



FLIGHT TO NOWHERE

Blas E. Padrino

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Hurricane *Frodo* is gearing up to be the next big national disaster. Part of a national weather forecasting team, Miami storm-chaser Felix Robles routinely flies into the eye of storms to help keep tabs on dangerous weather activity. He never imagines that hurricane tracking could bring him fifteen seconds of fame or the thrill of a lifetime. Invited to be featured in a news segment on a local TV station, he is enamored of sexy and sassy news anchor, Terry Toledo. Of course he knows he's way out of her league. Next to her, he feels like a silly schoolboy.

Terry Toledo is smart, ambitious, and always on the lookout for a news scoop to propel her to investigative reporting stardom. She never dreams that riding on a hurricane-tracker plane in the eye of a storm will result in anything more than a thirty-second news segment about ferocious weather. The one surprising plus in that wild ride is charming storm-tracker, Felix Robles. Somehow he manages to get under her skin.

When Felix examines the weather plane's pictures after their trip through *Frodo*, he finds something curious and asks Terry about it, hoping to get one more chance to breathe in her alluring perfume. But when they realize they've stumbled upon a half-century-old plane wreck dumped by the hurricane onto a deserted Bahamian islet halfway to Cuba, they suddenly find themselves targeted by someone who will stop at nothing to keep the truth about the wreck a secret forever.

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To my parents, whose courage and sacrifice made it all possible; and to all the Pedro Pan Program children and their parents, who made the heart-rending decision to send away their sons and daughters to an uncertain future in a free land rather than raise them under tyranny. And then, here's Vera...

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PROLOGUE

Camagüey, Cuba – October 28, 1959

The rain poured in rivers all afternoon but stopped shortly before the twin-engine Cessna lifted off the slick grass runway. The plane made two circles above endless sugarcane fields that glistened fresh, wet, green against the setting sun, then pointed its nose towards the vanishing daylight and climbed into darkening skies.

The passenger took one deep breath and shuffled the sheaf of papers in his hands. His report did not contain what he'd been ordered to write, but he couldn't bring himself to smear an innocent man. He'd told them as much over the phone already, and felt no apprehension about telling them again to their faces when he arrived. If it meant a revolution inside the revolution, so be it. The ball was in Fidel's court.

He stretched his legs and lit up a cigar, then leaned back and let his hat dip over his forehead, its wide brim just above the eyebrows. He took a puff and watched the reflection of the burning tip flicker on the plane's window.

Fidel will curse and rail for who knows how long. Who cares? His tirades are starting to wear on everyone. He knows he can't touch me. The people adore me just as much as they fear him. Just the other day he said, 'If something happens to me, there's Raúl.' He's so full of shit. Nobody can stand his brother. Fidel thinks I'm going to do whatever Raúl wants, just because he made him my boss. He's got another think coming. He can rant all he wants. I'm not going to stab Huber in the back. Either Fidel gets rid of the

communists, or there's going to be another civil war.

He took another puff of the cigar and watched the ring of ash around the tip glow red. He'd never been afraid of confrontations. Not in the least. Wasn't he the one who led the attack on Santa Clara that broke the back of Batista's army; the one who marched first – triumphant – into Havana? Where were Fidel and Raúl on January first? It was he and Che and Huber who took the fight to the enemy while Fidel and Raúl hid in the mountains. No. He wasn't afraid of confrontations. Especially those he knew he couldn't lose. Actually, he was looking forward to it. Half the Cabinet was ready to abandon Fidel over the communists. Even Urrutia, the President, had told him he'd had enough.

* * * * *

The plane reached cruising altitude and streaked through an indigo blanket of sky. The evening floated beneath him in dark patches, broken by occasional points of light below, huddled like candles on a birthday cake – each cluster marking a small town nestled on the water's edge.

Suddenly, he heard a high-pitched whistle coming from above. Three bursts of light flashed against the night. The plane shook and banked right. Hard. It no longer flew in a straight line, but swerved and shuddered in haphazard fashion like a kite snapped off from its string. One moment he was glued to the seat by the G-forces, the next he was being jostled like a pip inside a maraca. "*Que pasa, coño?*" he shouted. He got no answers from the pilot, whose body lay crumpled against the controls. The engine gasped like a dying man fighting for one last breath. The plane shook again. His head hit something. The hat went flying. The cigar slipped from his grasp. The plane went into a spinning dive. Darkness. Noise. Silence. Black sky became unfathomed water.



