

The Storm After

Gina Hooten Popp

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PROLOGUE

GALVESTON ISLAND

SATURDAY AFTERNOON

SEPTEMBER 8, 1900

Looking out over the ocean, Sister Elizabeth noticed two things: magnificent, violet-tinged clouds streaking across a gray-blue sky, and a strange swirling of waves in a most unusual green color. Walking back along the beach, she began to mentally prepare a list of things needed to ready the orphanage for the coming storm.

When Sister Elizabeth went to town for supplies, she would seek the advice of John, the church's volunteer handyman. Close to her in age and thought, John was her friend and a Godly man, even though there were some who thought otherwise. But she knew his heart and was grateful for his help. As Sister Elizabeth made her way back to the dormitories, she felt the first drops of rain. She couldn't help thinking they tasted like tears as they slid down her face. A gull in erratic flight screeched overhead.

Sister Elizabeth only intended to make a quick trip into town, but the rain had intensified, making it difficult to navigate the streets. People scurried about making last minute preparations for the storm. No one had ever seen flooding come in this fast, or this far inland, and people were starting to take the weather seriously. Many appeared to be leaving their jobs early to go home and help their families get ready for the approaching storm. Some were saying the hurricane had changed paths and, now, it was headed directly for them. If the townsfolk's speculation of the storm came true, the orphanage would be completely unprotected in its position near the beach. Sister Elizabeth looked down at the too-fast rising water impeding her progress and shifted her packages higher.

"Sister Elizabeth. Sister Elizabeth."

She turned to the voice she knew so well. John stood, drenched by the rain, giving him the appearance of a different person. But she knew when he took the heaviest packages and loaded them for her he was the same sweet John.

Jumping into the buggy, John took the reins. “I’ve got to get you back, sister,” he said. “Got to help you and the sisters batten down. Ships coming in report this storm’s a real bad one. Sailors told me it’s the worst they’ve ever seen.”

...

Later that night hurricane-force winds pounded the orphanage like demons with sticks. This is as close to hell as Sister Elizabeth ever wanted to be. Fear rose like bile in her throat and she wished John had not insisted on going back to town. His presence would have been comforting. However, she knew no mere mortal could protect them against the angry winds and needle-like sheets of rain being forced down upon them. The outcome would be in God’s hands.

Rising high, the water covered the whole first floor. She was thankful John had the foresight to convince the sisters to gather all the children on the top floor of the girls’ dormitory. He had deemed it the stronger of the buildings. Now at the height of the storm, even its sturdy construction groaned from the strain of the sustained high winds. She thought back to what the store clerk had said about the hurricane changing paths. Judging by the unrelenting roar, the hurricane was passing right over the heart of Galveston, and the island didn’t have a seawall. Her heart lurched as she watched one wall start to bend perilously inward. Nails popped. Wood splintered.

Knowing she could not hold all the children in her arms, she had used clothesline to connect each child’s hand to one another. She had told them they were playing a game. Now linked together, the little ones huddled around, hiding their eyes in her robe. With each new crash of thunder and burst of lightning they cried uncontrollably.

“Shhh, now ... shhh,” she said. The roar of the storm deafened her so she could barely hear her own words.

As the pressure outside dropped lower, she felt the urge to sleep—even as her anxiety increased. Her nerves raw, she stayed strong for the little ones. Silently, she prayed the clothesline would keep them from becoming separated if the storm intensified. If they had to move...closing her eyes, she tried not to think about “what ifs.”

In the chaos, she saw one girl's mouth moving. As she leaned close to listen, she felt the toddler's silky blonde ringlet brush her cheek. "Momma. Momma. Make it stop," the toddler cried into Sister Elizabeth's ear. The heartbreak was instant. Her breathing became labored and she feared each breath would be her last. And she wasn't sure if she was holding the orphans or if the orphans were holding her.

A kerosene lantern hanging in the rafters cast ghostly shadows over them as it swayed ominously back and forth. Looking across the room, she locked worried eyes with one of the other nuns.

The wall of ocean water crashing through the roof on their side of the building took them both by surprise, as did the darkness it brought with it. Burning saltwater filled her lungs as the force of the wave pulled her and the children down. Death was imminent.

1 GALVESTON ISLAND

SUNDAY MORNING

SEPTEMBER 9, 1900

I was Sister Elizabeth, but no longer. Along with thousands of others who perished in the storm, I transitioned from my body last night. The people we left behind were dazed by what had happened to us ... to them. Later they would learn they had lived through one of the worst hurricanes in history. Right now that didn't matter, because the real storms of life begin just after the howling winds and driving rain die down.

Today would be no exception, as the sun rose in a clear sky and a balmy breeze off the Gulf of Mexico greeted the still-shaking survivors.

It was Sunday morning. A perfect Sunday for going to church...if only the church weren't in shambles, along with so many lives. Intuitively, I knew my mission. I would help my earthbound brethren with the shackles of their human existence until they, too, could be set free.

Right now, I must stay with John as he begins searching for the orphans and me. His heart will be broken when he discovers what has become of us.

JOHN

Ah, Mother o' God, how did I survive? Morning sun beat down on my Irish soul and heavy sea-laden humidity hit me full in the face. I was floating on a door. It rocked back and forth as it settled on a mile-high pile of debris. Last night in the storm, the door caught in a whirlpool. Round and round I went as the hurricane and the ocean raged.

