. You've got to keep focused and energetic here, because you think you're going to see a tornado."

"Actually, I don't," Jack said, going back to the radar.

Andre sighed and returned to shooting Brad, who cleared his throat, working himself up to hero mode. "Devlin, this storm could tornado any second," Brad said. "Let's find a good place to deploy."

Saffire flashed a smile at the camera staring at her from the upper right corner of the windshield. "This is so exciting. This is when science is at its most fun — when it confronts the violence of nature." A shiver seemed to run through her amber locks and

breasts in the same moment. Jack had a feeling the camera guys would be fighting over that footage later.

“Here we go,” Devlin said from the second seat. “Here we go. This might work.” They were crossing a long, low valley.

“I suggest getting a little higher on the hill so we can see it coming,” Jack said. He didn’t like the idea of the entire crew hiding obliviously behind a knoll if this storm really did put down a twister. That could be a bad, bad day.

“Pole!” Brad called into the radio. “Pull off up here into the parking lot.”

Parking lot was an exaggeration. It was a wide dirt and gravel clearing off the right side of the road next to what apparently used to be an ice-cream stand. Although it was nearly level, it was, indeed, at the top of the hill. A weathered, broken neon ice cream cone sign, supported by a large, rusted metal hand, protruded from the boarded-up yellow brick building. The only letters left spelled out “I ... REAM.”

“Ouch,” Jack noted to himself as their Van One, Pole’s Bubblevan and the crew SUV pulled up, side-by-side. As Jack slid his door open, he could feel the warm air, carried by decent south-east winds that could still give the storm the fuel and spin it needed.

“Let’s deploy!” Devlin said as they piled out, all cameras and colorful rain jackets and hair blowing in the wind. Wearing a headset wired to the radio at his waist, the engineer pulled open the Bubblevan’s double doors. Devlin and Pole slid out a ramp and jumped inside to disengage the Bubble. Lightning hit nearby with a quick report of thunder, prompting Saffire to emit a little whoop. It was kind of cute, Jack had to admit.

A few minutes later, after fighting with a sticky clamp, the guys rolled the Bubble slowly out of the van. They brought it to a halt on the gravel, where it rested and rocked slightly. A clear globe about six feet wide, framed by gleaming metal struts, it was a hamster ball for storm geeks. Inside, a contoured chair hung in the middle of three gyroscope-controlled rings.

The inner walls were crisscrossed with conduits and boxes for wires and electronics. The outer wall was mostly smooth but studded with instrument and camera housings attached to the shiny metal supports that encircled it. Wide airbag boxes were attached to the struts, too. While a car's airbags were internal, the Bubble's were on the outside. They would help the probe bounce if a tornado picked it up.

Brad was starting to look uncomfortable. "Does that thing have a kickstand?" he asked.

"Come on, boys!" Wynda shouted. "Action time. Get him in! Brad, look enthusiastic, for Christ's sake!"

Pole and Devlin unlatched the door of the sphere and pulled it open. A nearby flash of lightning shot a blue gleam off the curved surface.

Brad hesitated, then looked at Jack. "Well?"

Jack turned to the storm. It was getting closer and now had a wall cloud, a possible precursor to a tornado. But it still didn't have that *thing*, that magic. Not yet. His reply was low, pitched so not everyone could hear. "I don't think it's going to do it."

Jack saw relief cross Brad's face as the fearful, er, fearless leader shifted into movie-star mode. "All right, team, this thing could put down a twister any minute. Strap me in and get to safety! I don't want any of you hurt!"

The words gave an urgency, however fake, to Devlin and Pole. With swift movements, they got Brad's tall frame folded into the chair suspended inside the Bubble's rings and proceeded to lock in the web of safety harnesses that were meant to keep their star from becoming a human maraca. Brad stuck a key into the manual override control for the external airbags and unlocked it so, in an emergency, he could open the clear plastic box that protected the button. The guys popped a helmet over his head, and Brad did a sound check with Michiko and Devlin. They all should be able to hear Brad through the long-range radio monitors installed in each vehicle.