CHAPTER 1

Felix Robles ignored the sweat trickling down his back. Never mind the ice-cold air blasting from the restaurant's overhead air-conditioning vent – it was losing the battle against Miami's summer heat. He focused on the gray cloud on the laptop's screen and frowned as the mass staggered across the ocean with the broken steps of a Frankenstein monster – or so it seemed when tracked through time-lapse photography. Turning to his friend Mario Fernandez, he pointed to the black heart at the cloud's center. "This is no chicken-shit hurricane. Could be another *Andrew*."

"You sure?" Mario looked up from his espresso and slid his chair closer. He craned his neck and squinted at the slide show of satellite photos.

Felix pushed his coffee cup across the table to make room. "You can lay off your 'Castro's dying' news stories and take the thermometer out of his ass for a week or so. When this storm hits, you'll be busy covering it."

Mario looked through the window at the Little Havana traffic, stroked his mustache, and cleared his throat. "So, who's gonna get it?"

Felix laughed and poked his friend's arm. "I'm a weatherman, not a *babalao*." He reached for his *café con leche* and dipped a slice of Cuban bread in it. "Wherever it ends up, it won't be pretty. Has the potential to become a cat-five." He slurped down the bread.

Mario's eyebrows bunched up at the bridge of his nose – his signature end-of-newscast look. "At least give me probabilities, a leg

up. You must have some idea."

Felix shook his head and raised his eyes to the ceiling. "You haven't changed since our football days at Miami High ... always looking for a gap to shoot through." He looked around the room, made sure no one else could hear, leaned closer to Mario, and spoke in a whisper. "We haven't put out a probability cone yet, so if you quote me on this I'll yank your hair plugs."

"What hair plugs?" Mario's mustache drooped around his lips. He ran his fingers through his pompadour. "This is all natural!"

Felix chuckled. "Yeah, right. From your own armpits."

Mario scowled. "You're making fun of my livelihood, man. That's cruel." He gave Felix a little shove. "Just for that, you can get the check."

Both of them laughed. Felix slid his finger over the mouse pad and double-clicked. A map of the Caribbean popped up on the screen. "It's barreling out of the Atlantic." He moved the cursor as he spoke. "There's a high-pressure system to the north. Stationary. Will keep the storm heading west, at least until it hits the Florida Straits. I'm guessing a path north of Puerto Rico, maybe slam the Dominican, maybe Grand Turk and the north coast of Cuba. The high's been wiggling at the edges. My gut says it'll slide north eventually."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"This storm has Key West written all over it. Maybe a direct hit, maybe just a swipe, but it'll make its presence known."

"Key West, huh? So much for my fishing plans. What then?"

"That's as far as I'll stick my neck out. Once it reaches the Gulf, all bets are off. If I were you, I'd sail that pretty boat of yours the hell out of Islamorada and haul ass for Boca Raton."

"How soon's it hitting the fan?"

"Another five days before it rears its ugly head. You can start preaching preparedness in your newscast."

Felix shut down the computer and put it in his briefcase. "I got to get to the office. In a few days we'll be flying over the storm, and there's a ton of things to do." He gave Mario a sidelong glance. "You

want to come along? Do a report from the eye of the beast?"

"Thanks, but no thanks, buddy. That stuff's not for me. But I can ask Terry. She lives for that kind of drama."

"Your co-anchor?" Felix's pitch rose to a mocking falsetto. "Terr-ry Toe-lay-doe, the news tornado?"

"That's the one."

"She's smoking hot. I'll take her any day."

"Don't get your hopes up. She only swoons for millionaire athletes. And you're no Alex Rodriguez."

"Hey, I may not have a running back's build like you used to have, but I still got my Latin charm."

"What do you mean *used to have*? I'll have you know I can still bench-press two-fifty."

"Yeah, right, and I'm going to have lunch with the Pope this afternoon."

