Lily's story

By Carolyn Mueller

One month after Lily's miraculous recovery, on May 22, 2011, a tornado hit Joplin, Missouri.

Located in an area of the heartland known as Tornado Alley, the city is well acquainted with such weather. No resident on this stretch of flatland ever spends a summer feeling entirely safe. But the twister that hit Joplin late in the afternoon of Sunday, May 22, was quite a different beast.

The category F-5 monster was the deadliest tornado to hit the US since 1947. There is a north and south side to this town of 50,000, and the tornado blasted smack through the center, annihilating everything in its path with merciless 200 mph winds. It killed 161 people and injured another 1,000.

The stormy Monday morning the day after the tornado revealed what looked more like the aftermath of a huge bomb than the result of anything natural. All in all, the Joplin tornado caused $2.8 billion in damage, and it reshaped the hometown of Tara Prosser and her dog, Lily.

As the tornado approached Joplin, Tara, her husband Jeff, their kids, and the dogs were driving in their new camper on an inaugural journey to Arkansas for a search and rescue (SAR) dog training clinic. Jeff tried to hurry home. He's a bit of a weather watcher, and he saw storms coming. Jeff wanted the new camper in the garage before things got bad.

CHAPTER 5: The Tornado

It had been four years since Tara and Lily began their training in search and rescue. As her passion for SAR grew, Tara had found other interested friends. A few accompanied them on the Arkansas trip. Everyone watched the weather. A phone rang. A friend in Joplin called.

"It's here," he said, before the line suddenly went dead.

Though they were still hours from Joplin, the weather system moving through the Midwest that day collided with their van in Northern Arkansas. Hail battered the windshield, and the wary travelers pulled over at a Best Western to wait out the storm.

In Joplin, the clouds gathered, turning the sky a sickly green, like an old bruise. Rotation began, and the tornado touched down just west of Joplin, near the Kansas state line. It marched toward the southwest corner of the city, gaining power. As it entered the more densely populated areas of Joplin it strengthened significantly. The trees, buildings, cars and debris sucked into its monstrous, rotating mass added to its intensity.

By the time the tornado reached the center of Joplin it had become a true monstrosity of a storm. It traveled at least 22 miles across the area. Everything was dark.

It was 10 p.m. before the Prosser family and SAR crew reached home. With the power out, the new reality of their lives remained veiled from them by the night.

Upon their arrival, Jeff immediately changed clothes and disappeared into the darkness, not to be seen again by his family for several days. As the man in charge of the paramedic force, Jeff needed to be at the forefront of rescue efforts.

Tara and Lily fell into an uneasy sleep in the pitch black of a very dark night.