A fly began buzzing near my right eye and it took everything I had just to move my head away. My insides quaked in fear as I viewed the devastation.

I stood. My inner thighs hurt. The tops of my arms hurt. I was bleeding. There was no one to help. All the living were hurt. A seagull screeched overhead. People moaned and called out for help, for fresh water.

What the hell? I heard the tolling of the bells calling people to mass. God, I'm thirsty. Thirstier than I've ever been before. And, as my fellow dockworker and Greek friend Constantine would remind me, that's saying a lot because I'm Scots-Irish. Where was the ever-joking Constantine? Where were Dean and Jim?

My drinking buddies were mostly sailors and dockworkers. An odd assortment of fun-loving characters brought together from every corner of the world. We gave each other hell, but we loved each other, too. I had been playing cards and drinking with a group of them last night. It was how we were going to ride out the storm. What I wouldn't give for yesterday.

I tripped over something ... dead man ... oh, no ... dead bodies everywhere. How many? I needed to get to mass. Needed to find living people. There was an arm waving from under a pile of tree limbs.

"Oh, God! Help me pull this stuff off." A face. Eyes blinking. Blue eyes. I'd seen the eyes before.

“I’m going to get ye out. Ye hear me? I’m going to get ye out,” I was crying for myself, for being damn helpless, and for her because her beautiful hair was tangled in the limbs of a tree. To set her free, I’d need to cut her hair.

I turned wildly. Where would I find something to cut with in this chaos? I ran to an overturned chest of drawers and started rifling through it. Clothes, hairbrushes, old photos still in frames. Then I saw it. A hunting knife.

She remained very still as I cut. I tried to leave as much as I could, which made for a rather odd haircut. Long in some areas and not so much as an inch in others. She was a pretty woman in spite of the bruises. I had seen her before, but I didn’t know her.

“Come now. Let’s get ye to your feet.”

She stood and leaned on me heavily. Then she began to walk on her own. In the direction of the ringing church bells. The same way I was headed. An ungodly stench made me nauseous. Covering both nose and mouth with a wounded hand, I tasted blood and sea salt. But I couldn’t escape that strong smell.

Oh, God. My insides wouldn’t quit quivering. I am not cowardly. But the events of last night left me undone in a way I had never experienced before.

I watched her up ahead as she picked her way through the debris and dead bodies. She stopped for a moment and lingered over the face of a child.

“Do ye know him?”

She didn’t answer. She just stared straight at me. Or rather through me. Then she stood and turned and started to walk again.

This lady with the blue eyes. Something was wrong. She was like a ghost. A living ghost. Her eyes were hollow. Soon I would discover half the faces on the island would have this look and it would never leave them altogether. It might leave for a while. But when they were by themselves or deep in thought it would return.

We stopped to rest and, in my mind’s eye, I saw the thunder and lightning cutting the darkness of last night’s sky. I remembered where I had seen this Blue Eyes. She had been clinging to a rooftop at the height of the storm ... a man and a child beside her. As my door raft raced by them, I could see her eyes, large and

frightened. The wind howled like screaming banshees. So loud I barely heard the human screams. Was the child on the roof the same child she had lingered over earlier? I didn't think so.

Others had joined our silent sojourn to the church. Tangled, muddy and battered we walked together in a small band that grew larger as we got closer. The dead along the way far outnumbered the living.

Up ahead, the lady touched her hair, feeling its jagged pieces. Please, God, let it grow back fast. When we reached the church, people were eating out of cans. Beans and such as that...ah, there was also cider. I made sure my new friend, whom I referred to in my mind as Blue Eyes, had something to eat and drink. Then I sat and ate and drank.

That's the thing about me. I can always eat and drink. I'm not one to let my emotions go to my stomach and that's why I think I manage to get by so well. Blue Eyes barely ate a nibble.

I glanced to my right and saw a lad of about fourteen, muddy, bloody, tangled and unkempt. Yet still he managed to give me a small smile. He held out his grimy hand and I gave him some of my food. I have this philosophy on life. Everybody eats. Even if there is only a little money or food, it's split between everyone so no one goes hungry.

Then I stood and started in the direction of the orphanage to check on the sisters and the orphans. I sure liked the sisters. Sister Elizabeth in particular. She never seemed to judge me and seems like if anyone should be allowed to judge, it would be a nun like her—a real spiritual person. But she never did and for that I was grateful. It was easy to be with her and the kids and I wanted to help and be there with them. Especially whenever I was troubled.

I had not gotten very far down the way when I realized both Blue Eyes and the boy were close behind me.

"Hey, ye following me, lad?" I didn't ask Blue Eyes as I felt it improper.

The boy didn't answer. I called back to him, "If ye are, it'd be okay."

We went on down the road, the three of us picking our way through what was left of our lovely Galveston, one of the wealthiest, most prosperous cities in America. I was as proud of living in America as I was of being born in Ireland.

“Are ye an American, kid?” I asked to make conversation and, honestly, I was trying to bring some control to the overwhelming terror beginning to press down on me. Polite conversation was a way to normalize the situation for me. For the three of us.

“Yes, sir. Born right here on the island.”

“Ye remind me of meself.”

“And you remind me of myself,” he parroted back.