Mario shook his head and gave Felix a pat on the back. "You always were the class clown." He got up, wiped his mouth with a napkin, and dropped it on the table. "I'll give Terry your cell. Got to go huddle with the writers. Thanks for the heads-up." He touched two fingers to his forehead in salute and hurried off.

Felix gulped the rest of his coffee and whistled to the waitress. "Put it on my tab, Cristina," he shouted, tossed a few singles on the table, and walked out.

It was still early, but the Miami August sun was already roasting the pavement as Felix walked to his Ford Escape. He got in, started the engine, and hit the button that opened the sunroof just as the air conditioner fan blasted its initial shot of hot air at his face. He turned the AC control knob down to 'frozen tundra' and turned west onto the Tamiami Trail. When the traffic light on Douglas Road turned red, a street vendor ran between the cars, holding plastic bags full of *mamoncillos*, for a dollar a sack.

Felix had a weakness for the little green fruits with the brittle rind that split in half when he bit into them. Licking at the silky layer of meat around the seed was as satisfying as the tart taste of the juice. He waved a bill through the open sunroof. The man raced

over, tossed him a bag, took the money, and weaved his way back to the sidewalk as the traffic light turned green. Felix closed the sunroof and sucked on *mamoncillos* while he drove to the campus of Florida International University. By the time he arrived, he'd gone through half the bag.

He parked on the lot across from the National Hurricane Center building and stood outside for a moment. He studied the bunker-like structure, windowless and austere, a concrete box topped by satellite dishes, radio antennas, and wind gauges. A storm-chaser's bat cave.

As he walked through the front door, his cell phone began playing *Stormy Weather*. He flipped the cover open. "Felix here."

"Mr. Robles? This is Terry Toledo, from WHOT News. Mario gave me your number."

His eyes lit up. He cleared his throat. "Yes. He said you might call about doing a report on *Frodo*."

"Can you get me a seat on the hurricane hunter?"

"There's an open seat on the next flight. I'll talk to the mission coordinator." He paused. "I've got to warn you, it's a bumpy ride."

"I can handle it. Get me on the plane, and I'll give you your fifteen minutes of fame." Terry hesitated. "Well, not fifteen minutes, but you'll get thirty seconds in prime time, leading off the six o'clock news. What do you say?"

"I'll speak with the PR people this afternoon. They don't mind the press coverage. The P-3 Orion is scheduled to fly out of MacDill Air Force Base in a couple days. You'll have to come for a pre-flight briefing; day after tomorrow at one."

"Can I bring a cameraman on the flight?"

"There's no room in the plane. You'll have to shoot your own video."

"I can live with that."

"Get here by noon, and I'll give you a quick tour of the Center."

"I'll be there, and I'll bring lunch. How's that?"

"Perfect. See you then."

Felix flipped the cell phone cover shut. *Yes!* He pumped his fist and mambo-stepped the rest of the way to his office, humming a riff from a Perez Prado classic while mimicking the band leader's trademark grunts.

* * * * *

Felix ran up the wooden porch steps of his parents' Ocala ranch house and greeted his mother with a hug. She took his face in her hands, kissed him on both cheeks, and said, "I'm so glad to see you. You don't come up enough."

He smiled at the slender woman who stood in front of him. There was a hint of gray on her temples and a few wrinkles on her forehead, but her voice was young and tender, no different from when he was a boy and she read him corny poems in Spanish. "It's hurricane season, Mom. There's a storm brewing. You know how it is. I was lucky to get the day off."

"You should have been a doctor, like your dad. Even when he was an intern, his shifts were only three days. Yours last half a year. And that trip to the South Pole ... you were gone two years!" She shook her head slowly. "Two years."

Felix patted her shoulder and smiled. "I didn't go as far the Pole, only to McMurdo Station at the edge of Antarctica."

"Same thing. All you got to see was ice, penguins, and polar bears. I saw all that at Sea World last Christmas when your father and I drove down to Orlando. Less than two hours away."

"There are no polar bears in Antarctica, Mom."

"There you go. I got to see more than you without leaving Florida and freezing to death. But you, a tropical boy, you had to go. I don't know what for."

Felix shook his head. He'd never won an argument with his mom. "You're right. I don't know what came over me. Youthful foolishness, I guess."

"At least you'll stay the night, right?"