"All right, Brad," Devlin said. "The internal and external cameras are running now. All you need is a tornado to pick you up. We seriously don't think the Bubble will be lifted higher than tens of meters, and probably a lot less. If by some freak happenstance it goes so high you have to deploy the 'chutes, an alarm will sound. But the external airbags will deploy automatically when the Bubble senses a predetermined altitude increase and then a sharp descent. You can also deploy them manually at any time. I can't see a reason you'll need the manual override, but with the key in the control, you just have to flip open the cover and press the button, if it comes to that. Once the air bladders inflate, you won't have much of a view, other than whatever the cameras show on the monitor. And then you'll bounce to safety. Piece of cake." Devlin waved at the primary outside camera, and his face showed up on a small color screen mounted above and in front of Brad. "Good luck!"

"With a team like you behind me, I know I'm already lucky," said Brad, getting into his brave role.

"All right, time to hit the road and get this on camera!" Safire said.

Jack hung back for a moment as the others rushed to the vehicles. The storm was probably going to miss them. But there was a distinct change in the wind where they were. It was stronger, warmer. The storm was breathing, sucking in the moist, hot air that had traveled all this way from the Gulf of Mexico. Inflow. It was getting stronger. He took a last look at the Bubble, met Brad's confused eyes with his own and shrugged, not without pity. Then he joined the others in the van, and the caravan spun out of the I ... REAM parking lot, hauling east toward a vantage point on the next hill as thunder crashed around them.



This was the spring of Brad's discontent. He was on the skids with his fiancée, Willa, whom he still called his fiancée because she was hanging on to the pawn-shop cubic zirconia he'd purchased for her as an engagement ring. At twenty-five, with a degree in business but not the will, he was pretty much unqualified to do anything except for what he'd fallen into. And that was storm chasing and the occasional part-time job.

This was better than running Thor's Tours, though, and having to face the disappointment when tourists paying a few thousand bucks saw little more than broken windshields and dust devils after Brad led them around in circles, usually nowhere near the tornado. All that changed outside Prairie Rock, where Jack and his research buddies saved Brad and the tourists when their tour van got stuck in the path of a monster twister. That's not how it all came out in the media, however. Brad emerged a

hero as his van became a flying tornado probe and his camera caught incredible footage inside the monster. The bits about the terror and the rescue and Jack's selfless act later that day never did find legs when the story was retold, but Brad got a job offer out of it, as the star of this new reality show. Sure, there was competition on TV, lots of it, but he was getting paid quite a bit without having to get a real job. And they had the Bubble, which made his show unique.

All that said, it wasn't comforting to be in it as the brooding supercell, tinged with black and mint-green, bore down upon him. Through the clear walls, between the Bubble's struts, the storm looked a lot more real than the drawings on the white boards in the production company's modest L.A. offices. He could see a milky wall of rain to his northwest and a blocky lowering under the storm's base. The anvil spread above his head. Lightning hit in bursts around him. The Bubble's straps were cutting into his shoulders, and he had to pee.

His one comfort was that it looked like the worst might miss him, but he noticed the grass bending toward the storm, worshipping its might. Or, as Jack might have pointed out, the southeast inflow was picking up. The storm was sucking in fuel, and the wind made the Bubble rock slightly and then, slowly, turn half a revolution toward the supercell. Brad bobbed in his chair and harness, getting a brief look at the ground as the computerized, gyroscope-controlled servos slowly righted him.

"We have movement," Brad said nervously.

"Copy, Brad," he heard Devlin say. "How far have you moved?"

"Just far enough so that I was looking at the ground for a second. I'm upright again."

"Are you steady on top of the hill?" Devlin asked. "Are the cameras working?"

That's when it really sunk in for Brad that he was on top of a hill. A pretty big hill, with tussocks and pits and ... was that an armadillo running past him, away from the storm?

"Uh, yes, still on top of the hill," Brad said. But not steady, he thought to himself. He pressed a button on his armrest that made the monitor above his head flip through multiple camera views. "It's getting good shots, I think." The Bubble trembled for a moment. The wind shifted a little as the storm got closer. Then the probe rolled west again, a whole revolution this time. It was almost to the edge of the parking lot and the slope.