Blue Eyes stopped to examine a small figure. She checked to see if it were indeed dead. When she assured herself nothing more could be done, she continued in our direction using a limping trot to catch up. Clearly, she did not want to be left behind, but she did not want to talk either. She touched her hair again. My heart hurt.

I slowed my pace to accommodate her. I hated myself for cutting her hair. But she was alive and the hair would grow back. I kept thinking that thought in me head so hard that finally I said it out loud.

“Ye’re alive, Blue Eyes. Yer beautiful hair will grow back.”

Aside from looking startled at being directly addressed as Blue Eyes, there was no other response from her. Still she seemed to cling to the boy and me as we headed for the orphanage. They didn’t know where I was going, yet they followed.

Sister Elizabeth would need my help. To my luck, when we realized the storm might be worse than we thought yesterday afternoon, I caught a ride with her from town and helped her get things ready at the orphanage. She had been at the store buying supplies and the nuns in the downtown church begged her to stay as the storm started whipping up a strong wind. But she wasn’t afraid. She wanted to be with the children. So I went back with her to the orphanage.

Turns out she really did need my help. The children were frightened and quite a few were just toddlers. I told her to take them to the top floor of the girls’ dormitory, as it was stronger and better made. I even helped her make a small swinging sling to hold a newborn. We took a piece of cloth and nailed it to the topmost rafters. We left a few small air holes and hung it in a way that the baby wouldn’t fall out.

Sister Elizabeth came up with the idea of hanging the baby in the rafters so her hands would be free to help the other children. The ingenious design of the little swinging sling with air holes was mine, though. She would probably need help getting the wee one down now. I had used a ladder to hang it securely.

After I had helped with all this at the orphanage the morning of the storm, I headed back to the house I was living in and renting out to four other friends. The water began to rise and I thought more than once I should go back and stay with Sister Elizabeth and the orphans, but the guys and me were going to play cards. I really wanted a strong drink, too, as I was feeling uneasy myself about the strength of the winds.

It was just easier to be in the company of men, ignoring the dangers, having fun until I'd wake with a hangover and a story of adventure about how we all rode out the storm, laughing and drinking.

Some of the orphans had already started to cry and I just couldn't take it. Sister Elizabeth seemed to understand. But I felt bad. Real bad. I'd make it up to her now.

Soon the boy, Blue Eyes and myself rounded a small hill on the way to the orphanage. We stood, stunned.

The boys' dormitory was gone. However, I knew the nuns had planned to take all the children to the top floors of the girls' dormitory. And, while devastated, a partial section of the girls' dormitory still stood. The rest of the building and the ones around it were washed away. Completely.

"Where is everybody? Where are ye?" My voice caught on the wind.

"Sir, maybe they headed back to town," the boy offered.

"Wait here," I said as I went to the bottom of the shaky staircase. I could see the small swinging sling in the rafters.

"Do you think we should go up these stairs?" The boy's voice took me by surprise. He was right behind me and he startled me so I stumbled.

"You're too heavy. Let me go up." He said as he ascended the rickety stairs faster than I would have ever thought possible.

"See that piece of material in the rafters?" I pointed at the swinging sling as I spoke.

“Yes sir, I see it,” the boy said as the baby in the sling started to cry. The boy’s face registered surprise as he heard the newborn. Cautiously, he moved forward to the top floor and disappeared into what was left of the building.

“I’m coming up. Ye’re not tall enough.” Next thing I know, I looked up and the lad was crawling across the roof. “Don’t!” I yelled. Blue Eyes gripped my arm hard. I felt her fear coursing through me. Neither of us could take any more tragedy.

“There’s a hole. I can reach in and get the baby out,” the boy said.

The structure started to give way.

Everything started to sway, and the boards creaked.

“I’m coming up.” I yelled.

The boy, flat on his stomach with his hand in the hole, looked at me terrified.

I hurried up the staircase.

The roof collapsed. Dust and debris covered me. I fought my way over the mess, worried my weight would crush the now silent baby, if the timbers hadn’t already.

The spirit of Sister Elizabeth hurriedly swept past John. As she pulled the boy and baby up through the rubble, the newborn began to howl.

Miraculously, I saw a hand pop up through the rubble ... then I saw the boy’s head. Oblivious to the danger, the boy came out of the hole holding the baby in one arm. Relief flooded me as I let out the breath I’d been holding.

“Let’s name him Lucky,” the boy said smoothing the newborn’s hair.

Shaking my head in agreement with his choice of monikers, I pulled out a small flask of clean water I had gotten from the church earlier that morning. Blue Eyes ripped off a clean piece of her slip and wet it as best as she could. Twisting it, she let drops of water fall into the infant’s mouth. This seemed to satisfy him.

I watched the boy as he put his hands on his hips and said, “Never dreamed you’d be looking for a baby, Mister.” Ignoring his remark, I said, “Remember the story we heard this morning, about the woman giving birth in the storm last night? Go back to the convent and see if they can help ye find her. Ask her if she will feed this baby, too.”

The boy didn't question me. He did as I asked and for that I was grateful.

I watched as the boy and Blue Eyes made their way across the debris-filled landscape. Occasionally, Blue Eyes would stop to examine something and the boy would wait patiently by her side. Finally, I could no longer see them and I felt a rush of fear at being left alone.

