

STORM CHASER

by Mary Kay Morel

I'M SITTING IN the back of a Chevy van somewhere in Nebraska, staring at the meanest-looking weather I've ever seen.

"See that, Emily?" Dad points as he speeds toward the greenish underbelly of a monster cloud. "That's the laboratory for a tornado."

"Really?" I gulp down a throat full of fear. Actually, I should be used to the *T* word. Dad and I have been looking for tornadoes all week.

He opens his window now, hangs his head out, and searches the sky. Then he points across a wheat field. I follow his finger and see a ragged chunk, dark as midnight, extend from the monster cloud.

"What is it?" I ask, trying not to sound worried.

"A tornado forming," Pop murmurs, sounding awe-struck.

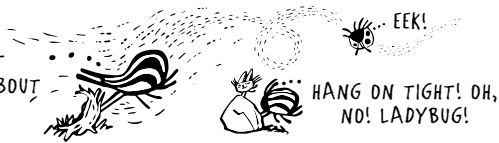
"You're kidding, right?" I lean toward the window, holding my breath. This is the first one we've spotted on our trip.

I know that tornadoes—or twisters—are columns of fast-moving air, shaped like funnels, that rotate violently. I also know they're dangerous. Right now I'm thinking of all those scary pictures I've seen on The Weather Channel, pictures of the damage tornadoes can do once they hit the ground: pickups turned upside



Illustrated by Brian Floca

POP QUIZ! WHAT'S THE MOST
IMPORTANT THING TO KNOW ABOUT
STUDYING TORNADES?



down, trailer houses lying on their sides like sick dogs, barns reduced to piles of rubble.

Unfortunately, Dad loves tornadoes. He's a meteorologist—he studies weather for a living. A sunny, cloudless day is dull stuff for him. Instead, he dreams of thunder, lightning, and twisters dipping down from the sky. That's why Dad works for the National Weather Service, tracking thunderstorms.

This trip is part of his job. Each June he crisscrosses the Midwest, searching for the kind of storms that produce tornadoes. Dad says tornadoes can happen just about anywhere in the world, but the worst ones usually touch down here in the United States, right between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains. Storm chasers call this area Tornado Alley.

"Grab the map!" he yells now.

I reach for a battered map and fan it open. Usually this is Chris's job. Chris is Dad's weather-tracking partner. This week, however, he's attending a hurricane conference in Florida. As a result, I've talked Dad into letting me ride along in his place. At first Pop felt reluctant to expose me to the dangers of chasing tornadoes, but I kept reminding him that science and photography are my favorite subjects. I also pointed out that I'm more mature than most fourteen-year-olds. *And* I told him that an educational summer adventure was better than no adventure at all. Finally, he gave in, and here I am!

The map flutters crazily now as wind gushes through Dad's window. Still, I manage to locate the road we're on.

"Anything going west?" Pop shouts.

I stare at the crisscross of confusing lines. The blue ones stand for county boundaries; the gray lines represent county roads.

"Found one!" I shout back.

Within minutes, Dad's turning onto my gray line. I hear the tires spin on loose gravel. Then I look up from the map. My mouth falls open. We're heading in the direction of the twister!

"The most important part of chasing a funnel cloud," Dad yells, "is making sure that you don't get caught in it."

No kidding, I want to say. Instead, I nod grimly and swallow hard.

Then the van begins to buck against the wind. A sudden, second storm rises up from the ground right before our eyes. "Tornado!" I shout, blowing my cool and falling into full panic mode.

Instantly I realize my mistake. What I'm seeing isn't a twister but a whole field, dust dry, rising skyward, carried by the wild wind. Dad can't close the window fast enough. Dirt blasts through, scouring the seats. I feel half of Nebraska's topsoil collect in my eyes, ears, nose, and mouth.

The dust finally settles, leaving the air the color of dirty laundry. Then I see the half-formed tornado again. It's closer to the ground now and no longer looks like a skinny rope. Instead, it has thickened into a squat, black funnel. When it hits the earth, the twister bobs and weaves. Suddenly it goes perfectly still. It's several seconds before I realize the reason: the tornado is heading straight toward us!





Dad sees the fear in my eyes and grins reassuringly. “It’s OK, Em. Chris and I do this all the time. We’ll just put the probes in place, snap some pictures, and be on our way.”

Yeah, Dad. Sure . . .

The van skids to a halt. Pop jumps out. I follow with the camera and start clicking away, just as Chris would. But my hands shake, and I wonder how well these pictures will turn out.

Dad, meanwhile, plops down the probes. They look like orange Frisbees with pointy heads. Inside the “Frisbees,” data sensors digitally record the tornado’s temperature, barometric pressure, wind speed, and direc-

tion. After the tornado has passed, Dad will drive back here, hunt them down, then download their information onto his laptop.

The probes, of course, are tough enough to withstand really nasty weather. Even if they get tossed about, the data stays intact. The tricky part is placing them directly in the tornado’s path. That’s not always easy because twisters don’t necessarily move in straight lines. They wobble and weave. They can even veer off in a new direction within a matter of seconds, missing the probes entirely.

With the “Frisbees” in place now and my shaky pictures snapped, we scramble back

WHAT WAS IT LIKE, LADYBUG? INSIDE THE
TORNADO? WHAT DID IT SOUND LIKE? COULD
YOU FEEL THE AIR PRESSURE DIFFERENTIALS? OH,
I WISH I COULD HAVE GONE!



REALLY? I WISH IT
WAS YOU, TOO. OW.

MEW!

WHY ARE YOU CHASING THE
TORNADO, TATER?



I NEED TO GET IN FRONT OF IT!
I'VE GOT SENSORS AND DEVICES
TO RECORD AIR PRESSURE
MEASUREMENTS.



inside the van. “Let’s get out of here!” Dad yells. He grabs the steering wheel and backs toward the ditch, hoping to turn around and hightail it in the opposite direction.

