

TIM SHOEMAKER

THE SECOND STORM

A HIGH WATER NOVEL



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FOCUS
ON
THE FAMILY[®]

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The Second Storm

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CHAPTER 1

Rockport, Massachusetts

Friday, October 22, 5:01 p.m.

THE HURRICANE THREAT shouldn't have consumed Parker Buckman's thoughts like it did. The thing would make landfall hundreds of miles away from where he lived. But it wasn't so much *where* the storm was headed that had him on edge. It was *who* was in its path.

The way Parker saw it, tropical storms were nothing short of nature playing the bully. And bullies rarely worked alone. Even storms traveled with six henchmen. Frequent flyers on an unholy voyage. Blinding rain. Shrieking winds. Behemoth waves. Dark clouds thick enough to veil any trace of the sun—or the hope it brings. Confusion is their wingman. And if you're unfortunate enough to be too close when the pack stalks through, you'll surely meet the sixth of the storm's cohorts. The one you never want to face. Sheer terror.

The six of them formed the kind of gang that had the power to change lives—or end them. And right now, they were flexing and elbowing their way toward land—and an old friend.

Parker Buckman stood halfway out on the granite breakwater shielding Rockport Harbor from the Atlantic and scrolled through Wilson Stillwaters's texts from the last couple of days.

Southern Florida will be hit by Tropical Storm Morgan. Shaping up to be a monster. Winds 50 mph. First exciting thing that's happened here in a long time. Why not come down for a visit, Bucky?

Wilson could sell the cool factor of riding out a storm all he wanted. But there was no way Parker would go back to the Florida Everglades, even for his friend. No, not there. Not ever.

It's official. Morgan has been upgraded to a Category 1 hurricane. Winds nearly 80 mph. Still heading right for us. Thinking of riding it out on my uncle's airboat. Won't even have to turn on the motor! Yee-ha!

Parker remembered the airboat well. The sound of the engine. The name *Typhoon* painted on the steering fins. He imagined Wilson riding full-throttle into the hurricane winds—and catching too much air under the bow. Would the thing go airborne? It could, right? And if that happened, the flat-bottomed boat would likely flip fast—and hard.

It was probably dumb to let this gnaw at him. Wilson could handle himself in the Glades. Parker had witnessed that firsthand while his own dad had been stationed there as a National Park ranger. Wilson knew the dangers. He was proud of his half-Miccosukee heritage—and he knew how to survive. On the surface, it seemed his whole life was about taking chances. Like every venture into the Everglades was a test of manhood or something.

Actually, manhood had been a topic that Parker's grandpa had talked about with him while in town in August. "What kind of man do you

want to grow to be, Parker?” Grandpa’s question had replayed in his head a hundred times since then. The bigger question in Parker’s mind? Would he have what it took to be that kind of man?

Based on what Parker got from Wilson—and picked up online—authorities had advised residents of Chokoloskee, Everglades City, and the surrounding areas to evacuate. According to Wilson, some locals planned to stay put and ride out the storm. Wilson’s dad was among them.

Dad says the storm will fizzle, or turn before it gets here. Not sure he actually believes that. He's finding plywood to screw over the windows.

Parker couldn’t shake the feeling that Wilson was in more danger than he realized—or was letting on. And there was something more. A sense that Parker was going to be sucked in if he wasn’t careful. Which was ridiculous.

My dad laughs at those leaving. Says this will be Dorian all over again.

Hurricane Dorian. September, 2019. Predicted to be devastating to parts of Florida, but it didn’t happen. Dorian and the gang camped out in the Bahamas instead, pummeling the island of Abaco almost into oblivion before turning northeast and away from Florida.

My dad is never wrong. HA!
 But pray for me if you think of it, okay?
 This storm is no joke.
 Still wearing the gator chomper?

The alligator tooth necklace Wilson had given Parker before he left. He’d worn it for months. Not as the lucky charm Wilson claimed it to be. It was as a connection, a way to remember Wilson. But as Parker

had become better friends with Ella and then Harley, the necklace found its way to the corner post of his headboard. And sometime after Jelly had moved up here to Rockport, Massachusetts, the gator tooth on the leather lanyard had gone MIA. It had to be in his room somewhere. But he'd avoided answering that part of Wilson's text.

For weeks now, he'd been wearing Kemosabe's spare key around his neck. Once the motorcycle key—and the spare—had no longer been needed for evidence, Officer Greenwood gave them back to Harley. And Harley gave one to Parker.