"John," I whispered on the wind, "your new friend's name is Sarah Michelle. She and the boy and the baby need you."
I wanted to tell him I was happy the swinging sling held tight. He wasn't listening, though. I tried to reach out and touch him.
Get his attention. I was unaware of what I could and could not do in my interactions with the living, as I had only been dead a few hours—a virtual baby in this new stage of being.

SARAH MICHELLE

I couldn't talk. I could only function. The horror was too much. My head hurt. My body hurt. I was afraid to leave the man named John.

... but, needed to go find food ... for the baby ... and the boy.

What was the miracle of the woman giving birth last night? Someone told us the pregnant woman and a toddler were clinging to a roof across from the convent. The nuns could see them out the top floor window they were looking through.

The woman slipped ... and the toddler slipped ... and the woman fell into a floating washtub ... a floating washtub ... and, they said the wind forced the tub right against the convent window and the nuns pulled her in ... she was in labor. The baby was born as so many were dying.

They also said something about the toddler falling into the water and being pulled out by a man clinging to a nearby tree. He grabbed the toddler by the hair and plucked him out of the rushing water. Then he swam to the window with the nuns. The child he had saved in the darkness of the storm had turned out to be his own nephew ... and the woman he saw pulled in his sister-in-law, but her husband didn't make it. My husband Thomas didn't make it ... my son Tommy didn't make it. I saw them both go down in the water while my hair got tangled in a tree ... holding me ... keeping me from them.

The room I'm in now is filled with blinding sunlight. The beautiful dancing light makes everything appear bright and cheerful even though I'm desperately afraid.

I couldn't help but notice some things were left untouched by the storm, like that delicate statue of a sparkling glass swan. How Tommy would have loved its intricate shape. I would have told him how back in England, when I was a girl, I had seen a similar statue blown by mouth out of a bubble of glass on the end of a straw ... oh no, is this how it is going to be now ... everything reminding me of Tommy Jr. and Thomas. Surely I will go insane without my dear husband and darling son. I've lost all reason to live.

But then I remembered I needed to do something important. What was it? It was the reason I had come to the convent. I needed to find the new mother who gave birth in the storm ... ask if she could feed two babies. The baby we found in the orphanage rafters must survive. Where was the boy? He would find the new mother for me.

Coming here the boy had stayed right by my side ... sometimes holding onto me and other times holding me up. Oh, God, the devastation. I couldn't tell which direction to go because the island was a mountain of broken things. Snakes of all kinds were everywhere. Some of them drowned just like the people. Snakes were even in the tree I was caught in last night. I shoved them away as they climbed in the limbs for safety. I saw other people get bitten. I did not to get bitten. Why not? Why did I live?

I remember they built the orphanage away from the middle of town thinking it would protect the children from the yellow fever. But the walk to and from town was long ... a long walk for little ones ... or anyone for that matter. Where are all those orphans? Only the baby was left. Did they leave the baby and walk into town? Why hadn't we crossed paths with at least a few? Did the nuns at this convent know where the nuns from the orphanage went? I must ask them.

I had to help Sarah Michelle and the boy walk the last few steps to the convent. I whispered in the boy's ear, "Take the baby from her." He immediately did as I asked. Then as they approached the door, I let go of Sarah Michelle and she gently slid down to the ground with a soft thump. The convent nuns rushed out to help.

JOHN

Let's name him Lucky. "Is that what the lad had said? Is he *Lucky* though to still be alive in this mess?" I guessed so. I was glad to be alive. But I couldn't really think. Maybe if the woman would breastfeed him. Or maybe if the nuns could bottle feed him he would live to be an old man. How were we going to take care of a newborn? I wish we could get him off the island and to the mainland. I would carry him myself if I could get hold of a boat that wasn't damaged.

Oh my God, the stench, it just wouldn't let up. It only got stronger as the sun rose in the sky. And why couldn't I find the nuns and the children? Both Blue Eyes and the boy didn't ask why I stayed behind. I think she knew and I think the boy was only thinking of saving Lucky. Good for him for leaving with Lucky. This doesn't bode well—there is no sign of life.

I looked across the sandy beach to where a large pile of storm debris had formed. Lumber, barrels, furniture ... it was all coming back in with the tide. Or maybe it had been pushed out with the tide. Who could tell with the world upside down?

"Halloo there!" A voice called out.

What the hell? I turned and looked in the direction of the voice. It was a man's voice and it was coming from behind or under a large mound of rubble.

"Are ye stuck?"

"No, but I could use some help," the gruff voice answered as an old sailor came from behind the mound. He was as old as any human I had ever seen, but much to my surprise very spry. "Sure glad you happened across me. I heard tell of three boys who weathered the storm in a tree near the orphanage. Came back to look for more survivors."

He nervously paced back and forth before continuing, "Maybe you can help me look?" Then he lifted his face to the heavens as if he saw them there, "Seems like God scooped'em up for safekeeping while this Hell on earth is happening."

My stomach tightened at his words. "Let's look for them along the beach," I suggested. "There's a neighborhood in this direction. Perhaps they're headed there."

As we walked I took a long, hard look at this stranger. He had a big nose. The kind of nose a really old man has—bulbous is what I think they call it. He had silver hair and silver whiskers. He talked like a true Texan.

“I’m Scots-Irish.” I said for conversation’s sake.