I hear weeds scratch at the wheels. Then I feel the van’s undercarriage scrape against a mound of earth. Dad switches the gear from reverse to forward. But we just sit, tires spinning hopelessly. For the first time in my life, I see fear in my father’s face. “I can’t believe this is happening,” he whispers. “We’re stuck right in the tornado’s path!”

Dad jumps out and tries to shoulder the van back onto the

road. I join him, pushing with all my might. It doesn’t budge.

I start ticking off tornado safety rules in my mind. Rule Number One: Never stay inside a vehicle for protection. A car or truck can be a deathtrap when a tornado hits. Pop obviously knows that rule, too. “We’ve got to get out of here!” he yells, running back to the driver’s seat and shutting off the engine. The fact that he sounds scared doesn’t comfort me.

Rule Number Two: If you’re caught outside with no structures nearby, find the nearest low spot—a ditch or a ravine. The problem is, we’re surrounded by flat fields. The ditches on either side of the road sit directly in the tornado’s path. Then I notice a barn. It’s squatting out in the wheat field.

Rule Number Three: Seek shelter inside a sturdy building, if possible. I’m not sure about the sturdy part. That barn looks like it’s been standing there since the days of the dinosaurs. On the bright side, it appears to be out of the tornado’s line of fire. I point toward it





EEEK!



LOOK OUT, MUFFIN! I'VE GOT TO CATCH THAT TORNADO!

hopefully now. Dad nods. "Come on!" He grabs my hand like I'm four years old, and we make a run for it.

On the other side of the ditch, we confront a wire fence. Dad stretches two strands as far apart as they'll go. As I'm crawling through, I catch my baggy T-shirt on a barb. Panicking, I grab the cloth and give it a jerk. Nothing happens. I feel sick. My heart's beating so loudly, I swear you could hear it in the next county. Then I yank the fabric a second time, and it jerks free. Dad climbs through next.

We start running again. Back home on my school track field, I can fly, my feet barely skimming the ground most days. Here, where speed really counts, I move clumsily, tripping on dirt clods the size of turtles. The apple I ate for lunch bops around inside me, and the camera bounces against my rib cage. I feel like I might throw up—only there's no time for that. So I focus on the barn, commanding my legs to go faster. If only it wasn't so far away . . .

Suddenly, we're there. Dad pushes a splintered door open. We find nothing inside to crawl under, so we drop onto the floor. I throw my arms over my head just like Dad's always told me to do. Then we wait.

First the wind attacks, carrying loose soil. I hear it seep between the boards, oozing around us, clogging the air. Then something whops the side of the building—something big enough to make the boards clatter like broken teeth. A fence post? A cow? No, we haven't seen a cow for miles. I close my eyes and tell myself to count to ten. Sometimes that works when I get scared at the dentist's office. One, two, three . . .

The barn creaks like it's being stretched apart. What if we're *not* beyond the tornado's reach? What if it changes direction? Twisters



are unpredictable. They can veer off course instantly. What if this one is coming right at us now? Four, five, six . . .

Then the wind changes, shifting into something beyond a roar. It now has the voice of a monster. A monster that screeches and wails like an untamed animal. A monster that sounds strong enough to suck the life out of us.

The monster barrels over the prairie, clawing the roof above our heads. I hear the dry shriek of a board being ripped loose. One final groan and it's gone, whizzing skyward, off into the Land of Oz. Two more boards follow from the barn's roof. The monster bursts through this newly made hole, roaring into our shelter. It whirls about, tossing dirt and rubbish everywhere. Silently I wait for the rest of the boards to be plucked loose and tossed into the sky. Seven, eight, nine . . .

My brain slides away from the numbers and latches onto the noise again. This must be what death sounds like. Death by wind. I think of the stories my dad has told about what tornadoes can do: scrape the bark off trees, crumple cars like Kleenex, toss bathtubs into the air. Ten, eleven . . .

Chris would probably be taking pictures at a time like this. Not me. I'm not that brave. So much for being a great storm chaser . . .

Then, in spite of my fear, I look up. Dad is watching the storm. When he sees me raise my head, he reaches over and hugs me. So we wait, eyes wide open. The truth is, I want to see the monster that has come to kill us. In fact, I want to fight it, even if I really don't have the power. I look up at my dad's face


again. He winks at me, and—just like that—I feel better. Then we grab each other tighter and hold on while we wait for the worst.

SUDDENLY IT'S OVER. The wind eases to a slow waltz, then shrinks away. When we look out the barn door, we see the tornado, already rolled on its side and unraveling.

Turns out we were on the edge of the twister. The real damage happened near the road. We see fence posts snapped off and tossed about. We see wheat and weeds, yanked out by their roots, pulled straight from the ground. Our van is still in one piece, but the back end is crimped. Also, it no longer straddles the ditch. Instead, it sits at a crooked angle down in the wheat field. I snap a few pictures, but I'm no Chris. He would have shutter-bugged his way through this whole ordeal.

Then we search for the sensors. The tornado has thrown them into the field, too. Still, the data is intact, and tonight Dad will download the information onto his computer. Then he'll study it, hoping to learn more about twisters. With this kind of research, meteorologists believe they will one day be able to better track and predict the unpredictable tornado.

As for myself, I think I've had enough of playing Chris this week. Sure, being Dad's storm-chasing partner has been thrilling. But I can only stand so much excitement.

Funny, some kids will spend their whole summer looking for a big adventure. Me? I've already had mine. 

IT GOT AWAY! PHODEY! I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU WENT UP IN THE TORNADO. THAT WAS A ONE IN A MILLION OPPORTUNITY. PURE LUCK.

