

# INTO THE HURRICANE

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FOR BETH,  
AGAIN AND ALWAYS,  
WITH A NOD TO THE MANY STORMS  
WE'VE WEATHERED TOGETHER



## *Prologue*

MAXINE FONTENOT CONSIDERS THE FRAMED SIGN HUNG ON the wall in the main office of the Clayborne Funeral Parlor. WE HONOR THE DEAD BY SERVING THE LIVING. Just above the sign, there's an imperfection in the wall, a tiny raised patch where some lazy painter spackled an old nail hole but didn't sand it down. Max runs a finger over the shoddy work. The fact is, she's bothered by just about everything about this place—the cheesy harp music drifting down from ceiling speakers, the tacky carpet, and most of all the sterile smell, which reminds her of the hospital room over at Wayne Osteopathic.

Max turns to the funeral home director, a pudgy man sitting awkwardly behind his oversized mahogany desk. She can tell that she makes him uncomfortable, the way he keeps trying not to gawk at the metal stud popping from each nostril or her spiky green hair. She cocks her head at the sign. “So what's that supposed to mean?”

The director clears his throat. “It means mourning is a process. The dead are gone to us. In truth, we can do little for

them. Our real obligation lies with those left behind to grieve. The, uh, the survivors.”

“Sounds like a load of crap to me,” Max says. “But I guess the dead aren’t writing you any checks, right?” She walks to the chair across from Clayborne and drops into it, then slides one long leg over the other. Thin slits rip across her black jeans, exposing pale skin.

Clayborne sticks two fingers inside his shirt collar and tugs it away from his neck. “As I thought I’d made clear when you called, this isn’t my affair. It’s a matter for the family to discuss. Really, Ms. Fontenot, you need to talk to your mother.”

“You don’t say the last *t*,” Max snaps. Everybody in Jersey makes this mistake. “It’s *Font-a-no*. As for my mom, I haven’t seen her in ten years.” Her mother ran off to Canada with a musician she met in New York. She left no note, never even said good-bye. One morning she was simply gone. “That lady out there with the black veil just happened to marry my dad. I’ve talked to her about all I need to.” Max thinks of the new dress, black and sleek, that Angie bought her for today. Right now, it’s crumpled on the floor in a basement bedroom at the Gonzalezes’.

Max leans forward. “Look, I was there at the end. Only me and nobody else. I’m the one who heard my dad’s dying wish.” This is a lie, but it’s a lie she hopes might serve her purpose. Max allows a few tears to slip from her eyes, smearing her black mascara. “You’re so eager to serve the living?” she continues. “Let me have that can.”

Clayborne gulps and blinks. With some effort, he rises

and shuffles around the desk, past a window where an air conditioner struggles. Through the window next to it, Max sees cars sliding by in the parking lot. Clayborne crosses behind her, and the double doors to his office squeak when he shuts them. As he returns to his chair, he offers her a flowery box of tissues, which she waves away.

“We call it an urn, Ms. Fontenot,” Clayborne says, now pronouncing her name correctly. “I know this is a most difficult time for you and your family. The loss of a loved one is always accompanied by great pain and confusion. This isn’t a day for hasty decisions you may regret later.”

Max stands up, but Clayborne raises a silencing hand. “Allow me to finish, please. Your mother—pardon me, stepmother—has been named executrix of the estate. I can’t possibly release the remains to you without her consent, and her intentions on that matter are unequivocally clear. Also, if I might add a personal observation, she seems to have other matters complicating her situation.”

Max ignores this last line and decides to double down on her lie. “But this isn’t what he wanted.”

From his inside jacket pocket, Clayborne tugs an immaculate white handkerchief and dabs at his forehead. “We’ll start shortly. Then, after the service, we’ll bring your father’s remains to his final resting place. It’s quite lovely and not far from your church.”

“Not my church,” Max says under her breath. This was another new element Angie brought into her father’s life, another change that cut her out.