“I’m not.” He said. But he offered nothing more and I had to laugh.

Suddenly, we noticed another person up ahead. Out of the sand, he was pulling a body dressed in a white nun’s habit. Immediately, I recognized it to be Sister Elizabeth. But before I had a chance to grasp the horror, I realized another body was popping up out of the sand. And another. And another. Nine in all. I couldn’t comprehend why they were attached together with clothesline at their wrists.

Was this someone’s idea of a cruel joke? Then, I remembered. The sister had tied them together to keep the group of little ones from being separated in the high winds. Her greatest fear was losing one of them. What had Sister Elizabeth said to me as I nailed the little swinging crib in the rafters? “I’ll have me hands full with the toddlers. Maybe if I tie us all together no one will get lost during the storm.”

I cried. Big billowing sobs. And my nose and throat, already dry, became swollen and congested and I could hardly breathe. And I hurt in a way that I thought I couldn’t come back from. I loved Sister Elizabeth in a way that I shouldn’t have and I loved her in a way that I should’ve and she never condemned me for it. She just kept being her perfect self. Seeing only the good in me. Never pointing out the bad. And, I didn’t know if I was crying for her dying, or crying for me still living.

The Texan was down on his knees praying and the other man just kept crossing himself. It went on this way for quite some time. Both had tears running down their faces. I thought I would die, as I could not endure this pain. Deep, and searing ... right through my very heart ... piercing me in such a way that I could only twist and endure.

Thank God these two strangers were with me.

Stumbling, I turned to look out across the ocean. Gentle waves rolled slowly ashore toward my feet only to turn back before touching me. A misty sea spray caressed me face and a seagull screamed, bringing yet another sharp pain to my heart.

THE BOY “SEAN”

“Oh, no,” the lady who had been walking with us since the storm fainted just as the nuns took baby Lucky out of her arms. “Please sisters, the baby needs to eat,” I said frantically to the nuns as I rushed to help the lady.

“Here, help us get your mother to a bed, boy.” The nuns assumed she was my mother. Why tell anyone otherwise? To tell the truth, I had already started to form a plan in my head. Maybe this storm was a way out for me, a new start.

“She can’t talk. She can hear, I think.” The nuns nodded. “And, my baby brother, needs to eat. My mother can’t feed him.” The nuns looked startled. “Something’s wrong with her and I ...” Both nuns stopped helping my new mom and focused their attention completely on me. “... I was hoping ... we heard about a lady that gave birth in the storm. Maybe she could feed Lucky, too. He’s only a few days old.”

The nuns conferred in hushed voices. Then one approached me and said they would ask the woman.

I carried Lucky in my arms as they took me to the woman with the newborn in a nearby room. Lucky began to cry and the woman reached out her arms toward us even as the nun was asking her if she would consider feeding two infants. I took Lucky to her and he seemed to know naturally what to do. Who knows? Maybe he was a breast-fed baby.

I bashfully stepped out of the room and headed back to the lady I now referred to as mother. She was starting to rouse and the nun was holding a wet rag on her forehead.

“Mother, mother! You’re awake. How do you feel?” I was truly worried.

The nun looked up at me and gave a little smile. Her face was ageless, with soft ivory skin and gentle slate-gray eyes that seemed to sparkle each time she looked at me. Considering all she had been through in the last twenty-four hours, the nun seemed remarkably calm. I drew strength from her inner peace and I was glad she was the one helping my new mother. Together we would bring her back to health.

From underneath the rag, the woman couldn’t see that it was me, and she held out her hand to the son she had lost in the storm. I put my hand in hers and she grasped it with much love. Then she quietly went back to sleep.

“She’s exhausted.” The nun said as she tucked a dry, slightly dirty blanket around her. “Your mother will feel much better when she has slept. Let me get a blanket for you, too.”

“No, thank you. I actually slept through part of the storm. Can you believe that?” The nun didn’t say anything. I continued, “If you’ll excuse me, I must go and inquire about something.”

“Please take something to eat.” The nun pushed a few biscuits from a tin into my hand. At the sight of her small food offering, my mouth started to water and my stomach churned with hunger. Even though I was ravenous, I made myself slow down to savor each bite as if it were caviar. I would take nothing in this life for granted again.

“Thank you,” I said to the nun. “I must go now. I’ll return soon.”

Then I bent over and gently kissed my new mother’s cheek as any dutiful son would and I was on my way.

JOHN

I'm trying to think what happened after we discovered Sister Elizabeth and the orphans on the beach, but my memory leaves me. I know it took us all three quite some time to recover. The other two recovered faster because they did not know Sister Elizabeth and the orphans personally. Or maybe they did, I really don't know.

I remembered the Texan holding a bottle of whiskey near my mouth. I took it, even though I couldn't breathe because I had been crying hard. I choked it down, with some of it running down the front of my shirt. It burned, and I did it again.

"Let's make a plan." It was the other man talking, the one who wasn't the Texan. I recognized him from town. He worked on the docks, too. A barrel-maker. But I hadn't ever formally been introduced to him in the two years I had been living on the island. He was probably like me. There were many people like me who had come here to make money and improve their station in life. Nowhere else in the world was like America, and Galveston was the place to be in America. With more millionaires per capita than any other city in the U.S., Galveston had everything. A world-renown seaport ... a thriving downtown ... homes with all the latest inventions ... and, now, it was all gone. Swept away. Everything reduced to piles of boards and debris ... and it only took a few hours ... maybe even minutes.