He bit his lip. "Sorry, Mom, I can't. Got to drive back to Miami

tonight. We're flying into *Frodo* in a couple of days. I still have lots of things to take care of."

His mother's eyes got round like Eisenhower dollars. "*Frodo?* The hurricane *Marito* was talking about in the news last night? *Ave María purísima!*" She made the sign of the cross. "One day you're gonna give me a heart attack. Only crazy people take a plane into a hurricane. What are you gonna do next? Join the Flying Wallendas?"

"That's an idea!" Felix walked the length of the porch, placing one foot in front of the other, arms spread to the sides as if walking a tightrope.

His mother followed him and shook him by the arm. "Quit making fun of what I say." Felix turned and faced her. "Thirty-two years old," she scolded, "and you still act like a kid. When your father was your age, we were already starting a family. But you, all you want to do is chase icebergs and hurricanes." She wrinkled her forehead and pursed her lips. "Why don't you find a nice girl and get married like Mario did? They already have two daughters. But I'm still waiting for grandchildren."

Felix sighed. "Maybe I just haven't found the right one, yet."

"What about the lady lawyer you were dating? What was her name?" The tone in Felix's mother's voice suggested that the lady lawyer was not her ideal daughter-in-law candidate.

"That was nothing serious. It didn't work out."

"That's the problem. With you, it's never serious. You should start thinking about getting serious."

Felix gave his mother a long look, then showed her a broad smile. "Maybe I'm waiting for someone who can cook as well as you."

"Ha!" She laughed. "See? You're asking for the impossible. But if you bring her over, I'll teach her so she'll be almost as good as me."

Felix hugged his mother and gave her a peck on the cheek. "I miss you and Dad. You should've stayed in Miami."

"Tell that to your father. All his medical education, and he's still a country boy. Ocala suits him fine. And, while we're on the

subject, you better get over to the barn before he starts complaining that you don't pay him any attention. He's out there with the horses." She paused and raised an eyebrow. "As usual."

"You're right." He stepped off the porch. "I better go say hello."

"Say something nice about Little Man, the chestnut stallion," she called after him. "Your father's been grooming him all morning. He hasn't stopped talking about that horse since he got him last month. Horses and President Reagan, God rest his soul, is all he yaks about."

Felix took the path that curled around the house and led to the barn. He walked under the shade of the pine trees that lined the edges of the path until he reached a pole barn with half a dozen stalls on each side. He stopped at the door. "Dr. Robles? Which patient are you examining?" he shouted.

"Felix?" his dad bellowed cheerfully from the last stall. "Over here, son. Come check out this beauty."

Felix walked to the stall and found his father smiling, holding a dandy brush and a rope attached to the halter of a large reddish-brown thoroughbred. "This is Little Man." He beamed. "What do you think?"

Felix took a step back and looked the horse up and down. "He's a beast! Very impressive." He nudged his father's arm. "Mom lets you ride him? She doesn't freak out?"

"Come on, son, this horse is a pussycat. No bad habits. Besides, I'm only sixty-four, you know. I'm not an invalid. Not yet, anyway, in spite of what your mother might think." He ran his hand over the horse's muzzle. "Look, Ronald Reagan was seventy-five, and he was still riding. A chestnut, just like Little Man. That's what I say to her. You can't argue with that, right?"

"You got a point, there, Dad."

"Did I tell you the story about the time President Reagan was in England and went riding with the Queen?"

Felix rolled his eyes. "I don't think so," he lied.

"Well, see, he was on a state visit, and they went to Balmoral

Castle. So the Queen has these beautiful horses brought out – one for Reagan, one for Prince Phillip, and one for her.” His dad chuckled under his breath. “So they’re riding up this hill, just at a canter – the Queen in the middle – when her horse lets out a big, loud fart you could hear a mile away. I mean, up goes the tail and *prrrrrttt*, like a trumpet. It stinks so bad, the air turns green.” He stopped a moment and held his ribs, as if trying to suppress a snigger. “Imagine that. The Queen’s face gets red as a beet, she’s so embarrassed. She turns to Reagan and says, ‘I’m so sorry, Mr. President.’” Again, he chuckled. The rest of his words sputtered out between spasms of laughter. “So, Reagan says, ‘It’s all right, Your Majesty.’” Solemn silence. “‘I thought it was the horse.’”