"We saw that roll," Devlin said over the radio. "That looks cool."

"Yeah, uh, real cool."

That's when the storm inhaled.

The southeast winds picked up abruptly. The Bubble rolled another revolution and a half, this time coming to a stop against a rock. It took a few seconds for the gyroscope to catch up. Brad felt nauseous.

"I hope all these electronics can handle vomit," he heard himself saying.

"Now, Brad," Wynda said, "keep it positive. This is for posterity."

"I thought it was just a test," he said, his voice pitching higher.

The Bubble bumped against the rock, and then again. And then harder, like an obsessive rocking chair, as a few fat raindrops began to spatter the clear enclosure. As the wind began

to whistle around the pitching orb, Brad let out a slow and strangely harmonic whine.



On the next hill, where the vehicles had parked by a derelict windmill, Jack stood outside and looked at the Bubble through a pair of binoculars. Perhaps foolishly, he was the only one who braved the lightning. He always needed to get the flavor of a storm. As the rotation and inflow picked up, this one had started to get a stacked-plate look. But Jack could see that the rotation wasn't Brad's problem right now. The inflow was rocking the Bubble against some kind of blockage, a rock or something, in the increasing wind. Jack was having trouble standing steady against the gusts, and he estimated they had topped fifty miles per hour as the storm greedily sucked up the warm, moist air. It was just a matter of time before the Bubble was set free, and then they'd see what earthbound deployment was all about.

It turns out, it was a matter of about ninety seconds. Jack felt the gust first, as he was east of Brad's location. The Bubble felt it second.

Like a wave wearing down a wall in a hurricane, it took that one good push to send it over. Then the Bubble was off and running — or, to be more accurate, rolling and occasionally bouncing down the hill, without the help of airbags. Jack could hear Brad's shrieks over the radio even from outside the van, and he jumped in the side door.

"We'd better go get him," he said to Devlin, who was behind the wheel.

"This is awesome," said Devlin. "A great test run!"

“Or roll.” Jack couldn’t help but be amused as he thought of Brad spinning inside the Bubble, but he knew he needed it to work, and needed Brad to get through it, if he was going to get his bonus — if not this time, then next.

Jack picked up the radio as the van accelerated. “Come on, everybody,” he said. “Let’s play catch.”

The Bubble had vanished from sight after several yards, with the hill blocking their view. They drove down, then up, and were halfway down the “I ... REAM” hill before they spotted it, sitting still in a trickling brook, which parted to spill around its curved bottom. Whatever the bottom was at that moment.

“Brad?” Devlin called over the radio. “Brad, are you all right?”

All they heard was a guttural sound as they parked on the shoulder. The storm was bypassing them, though they were still in brisk wind and light rain, and Jack could see a plume of dust advancing in their direction. Not a tornado. “RFD,” he said as they jumped out and ran toward the Bubble. It was about twenty-five yards from the road and looked intact. It could have been worse.

Michiko caught up with him, microphone boom in hand, running beside him. “I heard you say something back there,” she said. “RFD?”

“Rear-flank downdraft. That wall of dust. We need to get him out of here. We should be OK, but this will be a lot more pleasant if we hurry.”

Andre and Razor, cameras in hand, and the others got to the Bubble about the same time. The surface was muddy and scratched in some places. It had been clearing trail, too — weeds were jammed into every seam and gizmo that dared to stick out a

few millimeters. Brad was OK. They could tell by the way he was screaming.

“GET ME THE FUCK OUT OF HERE!” They could hear it through the curved walls and the shielded air vents. Devlin and Pole looked for the door and found it, halfway in the water — the reason Brad couldn’t open the door himself — and started to roll the ball. “DON’T YOU FUCKING ROLL ME!” Brad screamed again, but they had to do something, so roll him they did, onto drier ground. The lagging gyro slowly flipped him upright as they got the door open. Devlin and Pole painstakingly unstrapped Brad, and as they pulled him out, he leaned forward a little and threw up.