Ignoring his attempt to make a plan, I said, "I've seen ye around. I don't think we've ever formally met." I didn't recognize my gravelly voice. The tears and tightness of my throat had changed it.

"I'm Jack. I've seen you and your friends. A fun bunch of fellows you appear to be. Maybe when we've gotten through this hell on earth, we'll all go out for a beer, heh?"

"Me friends are all dead, I think. Maybe some are alive. I was going to go look for them after I checked in on Sister Elizabeth."

"Sister Elizabeth. Is this her?" He looked down at her. "I'm sorry." And I could tell he truly was upset. Finally he started to speak again. "I'm helping to find the dead and take them back to a makeshift morgue. But I don't know what I was thinking? There are so many dead. If we could find a wagon or a boat, maybe we could take their bodies into the morgue in town."

“It makes more sense to bury them here.” It was the Texan. A practical man, you could tell. His big bulbous nose was red and more swollen than before, if that was possible.

“I’ll go into town and try to find someone with a wagon. I’ll tell them what has happened here.” Jack ran his fingers through his thick hair as he spoke.

“I don’t know what to do,” I said. Jack looked at me and shook his head.

“Soon it’ll be nightfall. I’ll be back by noon tomorrow with a wagon.” Then he was off and the Texan and I just sat there, not knowing what to do. We looked out over the ocean and watched a gull swoop down for a fish. Along the shoreline sand crabs scurried back and forth. Mother Nature didn’t seem at all concerned by the havoc her fury had wreaked just hours before.

This was the saddest moment in my life and only the stranger beside me would ever understand the depth of my despair. I was thankful once again to have him by my side. Instinctively, I knew I needed to go and find the boy and Blue Eyes. They needed to lean on me just as I had leaned on this crusty old sailor. I couldn’t do much for them other than just be there, and, I guess for now that would be enough.

SARAH MICHELLE

It was a glorious day. Gulls were dipping in the ocean. A gentle breeze wafted across the land. The sky was cloudless and so blue. No wonder I had dozed off on the beach on this dreamy day.

Thomas was a ways up the beach beckoning us to him. I heard little Tommy calling, “Mother, mother. You’re awake. How do you feel?” He was holding my hand. Thomas motioned for us to come to him again. I couldn’t wake up. Was I dreaming? Or was I awake? I had this vague notion of a nightmare. But what was it? And why would I want to remember it when I was here in this marvelous place with the two people I loved. I would concentrate on the here and now. There was much beauty and much love. I wanted to say something back to little Tommy. For some reason, my words wouldn’t come out. I channeled my love through my body, through my hands, through my fingertips. I was sure he could feel it.

These were the sweet moments that make life worth living. Your loved ones are your Heaven, my grandmother used to say. Oh, was that Grams leaning over me? The sun was so bright behind her head I couldn’t tell if it was her or an angel. The light was getting brighter and brighter, warm and welcoming with all its love. It was flowing over me and through me.

A baby’s cry pierced the air. I needed to take care of the baby. The baby needed me. Where was the baby? Where was the baby? But no words came out of my mouth as I frantically thrashed about looking for the baby, my baby.

I hit the ground with quite a thud. Every bone in my aching body hit against each other. And I looked up to see a nun rushing in from the next room. She had a concerned look on her face. I reached my arms out and wordlessly mouthed, “Lucky.”

“Bring the baby,” the nun called to someone in the other room. “She’s calling for the baby.”

I had fallen back into the nightmare. I wasn’t ready to leave yet.

THE BOY “SEAN”

Slipping in and out of the jumble of furniture, boards, trunks, dishes and anything and everything was harder than it looked. I wasn't even sure if I was headed in the right direction. I just had to check on something before I started my new identity and I had to make certain no one saw me hanging around this part of town.

I rounded a corner of what I thought was the right street, or at least the right area—and saw an unbelievable sight. Apparently the whole neighborhood of houses had buffeted one into another during the storm, creating one long mountain of debris where a once beautiful tree-lined street had been. Gorgeous, well-tended homes now a pile of rubble, shattered to tiny bits and pieces by the relentless strength of the storm. My magnificent Galveston was no more.

Sitting down, I began to weep. I would never find it in this mess. But I didn't get a chance to feel sorry for myself. Voices were headed in my direction. Quickly, I opened the door to a large wardrobe that miraculously had been left standing upright. Inside there were clothes. I moved in behind them. The smell of fine perfume wafted over me, and even though I was holding my breath, the woodsy scent reached my senses by osmosis. Headed from the delightful fragrance, I made a mental note that I should also quit using big words to impress people. Who knows what my new mother's background would be? And, my real mother had warned me before she passed that my extensive vocabulary could be construed as prideful. Therefore, I should use it with caution so more common people would not think me “arrogant”—a term she often used to describe my rich, well-bred father whom I hated.

The voices were drawing nearer.

Barely breathing, trying not to make a sound, I strained to listen as the voices stopped for a moment in front of the wardrobe. Soon they passed and I cracked the door open to let in fresh air.

The fine fabrics hanging in the wardrobe caressed my face—silk and lace. Then it hit me. I knew what to do with these elegant clothes from the better side of town. I slipped the garments over my arm. They were amazingly dry. Outside, I began to run with them back to the convent. I didn't want anyone to see me or ask questions about what I was doing.