Felix’s dad laughed until tears welled in his eyes. Little Man shook his head and snorted, lips quivering. He looked back at his horse. “See that? He liked the story.”

Felix smiled, placed a hand on his father’s shoulder, and leaned toward him. “You’re a funny man, Dad. Funniest man I’ve ever known.”

* * * * *

Felix and his father sat at the dinner table, eyeing a steaming porcelain bowl filled with black bean soup and another dish brimming with fried pork chunks covered in lemon-garlic sauce. Felix’s mother came in from the kitchen and placed a bowl full of white rice next to the beans. She spooned a portion of rice onto everyone’s plate, then poured black beans over the rice and dished out fried pork chunks. She sat down, and the three of them bowed their heads for a short prayer before they began to eat. Fifteen minutes later, they’d polished off second helpings.

When Felix’s mom went into the kitchen to bring out the dessert, his dad looked up from his empty plate. “So, this storm they’re talking about ... do you know where it’s supposed to hit?”

“Looks like it’ll skirt the north coast of Cuba, east to west. I’m mostly worried about the Keys.”

“The planes that fly into the storm, do they get close to the island?”

“To Cuba? Now and then, if they have to.”

“You don’t worry about being shot down?”

“They clear the flight plans with the Havana tower to avoid incidents.” Felix shrugged. “We’ve never had any problems.”

His dad frowned. “I don’t trust those bastards, and neither should you. Be very careful.”

“I doubt they’d want to mess with us. They’d have the Air Force on their ass before they could cry Uncle Sam. Besides, they don’t fly their planes into severe weather.”

At that moment, his mom returned from the kitchen with a *flan* and set it on the table. “Who wants?” she asked.

Both Felix and his dad smiled and nodded.

“Then help yourselves,” she said. “My soap’s about to start.”



CHAPTER 2

When Terry Toledo walked into Felix's office, it was as if all the oxygen had been sucked from the room. She looked gorgeous on TV, but in person she was something else. There are women who take your breath away. Terry had him gasping. He scanned her from head to toe a couple of times before he regained minimal control of his eye movements. In spite of his efforts, his eyes kept wanting to shift from the low neckline of her blouse to the high hem of her skirt, back and forth. It was a struggle, but a delicious one.

"Felix?" she asked with her perfect news anchor timbre.

In a fog, he got up from his swivel chair and came out from behind the desk. Open mouthed, he offered his hand. "Ms. Toledo, so nice to meet you."

"Just Terry. No need to be formal." She smiled. "And nice to meet you, too."

Her grip was firm, but her skin was silk. He was pleasantly surprised to see no humongous diamond ring adorning any of her long, expensively manicured fingers.

"Please, sit down," he said. "I'll fill you in on what we'll be doing."

She sat facing him, crossed her legs, and leaned forward, then placed a paper bag on a corner of the desk. "Let's make it a working lunch." She took out a couple of Cuban sandwiches from the bag. "Might as well eat first. These things taste better when they're hot."

She handed one to Felix and unwrapped the other. He nodded, quickly removed the paper, and started eating, afraid that if he stopped chewing, he might start drooling. By the time he finished

devouring the sandwich, he had recovered a measure of professionalism. "Let me get you up to speed," he said.

Felix spread a map of the Florida Straits and the Caribbean across his desktop. He pointed to a spot on the Bahamas chain. "*Frodo's* right about here." His fingertip circled above the southern end of Andros Island. "It's moving slow and strengthening. By the time we fly into it, it should be just over the Cay Sal Bank." Felix's hand swept across the map. "Moving west-northwest and heading for the Lower Keys."

"Will it hit Key West?"

"It's a big storm. They'll get a piece."

"How bad will it be?"

"Right now it's a cat-four and getting stronger. Could be a five by the time it reaches the Keys. A high-five, even."

"What do you mean by high-five?" she asked.

Felix raised an open hand above his head, "Not this kind," he said, hoping Terry would slap it, but she didn't make a move. He cleared his throat and put his hand down. "A category five storm has winds above one-hundred-fifty-five miles per hour. It's a killer storm, even at its low end. *Frodo's* winds could hit one-seventy-five – sustained, not gusts. It'll blow down a concrete building like it was a house of cards, or break an electric pole in half like a toothpick." He paused. "Then, there's the storm surge."