“Language, Brad, language,” Wynda scolded, handing him a small towel she pulled from her jacket pocket. “Get your brave face on and tell the cameras what you went through.”

“Hurry up,” Jack said, as the first bits of dust and rock started to sting their skin. The dust plume was overtaking them, and the winds were increasing.

Shaky and pale, the Twister Tracker visibly tried to pull himself together. “What do I say?”

Wynda looked thoughtful. “How about, ‘I can’t wait to launch this into a real tornado!’ ”

Brad looked at her incredulously, then pointed west and screamed, “TORNADO!”

It was indeed a column of rotating dirt, but it wasn’t the tornado they were looking for. The weak gustnado spun through their group, carrying dust and grass in a cyclonic swirl, scattering them and sending them to the ground as they tried to cover up their mouths and eyes — except for the camera guys, of course, who dropped to their knees and risked exposing their gear to get

footage of the chaos. At the least, it made for good video and a lot of dust in their teeth. Wynda looked rumpled but ecstatic as it passed. Jack laughed for the brief thrill of it. The spin-up weakened and dissipated as it climbed the shallow slope. They caught their breath and dusted themselves off.

"Oh, look," said Saffire from a spot near a pile of rocks where she and Michiko had taken shelter. "A tarantula!"

"Yuck," said Michiko, who edged away from her and sat on another rock, picking debris out of her fuzzy mike.

"It's an Oklahoma brown," the actress said, reaching down and, to Jack's astonishment, gently picking it up and laying it on the sleeve of her jacket. "No worse the wear. Just have to make sure I don't get its nasty little hairs in my skin. Right, boy?" She held the fuzzy creature up to her face and looked lovingly into its eight eyes.

"How can you tell it's a boy?" Michiko asked.

"I'm not a hundred percent sure, but the boys are smaller."

"Adorable," Wynda said drily. "OK, now's your chance to say something heroic, Brad. Oh, wait a minute." She was looking down at Brad's jeans, where a wet spot darkened the crotch. "Pole, go back to the car and fetch another pair of Brad's trousers."



The team was exhausted, and no one except Jack wanted to continue the chase. Brad, especially, sulked in the passenger seat of Van One as Devlin drove back west, blasting a country station, about the only frequency he could tune in. Even Jack recognized that, one, their storm had entered horribly hilly chase territory in

Missouri; and two, the Bubble was going to need a thorough going-over before they could think of launching it again. They headed toward their temporary headquarters near Oklahoma City to see what they could do.

Jack flipped through radar images anyway as they rolled, armchair-chasing, considering what it would be like if the Bubble really worked. To be able to see a tornado from the inside — or even to flip around one once or twice, to be lifted by the updraft and actually feel which way the winds around the funnel were blowing — would be an incredible experience. At the same time, he knew the risks were huge. The airbags would help the Bubble bounce or float, but they had been tested on sharp rocks, not, say, church steeples. And the chances of the Bubble getting good elevation or a panoramic view were small. The large airbag boxes, camera housings and other gear attached to the struts already limited the view. Once the airbags inflated and surrounded the Bubble, Brad would be stuck watching the fun on a little monitor. Who'd want to risk his life to fly into a tornado just to watch it on TV? Apparently someone who wanted to be on TV, and that was Brad.

The only one among them who seemed born to be on TV was Saffire, whose yellow jacket now partially hid her tempting décolletage. She sat next to Jack in the back as they took a break from filming. In the middle seat, Andre dozed, a tiny drop of spittle clinging to the corner of his mouth and threatening to drop onto the camera he still clutched tightly, unconsciously, under his arm.

"It was a great day, wasn't it?" Saffire made it a statement more than a question. "How is that storm doing?"

Jack wasn't sure if she was really interested, but he was always ready to talk about the weather. "It started to fall apart, but since it crossed the border, it's showing new signs of life. I wouldn't be surprised if it produced after dark."

"A tornado, you mean?"

"Yes, a tornado. The low-level jet is kicking in." He sounded grumpier than he felt. At least he was chasing and not stuck in some office somewhere, though that could be next if this job didn't pan out.