Darting this way and that through the debris, my spirits were high and I was able for a moment not to notice the chaos and devastation around me. I know that sounds impossible, but maybe it was because I'm still just a boy. I try to be a man, but it's only an act. That's why I stay close to John and Blue Eyes. I've taken to calling her that too. However, I must remember to call her "mother" if I'm going to pull off my plan. And I'm going to treat her like my mother. Haven't I already found some fine clothes for her? Yes, this is a new start for me.

I noticed a group of men ahead. Something was wrong. One of the men had a gun pointed at the other men's backs and seemed to be forcing them to walk forward. Looters? I hid behind a tangle of wood and watched. When they got to the turn in the road, I stepped out and followed, slipping in and out of hiding as I went.

When I turned the corner the boy inside me began to quake. There was a large pile of stiff dead bodies in front of me. They looked unreal, with their twisted expressions and hard forms. The man with the gun was forcing the other men to load the bodies onto a barge. Up close I could see that he was a policeman.

I ran all the way back to Blue Eyes and the nuns. Only I wasn't in high spirits anymore. Blue Eyes and baby Lucky were sleeping. I showed the nuns that I had brought my mother some of her clothes. "How lucky you are to have found them," one sister said. "Now you must eat something."

The sight I had witnessed was still fresh in my mind and I had no appetite. Then I remembered how John had said he always ate to keep his strength up no matter what. So I pushed my thoughts out of my head and made the food go down. It was hard at first. I choked and coughed and it tried to come back up. But I pushed the bad things I had seen far away in my mind and continued to eat. What was it my real mother used to say? "When one must, one can."

I stayed with the boy Sean and the man John at the same time. This new way of being was a constant surprise. I was only just beginning to understand the whole world. How everything worked. How it came together every day, every minute. For instance, Sean needed to eat and I was able to help him. At the same time, John was devastated by his discovery of my human body along with those of the nine children — all attached together with a clothesline. He needed comfort too. That's why the old

Texan appeared for him. The old Texan was like me, except he was more evolved. He didn't die in the storm. He died years ago and was able to take the form of a human in certain circumstances. Not every soul gets to his level.

GALVESTON ISLAND

MONDAY AFTERNOON

SEPTEMBER 10, 1900

John was recovering from his shock. The grief would stay with him the rest of his life. That's something that I no longer felt. But I could sense need and he needed me right now. Get up John; they are coming with the wagon.

JOHN

I stood to my feet and felt the old Texan's hand on my back bracing me. I could see Jack coming in front of the wagon and it looked like a military-type person was pointing a gun at Jack. The cart was full of the dead. People I knew. Locals I recognized. With the exception of sailors coming in and out of port, there were very few strangers on our small island. All of them gone with a single swipe and now, so bloated and discolored they were almost unrecognizable. I had to turn my head away.

What happened next is a blur. Basically, the military man told us to build funeral pyres for the dead bodies. The thought of setting fire to my Sister Elizabeth was too much. The old Texan was right. We should have buried her and the children right away, not tried to wait for Jack to take them to the morgue.

The old Texan started talking to the military man that had a gun trained on us. Started telling him we ought to bury the nun and the orphans here near the orphanage site. Told him he felt it would be appropriate for us to bury the nun and orphans together ... and he went on about how I knew the nun personally. The military man said he would have the others help us dig the grave here on the beach. It didn't take long with so many working together. Then the guns came out again and we were told to build a funeral pyre for the dead on the wagon.

All those bodies and no time to identify them properly for loved ones. Jack and I tried to call out names and faces we recognized to the one policeman in the group. He listened carefully and quickly wrote it all down in a small leather book he was carrying. Occasionally he asked us a question about how to spell a particular name. His voice quivered with emotion at times, other than that he handled himself well.

“The bodies must be disposed of before disease starts to spread,” the military man said loudly. Was he reassuring us, his men or himself? He told us how the first day they took the bodies far out to sea for burial, but they came back in with the tide.

After a while the military man in charge started to help us with the work while the other two military-types kept a gun trained on us. If they hadn’t, I would have run and never stopped. As it was, I occasionally had to stop and puke.

My mind started to wander ... I needed to check on Blue Eyes and the boy and the baby. I felt responsible for the baby since I had helped the Sister save him. Sister Elizabeth’s little hammock idea was perfect. Too bad the clothesline didn’t work. In a normal storm it would’ve enabled her to keep tabs on everyone. I couldn’t even imagine what they went through ... the ten Roman Catholic Sisters of the Incarnate Word and ninety orphans. I know at least three boys had made it back to town. But their story of the buildings being washed away didn’t leave much hope.

Argh, I could smell the putrid, vile odor of burning flesh.

The funeral pyre had been lit. I couldn’t stop them. I didn’t have a better answer.

Words couldn’t describe the nightmare of it all. The feel of tight skin on bloated bodies, cold clammy corpses of people who had once been my friends, my neighbors. I told myself I would not relive this over and over. I would do what I had to do to survive. I would love again. I would laugh again. I would go forward. But I knew deep inside something had fundamentally changed. I would carry this.