"And you guys fly into that..."

"That's where the action is."

"Sounds exciting." Her eyes sparkled.

She put down her sandwich and took a pen and pad out of her bag. "Can you describe what it's like?"

"Ever seen the way a kite flutters on a windy day?" Felix raised his hand and drew figure eights in the air with his open palm. "Imagine the plane's the kite. At times you glide ... and then you drop." He made a quick downward motion with his hand.

Terry's eyes followed Felix's hand movements.

"When we punch through the eye wall, the plane hits a downdraft," Felix continued. "It gets pulled down real fast, goes in

free-fall. Eventually it picks up speed and climbs back up. That's the most challenging part of the ride. It can rattle your nerves."

"Are you trying to scare me?" She fixed her steel-blue eyes on his. Her brow wrinkled. "I don't frighten easy. I've gone skydiving, bungee jumping. I know the feeling."

He flinched. "I'm sorry. Just trying to give you an idea. I imagine it's hard to do a news report when you feel like you're falling out of the sky. Harder when you don't expect it."

"How do you stay calm?"

"Everyone in the flight has a routine. We stay busy and focus on our assignments. It's the best way to handle the ride. You may want to do the same thing. Make yourself a to-do list and keep it handy."

Felix glanced at his watch. "The briefing's about to start. We better get over to the conference room. You'll meet the rest of the flight team there."

Terry picked up the remains of their meal from the desk, put it back in the paper bag and tossed it in the waste basket. Felix held the door open and followed her out of the office. He led her down a corridor to a conference room and ushered her inside. A dozen people were seated at a long table, making small talk. Felix motioned to a couple of adjacent empty chairs. "Grab a seat," he said, "we're about to start."

They sat down. He turned to her and pointed to a tall man with short-cropped hair who sat next to him. "Captain Rick. He'll be our pilot." He nudged the man's elbow. "This is Ms. Toledo, from the TV news. She's going to come along, do a report on the flight."

Terry smiled. "Nice to meet you, captain."

Rick flashed a dimpled grin. "I'm a fan of your show. Glad to have you aboard."

A moment later, a stout balding man marched in and shut the door. He deposited a thick binder on the table, rolled up his shirt sleeves, and tightened his tie around his neck until his double chin folded over the knot. "Good afternoon, everyone," he announced. "As most of you know, I'm Chuck Lowenthal, your mission

coordinator." He pointed to Rick. "Captain Richard Klug will be in charge of flight operations. He'll be piloting the P-3 Orion, assisted by a seven-man crew. As those of you who've flown with him in the past know, he makes tight turns, so feel free to ask for extra barf bags when you board."

Lowenthal turned to a map on the wall behind him and pointed to a spot midway between the Cuban coast and Andros Island. "You should catch up with *Frodo* roughly about here, over the Cay Sal Bank, if the weather pattern holds." He paused and bit his lower lip. "Brace yourselves, folks. It's bound to be a hell of a ride. Seawinds' latest readings is clocking it at one-seventy-five, and still strengthening."

Terry tapped Felix's arm. "What's Seawinds?" she asked in a whisper.

"It's a weather satellite. Measures wind speeds," Felix answered under his breath.

Terry nodded and scratched a note on her pad.

"We'd like to make at least three penetrations through the eye wall at ten thousand feet and deploy several windropsondes," Lowenthal added. "Carter and Fiorelli will be in charge of those."

Terry nudged Felix again. "Windrop-whats?"

"Windropsondes. Instrument packages that we parachute-drop inside the storm."

Terry nodded and scribbled some more.

Lowenthal pointed in Felix's direction. "Robles and Wright will be the weather officers. Wright on data collection and Robles on the high-def cameras."

Felix flicked his hand at the mention of his name.

Lowenthal continued. "Finally, Miss Terry Toledo, from WHOT-TV, will be coming along. She's doing a news story on our work and its importance for the safety of the public. As you well know, the first step in hurricane preparedness is hurricane awareness."

"Woo-hoo!" a voice hooted from the opposite end of the table.