"Cool. I haven't seen one yet."

"We'll do something about that."

"How can you be sure?"

"I've never gone a year without seeing one, at least since I've been chasing," he said. "I'll get us to a tornado. Whether we'll get Mr. Twister in it, that's another question."

They heard a growl from the front seat, where Brad had stirred from his funk long enough to snarl at them. "Mr. *Tracker* to you."

"I can't wait to see him fly," Saffire said, nodding toward Brad. "You heard about that tornado he filmed in Kansas, didn't you?"

Jack gave her a half-smile. "He was almost a tornado probe in that one, too."

"I know! It was amazing footage. I got to see it when they cast me in this show. How did you hear about it?"

"Besides the TV shows that have told and retold the *story*?" he said, making it clear he meant something different by "story." "I have good sources." He flashed back to that day, to the van full of Brad's tourists stuck in the mud, to the massive tornado and the Chinese fire drill with the research vehicles that saved Brad's

ass and sent Jack off to sound the alarm in Prairie Rock. It was dreamlike now, everything happened so rapidly. He was glad he had his own video to go back to. The only other things he'd taken away from the last few moments in the town were his memories, a laptop full of data, and his life. And the siren.

"So you know more than you're saying?" Saffire asked.

"Always," Jack teased.

"You don't have to tell me everything." She winked one of those big golden-brown eyes at him. "I always find out anyway."

"That's what makes you such a good reporter." He couldn't keep the derision out of his voice.

"I know, 'Star Beat' is not '60 Minutes,' but we had a much better wardrobe. Anyway, this is a lot more fun. I can see this leading to a regular gig on a TV show. A science show, I hope. Those geek shows are always looking for a techno-babe to fill out the cast."

"That's how you see yourself? A techno-babe?"

"I'm whatever they want me to be, baby," she said. "But I do have an inner geek that's dying to get out."

Jack liked the lilt in her voice, the way she said "baby." It was cute. That was the second time he'd noticed her propensity for cuteness, which he usually found cloying in anything but women, and sometimes even then. Still, since the events of the past year, he'd noticed in himself a subtle, disturbing softening of his attitude, manifested in involuntary reactions to such stimuli as sentimental commercials and puppy calendars. So what? Saffire was no puppy. She was persuasive when she spoke and magnetic when she moved. And she was a lot more than cute when she folded her body into a car seat or unfolded it to stand outside in front of a camera, showing off all the right angles.

"How'd you know about the tarantula?" he asked her.

"Studied entomology in college before I started getting cast in a bunch of things," she said. "Had to pick up the last few credits while I was filming 'Star Beat.'"

"You studied bugs?"

"What did you think I studied, hairspray?"

"I don't know. TV, maybe?"

Saffire showed her dimples. "Majored in bugs. Minored in film." She leaned closer, and he caught another whiff of lavender. "Hey, are those eyes real?"

"I could be a cyborg," Jack said.

"My co-host used to wear these weird violet contacts. I called him Elizabeth Taylor."

"I don't wear contacts. They're green and they're real. I know. I'm a freak." But he said it as if he were saying, *I'm irresistible*. Experience had taught him the allure of his green eyes.

"I like them," she confirmed, offering a coy smile.

"So, is that name real?"

"Reality is relative."

"True. Kind of like this show." He wondered how much of her was real. All of the important parts, at least, he thought. "You want to get a drink later?" He said it without thinking. He couldn't help it. There was something about her, more than she let on. And what else did he have to chase on this trip, besides storms? Michiko looked like she might be fun to hang with, but she was apparently involved with some hipster guitar player from her home in Phoenix and quite possibly immune to his charms. Wynda was too damn manic. Besides, you don't fuck with the boss, figuratively or literally, and she was his paycheck.

Saffire, though — women had gotten him into trouble before on chases. And except for a tragic moment or two, he'd enjoyed it.

"Sure," she accepted his invitation, her smile broadening. "What else is there to do?"

Oh, he could think of a few things.

end of sample

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