THE BOY “SEAN”

I thought John had left us to fend for ourselves. A bachelor like him would probably find Blue Eyes, the baby and myself a burden. I checked around for John near what was left of downtown. Then I went out to the St. Mary’s orphanage to look for him. Where were all the nuns and orphans? I headed toward the beach.

It was beginning to dawn on me that the aftermath of the storm was going to leave us with some mysteries that would never be solved. With so many people missing, and so many buildings and documents lost, some things would never be traced or tracked down. This gave me a thought — I could pose as one of the orphans to keep people from asking too many questions about my past.

Holy shit! I saw John up ahead. A man was holding a gun on him.

Positioning myself behind a pile of tangled seaweed, I hid myself from the men. Then, I watched in horror the very same scene I had witnessed the day before—bodies being prepared for funeral pyres. The pain it caused me was so great, I hadn’t realized tears were washing down my face until I put my hand up to flick a fly from my cheek.

I had wanted a new life, and for some reason, I wanted that life to be with John. Probably because of his confident ways ... John was the kind of person who made people feel safe. And I didn’t know how to tell Blue Eyes he might not be coming back to us.

Grief overcame me. I sat down and cried into my hands. I was certain my wails could be heard. But no one came. The men were still there but they had a pain of their own and could not hear mine. I must have cried myself to sleep because when I woke the sun was high in the sky and clouds were floating by, promising a better tomorrow.

JOHN

They held a gun on us and made us drink whiskey. But being drunk just made it worse. After the first two swigs, I only held it to my mouth and kept my lips pressed together tight. No one seemed to notice, and while the others got drunk I kept looking for a way to get away.

There weren't just dead human bodies that needed to be taken care of — there were horses and cows and dogs and even fish. I thought the fish were washed up on land from the storm, but apparently, the old Texan told me, they fell from the sky like rain. In some strange way, the fish were caught up in the fierce winds of the storm and taken very high up. Many of them fell to the earth frozen. People were eating the fish. Might as well before they thawed completely. "Here we are in hell and God found a way to feed us with frozen fish from the sky." That's what Sister Elizabeth would say. A sharp pain jabbed inside my chest as I thought of Sister Elizabeth and the way she was always sorting out everything according to God. Right now, I'd be highly interested in how she'd explain this storm. It sure needed some explaining. Why would a loving God take a nun and nine orphans? I stacked another twisted body on the funeral pyre.

Finally my break came when one of the military-types carrying a gun told me to start another pile for the animal bodies. But his companion pointed out they should take care of all the human remains first. They started to argue and since they were a little drunk, it didn't take much to get them into a screaming match. While everyone turned to watch, I slipped off into the darkness. The morning light would be breaking soon and I had to hurry. Town was about three miles away and I had to negotiate everything that the storm had put in my path.

The closer I got to town, the more I slowed down and began to think back on the night of the storm. How we had been playing cards. Laughing in death's face. It sure took me by surprise when that big wave crashed into the side of the upstairs room we were in. Especially when it pulled back and took part of the wall with it. That's when I ran around to look out the door. Why did I do that? Why not look out the wall hole? It was so big we could have all walked right through it. But only Dean did. He saw the next big wave coming in and he took a gamble. I saw him take a deep breath and leap right into it as it crashed against the side of the house. This time taking everything down and under. In the next second, I found myself riding the very door I was holding as the wave bounced the door and me back up in the salty water. It tossed me about

on the roaring ocean much like a child at play in the bath. I clung to the door so hard I would notice later that I left indentions.

I was getting close to town. I should stop in and check on Blue Eyes, baby and the boy before I went back to what was left of my house to look for my friends. However, judging by my wild ride across the island that night on the door they could be anywhere. Including on the mainland.

When I was building the funeral pyre, the policeman said he'd heard one young lady was taken that far. She had to sail back with some of the first rescuers into Galveston to tell her family she was alive. "The bridge is out and the railways are a tangle," he had said. "It's going to a while before things are back to normal."

SARAH MICHELLE

“I must get out of this black hole.”

“What are you saying? Did you speak?” The nun who had been helping trim my hair into some kind of presentable shape asked me again. “Did you speak?” She stopped cutting and peered directly into my face.

“Yes.” It sounded foreign as if it was coming from another place, but it was my voice only a little weak and squeaky sounding.

“What is your name? Tell me your name.” The nun asked in an excited voice.

“All I could do is repeat, “I must get out of this black hole.” It seemed to satisfy the nun and she ran calling, “Sean, Sean. Your mother is talking.” Something kept me from saying out loud *is the boy’s name Sean?*

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very different worlds, come-of-age as their life-changing journey carries them through killer dust storms, extreme poverty, and the unprecedented gangster activity of the Dirty Thirties.

CHICO BOY: A NOVEL

2016 NEW APPLE ANNUAL BOOK AWARDS MEDALIST WINNER.

Life isn't easy when you have as many obstacles to overcome as fourteen-year-old Chico Boy has in his life. For starters, his Dad left over a year ago and he's fallen behind in school. And even though his mother works hard at her waitressing job, she's barely able to cover the family's expenses. Things like new underwear and tennis shoes fall far down on the list of essentials when compared to gas, food and rent. And now to top it all off, he and his best friend Talula think they've witnessed a possible murder. But take heart, not all is bad for Chico Boy. He has a great group of friends and an indomitable spirit that keeps him bouncing high on the pogo stick of life.