



WHEN NOT IF

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CHAPTER ONE

Aida Mae, 2004: I put down the crowbar when I heard the whoop of a siren and garbled chatter from the patrol car megaphone. The attic wasn't air conditioned, and I needed a break anyway. Downstairs, the icy air chilled my sweat-soaked shirt as I leaned against the kitchen sink, looking out over the bay. I rinsed my coffee cup and wiped the

counter as I did every morning, tidying the house to go. But I had no intention of leaving today. I planned to stay put, knowing the generator would sputter to life and power the refrigerator and the lights if I was stranded for a few days.

I heard the message clearly as it came closer street by street: “The island is under mandatory evacuation. Bridges will be closed, and power will be extinguished at noon. I repeat. Anna Maria Island is under mandatory evacuation.”

I understood full well turning off electric and water was the easiest way to squelch any hurricane parties in the planning stage. When squad car number six pulled down my street, I walked out to the front gate to greet it. The driver was the deputy I thought looked just like a young Rock Hudson.

“You’d better get packing, Miss Stormy. We’re the bullseye for this one.”

“You’ve been saying that for every storm this season, Jeremy. I’m not even putting up the lawn chairs this time.”

“Come on now. Don’t get me in trouble. The chief told me to tell you we don’t want to have to come back and hang a toe tag on you.”

“That’s not a very nice thing to say to an old lady. You’d better get on your way now. Tell the chief he can terrorize the tourists with his toe tag spiel. And tell him to get every last one of ‘em off this island. I

won't babysit the stragglers."

I knew he'd make me sign a waiver like they'd been asking since Hurricane Andrew. I didn't even read the form when he handed me the clipboard—just scribbled my name, then watched him do a three-corner turn on the narrow street, cruising back past shuttered beach homes, all deserted now.

This would be the fourth storm to hit Florida in six weeks, and most people were still shuttered since Hurricane Charley, just like I was on the beach side of the house. It was too late to get help with the rest of the shutters now. Besides, I didn't want to give up my view of the bay or the bridge.

My best friend Bonnie left this morning in her old Honda, packed with picture albums and life treasures and her cat Bob, even older than the Honda. I prayed Bonnie would make it to her daughter's condo in Macon before the roads clogged and a big blow crossed the state.

"Honestly Lord, I don't know what I'd do without my Bonnie. Please take care of her. And Bob, too." I knew Bonnie would be lost without that old orange cat. I doubted she'd rescue another, knowing it could outlive an 85-year-old, even one as scrappy as Bon.

We watched on the news as the storm came up through the eastern Caribbean, then slammed Jamaica and Cuba before shredding the Keys. When the Weather Channel crew arrived at Tampa

International and Anna Maria Island sat smack center in the “cone of uncertainty,” Bonnie had second thoughts.

“Come with me. I can’t leave you here,” she said. “This storm looks like it’s really coming for us.”

“Don’t be silly. This will be just like always. It’ll turn. We’ll get some wind and rain. Big deal. You and Bob will be home by Thursday. You’ve got water and sandwiches? And that travel urinal contraction we used last trip? Remember to fill up at half a tank. Don’t wait....”

“Stop it, Stormy. It’s not my first rodeo. Now go charge your cell phone before the power is off and let me get on the road.”

Bon hated the drive to Macon and would rather stay and pass the storm, playing endless rounds of rummy, sorting the cupboards and rearranging the living room furniture. But her daughter wouldn’t consider it. While Bonnie sometimes suffered a bit of anxiety, her daughter Lucy had full-blown panic meltdowns when it came to her mother’s well-being.

I stared out to the bay: gray and choppy, even with the sun still shining through the circulating cloud cover. I had watched so many storms come up the Gulf only to pivot east just south of the island or speed past toward the Panhandle, again sparing our local economy. It never took long for a celebration to break out in a local bar or neighbor’s garage, everyone grateful once again the target had moved.

But today felt different. Already, before the first drop of rain, the air hung heavy and ominous. Though I hated to admit it even to myself, I was feeling lonely and a bit jealous of Bonnie. Lucy cared so much, even if she was a little neurotic. And those grandchildren gave Bon more joy than anything I had seen in my life—more than falling in love or birthing my own son or making my first million dollars.

I thought about laying screen over what was left of my garden—just a few peppers, the tomatoes mostly in shreds. There wasn't a leaf left on the hibiscus, typically bursting with yellow, pink and orange blossoms bigger than my hand.

But this summer had been anything but typical. We'd lost all the food in the refrigerator twice as tropical winds took out trees and power lines. I missed the old days when neighbors came together to cook everything up for a storm crowd before the food spoiled. There were no neighbors to count on anymore.

The disappointing garden patch tired me, and I decided to read rather than putter in the dirt. A breeze cooled the screen porch where my book waited on the foot of the cushioned chaise. My feet ached, and I felt winded after walking such a short distance. Nothing a good nap wouldn't cure.

The older I got, the more I enjoyed a nap in the breeze to pass a humid morning and forget my aches. My dreams seemed so vivid now, and sometimes I woke up confused about where I was. Then I'd look at my hands and realize I was still old, not young and pretty like

in my dream.

The bridge siren woke me a full hour later. This time, when the drawbridge went up, it did not go down. The island was officially closed for another storm.

Coming from the south, the circulation had sucked half the water out of Sarasota Bay, forcing hermit crabs to scurry for cover from hungry seagulls. Crab traps sat on the bottom leaving any live catch to slowly suffocate. Tires, anchors and less recognizable debris littered the basin, along with boats heeled at odd angles—some abandoned, some still attached to their moorings.

It wasn't the first time I had seen the water disappear ahead of a hurricane, when the moon was right for a King Tide. One of my earliest memories was hunting with my brother under the bridge, looking for arrowheads and spear tips lost by the Calusas centuries before. We sifted in the sand and sea grass usually covered by several feet of water. But just like now, the water had pulled away to join the storm.

The Calusas were the first settlers on this stretch of coast. They were convinced their sacrifices of fresh fish and shell beads enticed the gods to protect them against severe coastal storms.

Then the Spanish came to run off the Indians. The Spaniards also trusted the tribal lore and found the area did, indeed, offer storm protection for ships and cargo as they savagely muscled their way

ashore. It wasn't storms, but mosquitos and tropical disease that ran off the Europeans.

A generation or two later, a clan of sea-seasoned boat builders and fishermen from North Carolina staked claim, also believing the long, skinny barrier island and shallow waters around it offered safe harbor—a protective bubble some like to call it—along the western fringes of Manatee County, FL.

Those North Carolinian settlers, the ones who would become known as Cortezians, were my people. The night I was born laid all that Indian lore to rest. The question had never been if a storm was coming. It was when.