"God, please protect Wilson." No matter where Parker was, he knew God heard him. But the connection seemed better when he was in a boat on the water—or at least on the breakwater like he was today.

He pictured Chokoloskee and how it must look like a ghost town with every home boarded up. Even now, as he looked over the relative calm of Sandy Bay and the Atlantic beyond, it was hard to imagine how the ocean would be whipping up into a frenzy fifteen hundred miles south.

"Parker!"

Angelica "Jelly" Malnatti strode his way, jumping across the spaces between the giant granite blocks of the jetty without even looking down. "I knew I'd find you here."

Parker smiled. "I'm that predictable?"

She looked skyward and shook her head in a look of total exasperation. "In every way. Where's Harley?"

He pointed to the signal light at the far end of the breakwater. "Thinking."

"About?"

Parker's guess? Harley's foster home. At first, it'd seemed perfect. Right in nearby Gloucester. Close enough to stay at Rockport High and keep his new job at BayView Brew Coffee and Donut Shop in Rockport. But the new foster home with the Gunderson family wasn't going as great as Harley had hoped. "You'd have to ask him."

She shifted her weight to one leg and crossed her arms. "Well, how about giving me a *tiny* hint? Just one word."

Okay. “*Stuff.*”

“Very helpful, Parker,” Jelly said.

Time for him to change the subject before she pressed harder. “Looks like you’re on a mission. What’s up?”

“I see right through your little diversionary tactic, Parker.” She wagged her phone. “You following the weather?”

“If I’m *that* predictable, you tell me.”

She stuck out her tongue. “Brat. And no, I say you’re not paying nearly as much attention as you should.”

Had he missed something? He checked the texts from Wilson. Nothing from him in the last couple of hours.

“Morgan *is* going to hit our old hometown. Hard.” She nodded. “I really think this is going to be everything they feared Dorian would be. Ella thinks so too.”

“Gee . . . have you told that to Wilson? I mean, hey, if he heard *you* two say it will be bad, I’m sure he’d evacuate.”

She stood there in her jeans and sweatshirt—with her arms still folded. “Make fun all you like. You’ll see. Even Grams has a bad feeling.”

Parker loved Grams, but Ella’s grandma could get a bad feeling about a plate of Oreos. Besides Wilson, she was the most superstitious person Parker knew. “Well, let’s pray you and Ella—and Grams—are wrong.”

“And the National Weather Service,” Jelly said. “And every other sane person with more than an ounce of brains in their head.”

“Wilson thinks—”

“No. He *doesn’t* think. The fact that he and his dad aren’t evacuating is proof of that. They should’ve started north hours ago.”

“Some guys would rather stay in the ring and fight.”

“Yeah, well, Saturday night—which is tomorrow—they’re going to get hit in a regular no-holds-barred smackdown.”

Actually, her words rang true. A bully was closing in on southern Florida—and he wouldn’t arrive alone. He’d bring every one of his henchmen with him. The only one who’d be truly alone was Wilson,

the friend Parker had left behind when he and the family moved to Rockport.

“Wilson is in a lot more trouble than he realizes—or will admit,” Jelly said.

Parker was pretty sure she was right. Wilson could find himself in a cage fight of sorts. But worse, because once the whupping started, there’d be no ref to stop it. “I feel like I should be doing something to help, you know?” Wasn’t that what a real friend would do?

“There you go again.” Jelly planted both hands on her hips. “You are soooo predictable. You can’t help someone who doesn’t want to be helped. They *chose* to stay—remember?”

And it wasn’t like he was as close to Wilson as he’d been before. It’d been forever since he’d seen him. “Maybe you’re right.”

She smiled. “First smart thing you’ve said today. What could you possibly do to help anyway?”

An idea popped into his mind. The kind of thought a real friend would probably have. But the idea was insane. Absolutely crazy. It was totally beyond the call of duty—and something he’d never actually do. But still . . .

“What?” Jelly locked eyes with him. “What were you just thinking?”

“Nothing. It was stupid.” Parker didn’t want Jelly digging any deeper. “Do you think Wilson is scared?”

“He should be. Can you imagine anything scarier than being caught in a hurricane?”

That idea he’d had to help Wilson was back. “I really don’t want to think about that.” And he was dead serious. Because right now—at this moment? It definitely was the one thing that scared Parker more than the hurricane itself.