

I SURVIVED

THE JOPLIN TORNADO,
2011



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To the people of Joplin, Missouri

CHAPTER 1



SUNDAY, MAY 22, 2011

5:42 P.M.

JOPLIN, MISSOURI

A monster EF-5 tornado was destroying the city of Joplin, Missouri. And eleven-year-old Dexter James was in its killer grip.

The tornado had snuck up on the city, hiding behind a wall of storm clouds. Few knew it was coming. And nobody imagined that within minutes, it would kill 158 people and destroy much of the city.

In the hours before, Joplin had hummed with happy life. Cheers rose up from Little League fields. Gardens bloomed with roses and wild strawberries. Churches echoed with prayers and hymns.

It was a typical Sunday afternoon.

Until the day turned dark and the wind began to howl.

And then the sky exploded like a bomb.

The tornado was three-quarters of a mile wide, with winds that topped 200 miles per hour. It swept away houses and blasted the wreckage thousands of feet into the sky. It tore apart schools and sent stores crashing down on the people inside. Cars flew through the air. Trucks turned into missiles. Century-old trees were ripped from the ground.

The tornado sirens wailed.

People rushed to their basements and huddled in bathtubs as their houses collapsed on top of them. Parents gripped their children as cruel winds tried to tear them away. In minutes, entire neighborhoods lay in ruins.

Dex was in an SUV when the tornado hit, and now he was trapped.

The ferocious winds roared and sent tree limbs and rocks smashing against the SUV.

And then,

Smash!

A window shattered. The tornado's fury blasted into the SUV. Dex was attacked by swirling winds filled with bits of wood and metal and glass. The pain was like being stung by thousands of scorpions, over and over again.

And then the wind grabbed hold of Dex. It wrapped around him like invisible tentacles, pulling him toward the open window.

Dex had always wanted to see a tornado for real.

And now here it was — the evil, swirling darkness.

Dex was being sucked into the tornado, and he knew there could be no escape.

CHAPTER 2



ONE DAY EARLIER
SATURDAY, MAY 21
9:00 A.M.

Dex pedaled his bike through the quiet streets of his neighborhood, his dog, Zeke, trotting right beside him. He was studying an arrow-shaped cloud in the bright blue sky when squealing shouts echoed from just ahead.

“Dexter! Dexter! Buy some lemonade!”

Two identical blond heads bounced up over a rosebush.

It was the little Tucker twins, Stephanie and Bobbie.

Dex wasn't thirsty, but no way could he just ignore the girls. Dex's parents and Mr. Tucker had all grown up together in Joplin. Before the twins were born, Mrs. Tucker worked at Joplin High School, where Mom and Dad both taught math.

There were about 50,000 people living in Joplin, and it seemed that at least half of them were practically part of Dex's family.

Dex stopped his bike in the Tuckers' driveway and dug a quarter out of his pocket. Both girls pointed at Zeke and giggled. The dog sat patiently with his tongue hanging almost down to the ground. Dex had to laugh, too. Poor Zekie was probably the ugliest dog in southeastern Missouri. Dad had it right when he said Zeke looked like a cross between a dolphin and a hyena. But who needed good looks when you were the best dog on the planet?

Dex choked down a Dixie Cup filled with warm, watery lemonade.

“Delicious,” he said, smacking his lips.

The little girls beamed, flashing their missing front teeth.

Just then, Mr. Tucker came through the front door. He was lugging two suitcases, which he dropped next to the car.

“Good morning, Dex!” he said, striding over.

“Hey, Mr. Tucker. Going somewhere exciting?”

Mr. Tucker smiled. “Just down to Arkansas, visiting the cousins. We’ll be back Monday.”

He gave Zeke a pat on the head. “You and your guard dog can keep the burglars away for us.”

Dex laughed. The only criminals in this neighborhood were the raccoons that knocked over their garbage cans.

“So,” Mr. Tucker said, lowering his voice. “Any word from Jeremy?”

The question punched Dex in the gut.

Jeremy, Dex’s twenty-year-old brother, was a member of the US Navy SEALs, a special part of the military. He was overseas on a mission, but Dex had no idea where. SEAL missions were top secret. Jeremy could be anywhere in the world

where there was a war to fight, terrorists to catch, or hostages to rescue.

“No news yet,” Dex said, his throat tightening up. Jeremy had warned him that he could be out of touch for weeks during his mission. But still, each day without hearing Jeremy’s voice felt like a year.

When Jeremy first became a SEAL, all Dex felt was pride. His brother was one of the toughest warriors on the whole planet! How awesome was that? Folks in Joplin said Jeremy was a hero. At school, even Dylan Elliott and his pals were coming up to Dex, dying to know every detail about being a SEAL.

Dylan and Dex used to be close buddies. But over the years, Dylan had spent more and more time with guys from his baseball team. Dylan and Dex never had a fight, or even exchanged a mean look. But somehow an invisible wall had risen up between them, and Dex had no idea how to break it down.

And so it was a happy surprise for Dex that suddenly Dylan and his pals wanted to sit with

him at lunch. They'd crowd around him, begging to see the picture of Jeremy in his night-vision goggles with his M16 rifle strapped to his chest. They'd ignore their chocolate milk and French toast sticks as Dex told them everything Jeremy could do: parachute into a war zone, scuba dive one hundred feet down into the sea, survive an arctic blizzard or desert sandstorm.

"Did he ever have to eat a raw lizard?" asked Mike Sturm, who had replaced Dex as Dylan's best friend.

"Quiet, Mike," Dylan snapped. "They don't eat lizards, do they, Dex?"

"No," Dex said. "They can eat some kinds of bugs, though. They're really high in protein."

That sent them all into fits of groaning giggles, and the happy sounds echoed through Dex's mind all day. He hadn't realized how much he'd missed Dylan, and how good it would feel to be one of the guys.

But over the past couple of weeks, something strange had happened to Dex. He didn't want to tell stories about Jeremy. He didn't want to *think*

about Jeremy. Because it had suddenly dawned on Dex that his brother — his best friend in the world — might not make it home in one piece. Jeremy could get shot, blown up, kidnapped . . . or worse. Last night, Dex had lain sweating in his bed, actually counting the ways his brother could get hurt.

Dex couldn't admit this to the guys; they'd think he was a little coward.

And he sure didn't want to talk about it with Mr. Tucker right now. He said a quick good-bye, afraid he was going to start blubbering in front of the twins.

As Dex rode toward home with Zeke, his brain flashed with nightmare thoughts.

There was Jeremy, pinned against a mountainside as grenades exploded all around him.

There was Jeremy, leaping out of a burning Black Hawk helicopter.

There was Jeremy, alone and bleeding in some far-off desert.

Dex pedaled faster, as though his terror was a ferocious beast he could speed away from.

He flew down the street on his bike.
He ignored the stop sign.
He barely heard the horn or the screeching tires.
And then,
Bam!
Dex was flying through the air.