



The **EYE** of
the
HURRICANE

QUICKREADS

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“Hurricane Phillip is traveling directly toward southern Florida at this hour. The big storm is expected to reach the coast at approximately 6:33 P.M.,” the radio blared.

Laina shifted uneasily in her chair. The three clerks—Laina, Cesar, and Bobby—were taking a break in the back room of Florida Foods.

“I wish he’d shut that radio off,” said Laina. “It’s getting on my nerves.”

Billy Maddox, the store manager, usually blasted music over the PA system. But today there was nothing on but hurricane news.

“Nah,” Cesar said. “Playing the radio’s

a real good idea. It scares the customers. You know—it makes them panic so they buy more groceries.”

Before the store even opened, lines of people were waiting to stock up on food. The three clerks were having their first break in 11 hours.

“Thousands have boarded up their homes and businesses and evacuated. Traffic is at a crawl on major highways as motorists flee the advancing storm.”

“Maybe we should get out of town too,” Laina said nervously.

“You crazy?” Cesar cried. “You wanna leave when Maddox is paying us time-and-a-half for sticking around?”

“Laina—would you feel safer if we went to a shelter?” Bobby asked.

“You’re *kidding!* Go to some shelter full of screaming kids?” Cesar butted in. “Nah, this is better. Maddox said we’d be safe out by the loading dock if it gets bad.” He put his arm around Laina and stroked her cheek. “Don’t worry, babe—I’m

here. I'll take care of you." His voice was soft and sweet.

Bobby gritted his teeth. He hated it when Cesar talked to Laina like that. At the same time, he wished he had Cesar's gift for such easy sweet-talk.

Laina pulled away from Cesar. "Okay, I'll stay," she said. "But first I want to make sure that someone drove Tia to a shelter. She said she'd leave a message on my machine." Without another word, she sprang up and headed for the pay phone at the front of the store.

"Forecasters are predicting tides rising up to 13 feet and major flooding in low-lying areas. Governor Hermosillo has declared a state of emergency and called in the National Guard."

Cesar tilted his chair back and fingered the silver chain around his neck. "If Maddox was smart," he said, "he'd jack up the prices. People will pay *anything* right now!"

Bobby stared coldly at Cesar. "Maybe because he's not scum," he said.

Cesar's chair slammed to the floor. "You calling *me* scum, Diaz? Is that what you're saying?" he demanded.

"I'm saying that anyone who would take advantage of people's fear is scum," Bobby said.

"Whoa! *Mr. Saint!*" Cesar said mockingly. "Excuse me for breathing the same air as you! You know something, Mr. Saint Diaz? You know what's good about a thing like a hurricane? It makes things real—like who's gonna survive and who's not. And the ones who survive are the smart ones! It's the law of the jungle. All this polite stuff we do every day—it's not real. The reality is that we're all just animals."

Bobby glared at him. "We're worse. Animals only hurt each other to survive. Only people are greedy."

Laina walked up. "There's no message!" she said in a quivering voice. "I called Tia's neighbors, but none of them answer their phones."

"Don't worry, babe," said Cesar. "Tia's okay."

She probably just forgot to call.”

“Do you want me to drive you over there?” Bobby offered.

“That would be great, Bobby! Tia broke her hip last month, so it’s real hard for her to get around.”

“I’ll tell Maddox,” Bobby said.

“I’m coming too, babe,” Cesar chimed in as he turned to Bobby. His mouth was grinning, but his eyes were hard as flint. “No guy goes off with my baby alone,” he added in a low voice.



Bobby pulled his car out of the Florida Foods parking lot. The sky was an eerie yellow. Rain was now falling in sheets, blown sideways by gusts of wind.

The traffic was crazy. Cars sped down side streets or crawled along main roads, their horns honking. On one narrow street, Bobby had to pull over to avoid an SUV that was barreling down the wrong side of the road.

It took almost an hour to reach Tia’s

neighborhood. Bobby peered through the windshield. “Which way?” he asked.

Laina pointed. “Turn left at the end of the street. It’s next to the creek.”

The sky was black now. Street lights were out, and every house was dark. Twigs torn from the trees above them slapped against the windows. As they approached the creek, the water on the road rose to nearly a foot.

“Turn around and go back!” Cesar cried out. “This is crazy.”

Bobby turned to Laina. “You want to find her, don’t you?” he asked.

“Nobody asked you, Diaz!” Cesar snapped. Then he put his hand on Laina’s neck. “Babe, your Tia’s already left. Look—nobody’s around,” he said.

“I need to be sure, Cesar,” Laina said.

“Let’s get out,” said Bobby. “We’re better off going ahead on foot.”

When Bobby stepped out of the car, the warm rain hit him like a shower, soaking him instantly. He stood up, fighting the roaring wind as it whipped at his hair and clothes.

Laina grabbed both his hand and Cesar's. She led them forward.

By the time they reached the house, the water was above their knees. Laina ran up the steps. Wind was whirling through the open front door like an evil ghost. Bobby and Cesar felt their way through the dark rooms while Laina, who knew the house, raced ahead. She cried "Tia! Tia!" But her shouts were carried away in the howling wind.

Bobby and Cesar had returned to the gaping front door when Laina hurried up to them.

Cesar looked irritated. "She's not here, right? Let's go!" he said.

"Let's get to a shelter," Bobby said. "Maybe we can get in touch with her."

The wind was screaming when they stepped outside. Leaves and twigs, propelled by the wind, smacked Bobby's chest and legs. Then a rock hit his face, making him grunt with pain. The force of the wind made it feel like a blow from a baseball.

For a while they walked blindly through the stinging rain. Bobby wasn't at all sure they were headed toward the car. "Let's go back!" he shouted to Laina. But just then, something whizzed by his ear and struck Laina's shoulder. It was a tree branch, as thick as his arm. Laina crumpled and started to fall. Bobby caught her, but Cesar quickly pulled her to his side.

"Over there!" Bobby jerked his head to the left where a dim light was flickering in the distance. The light came from a two-story house. In a few minutes, they waded up onto the porch, Laina stumbling all the way. When Bobby hammered on the door, the light went out. Cesar started to climb through a blown-out window.

"Go away or I'll shoot!" yelled a voice from inside. It was a young voice, high and scared.

"Please help us!" Bobby shouted. "Our friend's been hurt!"

From the window a flashlight beamed out on the three of them. Then the door opened. A boy no more than 11 held the

flashlight in one hand and a kitchen knife in the other. Next to him were a younger boy and girl, their eyes big and their mouths taut with fear.

Bobby stepped inside. An inch of water covered the floor. "Give me the flashlight, please," he said. "I want to see where she's hurt."

The children gathered close to Bobby and Laina. "Don't worry. It's not that bad," Laina mumbled.

"Hush," Bobby said softly. "Hold still."

There was a long, shallow cut on Laina's neck. "Do you have a first-aid kit?" Bobby asked the older boy.

The boy nodded and hurried off, splashing through the warm water.

"*I'll* take care of it, babe," Cesar said.

"Let Bobby," Laina said wearily.

As Bobby dabbed Laina's cut with an antiseptic, he smiled at the older boy. "Thanks," he said. "I'm Bobby."

The boy said his name was Ramon. His brother and sister were Michael and