

Chapter 1



TIME TO GO

When Clare Porter’s dad dropped her off to volunteer at the SPCA on Saturday morning, the neighborhood hummed with activity. Traffic helicopters buzzed overhead. Neighbors hammered plywood over windows, getting ready for the storm. Two big trucks were parked outside the animal shelter.

“What’s going on?” Clare asked James, one of the older volunteers.

“We’re moving the animals to Houston,” James told her. “Katrina is a Category Three hurricane now. Procedure says we have to

evacuate the shelter. I'm working on ID collars. We also need to take photos of all the dogs and cats before they're loaded onto the truck." He handed Clare a camera, and she set to work.

"Smile, Bugsy!" she told a grumpy bulldog mix. She'd met him on her first day volunteering at the shelter last fall, right after she'd turned eleven.

"Your family leaving?" James asked Clare as he fastened a collar on a squirmy orange cat.

"Mom and my little brothers have been visiting Aunt Celeste in Houston. They're going to stay a few extra days," Clare said. "Daddy and I are staying here with my grandmother to ride out the storm unless it gets real bad."

James raised his eyebrows. "Already starting to look like a big one."

"We'll be careful." Clare looked at the pale, quiet sky. It was hard to imagine a monster

hurricane just two days away. Aside from getting their houses ready, most of her neighbors in the Lower Ninth Ward of New Orleans were going about their business. Dad had taken Nana to basketball practice right after he'd dropped Clare off to work at the shelter. Nana used to be one of the star players on the Silver Slammers, a basketball team for women sixty years and older. But Nana was eighty now, and last year, she started forgetting things. She couldn't remember the rules. She couldn't really play in games anymore, but she still went to practice to shoot baskets. Practice had gone on today, just like always.

But by the time Clare's father picked her up at the shelter, more and more neighbors were packing their cars.

"We've got time," Dad said. He scooped some of Nana's red beans and rice into a bowl for dinner and limped over to the table. His

knee still bothered him from when he got hurt in the army a long time ago.

“I still think the storm will turn,” Dad said. “We’ll wait and see.”

Later, after she was in bed, Clare heard him on the phone with her mother. “I know. But evacuation would be mandatory if they thought the storm was going to hit that hard . . . Okay . . . Love you, too.”

On Sunday morning, Clare woke to the sound of the news on TV.

“Devastating damage is expected, rivaling the intensity of Hurricane Camille of 1969 . . .”

Clare shivered. Dad had told her stories about Camille. Back then the flooding was so bad that he and Grandpa had to break out of their attic with an axe and wait on the roof to be rescued.

“Clare?” Dad called. Clare found him in the kitchen at the front of their long, skinny house, filling a cooler. “The mayor just ordered a mandatory evacuation. We’re leaving. Pack clothes for a week,” he told her.

“A week?!”

“Just in case,” Dad said. “Storm’s getting stronger. I’m going to put gas in the car. Mrs. Jackson next door is coming with us, too.”

“Mrs. Jackson? How come?” Clare asked.

“She doesn’t have family here,” Dad said. “So we need to look out for her. No one gets left behind on my watch.”

Clare nodded. She hadn’t been born yet when her father served in the army during Operation Desert Storm, but she knew the story of how he got hurt. He’d run out from behind a jeep to rescue another soldier who had fallen during a firefight. Dad said he had to go, even though it was dangerous. You never

leave a fallen soldier. It was an army promise. The mission wasn't over until everyone made it out.

"We'll leave as soon as I get back," Dad said. "Keep an eye on Nana while I'm gone."

"Okay." Clare headed down the hallway. "Are you getting clothes together, Nana?" she called into her grandmother's bedroom.

"I'm staying right here," Nana said. "I have practice tonight." She held up her Silver Slammers warm-up jacket.

Clare sighed. "There won't be practice with the storm, Nana. Everyone's leaving. Pack your clothes, okay?"

Clare went to her bedroom and threw shorts and T-shirts into a backpack. She was in the middle of reading *Bud, Not Buddy* again, so she packed that, too. Then she took it back out to read as she waited for Dad. She liked all of Bud's funny rules for getting by in the world.

After a while, the wind rattled her window, and Clare looked up. It had already been half an hour. Just how far did Dad have to go for gas? Clare hoped he'd find an open station soon so they could head out.

The sky grew darker and darker. Clare turned on a light. The wind slammed a door shut somewhere. Clare looked at the clock. It was already noon. She texted her father.

When will you be home?

He didn't reply. So Clare turned on the radio.

"At least one-half of well-constructed homes will have roof and wall failure," an announcer said. "Water shortages will make human suffering incredible by modern standards. Once tropical storm and hurricane force winds onset, do not venture outside."

Clare closed her book. She rushed to the living room. The door was partway open,

thumping back and forth on its hinges. Clare looked out. There was no sign of Dad. And the rain had already started. She closed the door tight.

He'll be here soon, Clare thought. We just need to get everything ready so we can leave right away when he comes back.

“Nana!” she called. “Are you all packed?”

Her grandmother didn't respond. “Nana!” Clare called again. She ran to Nana's bedroom. It was empty.

Panic rose in Clare's chest. How many pages ago had she heard the door slam? How long had it been since Nana wandered off?

Clare raced to the front door and yanked it open. Her grandmother's warm-up jacket was on the porch swing. Clare grabbed it and held it to her chest. “Nana!” she shouted into the rain.

But only the wind answered back.