Terry looked down at her notepad. A touch of blush rose to her cheeks. Lowenthal glared at the culprit, then said, "You'll be in the evening news, so be professional. Wear a clean shirt. Your grandmother could be watching." He opened the binder. "I got the flight plan and specific assignment packets here, so come on up, take yours, and go get ready. Have a good flight and come back safe."

On the way out of the briefing, Felix picked up a manila envelope that contained his instructions and walked Terry to her car, a late model Jaguar XK-Series sports coupe.

"Would you like to carpool to MacDill? It's a four-hour ride from here," he said.

"I can do it in three and a half." She smiled and pressed the unlock button on the car's remote control. "Meet me at the station. Five sharp."

"I'll be there." He opened the car door and stepped aside.

She eased herself into the driver's seat. He pushed the door shut. She started the engine, rolled down the window and waved her fingers at him like a harp player plucking an arpeggio. Her lips mouthed a soundless "Thank you."

"See ya," he said.

Terry backed out of the parking space, made a quick shift change, then zoomed off. Felix watched the car speed away. Sleek and smooth, like its driver. His eyes lingered on the spot where the Jaguar went out of sight and gazed at the invisible contrail her presence left behind. *Five a.m. couldn't come soon enough.*

* * * * *

Felix pulled into the WHOT-TV studio parking lot right on time. It was still a good hour and a half short of sunrise. When he got to the lobby, Terry was waiting, dressed more appropriately for a South Beach cocktail party than to fly into the heart of a killer storm. It did not surprise him. That was the standard attire for the news station's female anchor. Every platinum highlight on her hair was

sprayed into place. There was not one crease on the snug bolero top or on the side-split, midnight-blue miniskirt that hugged her hips like an added layer of skin. She picked up a soft-sided travel bag and strutted towards him with a graceful, high-heeled cadence deserving of a white-hot spotlight.

She handed him the bag. "The camera and mike's in there," she said. "My car's parked right outside."

"Do you know the way?" he asked.

"The Jag's got LoJack and GPS. It can't get lost, and I can't get lost, even if we both tried."

They went to her car, put the bag in the trunk, and got in. She slipped off her shoes, started the engine, and flipped on the radar detector. "Fasten your seat belt, Felix," she said as she put the car in reverse and backed out of the parking space. She shifted smoothly into first gear, then double-clutched, getting it up to fourth by the time they rocketed out of the parking lot and onto the street. A few short blocks later, the car reached the access ramp to I-95. She cruised onto the highway at seventy miles an hour.

"Perfect weather for an early morning drive, don't you think?" Terry said as the speedometer needle fluttered over the one-hundred mark.

"It should hold up," Felix said through clenched teeth. "*Frodo's* sucking all the moisture his way." He tried to sound casual, but his feet kept pressing the floor as if there was an extra brake on the passenger side.

"Don't worry," Terry said, momentarily letting go of the stick shift and placing her hand on his arm. "I went to NASCAR driving school."

Felix blinked when he felt her fingertips tapping on his forearm. A different kind of tension coursed through his body. He liked it – *really* liked it. "That's a big relief," he whispered, dry-mouthed.

"Good." Her lips pursed into a tight, red circle. "I'm glad you're not the nervous kind like Mario. I expect to do one-twenty once we hit Gator Alley."

He swallowed hard. "Just tell me you passed the course."

Terry laughed. "You bet, top of the class." Her right foot leaned a little harder on the gas pedal, toes curled over the edge, and the Jaguar sprang forward, pushing Felix against the seat. It occurred to him that flying into a hurricane would not be the most dangerous thing he'd be doing today.

Once they zipped through Ft. Lauderdale and hooked onto I-75, the rest of the trip felt like a blur – literally. Morning caught them as they reached the Sunshine Skyway Bridge. The giant steel structure stretched high above Tampa Bay like an enormous sailfish that, arched body and dorsal fin splayed, thrust itself across the shimmering waters.

Once past the toll booth, Terry coaxed the Jaguar to an easy cruising speed and opened the moon roof. The salty smell of the sea flew in with the breeze. "This is what life's about," she said. "Dawn over the ocean. It looks so peaceful, doesn't it?"

"It sure does. Nothing calmer, nothing angrier. We'll get a peek at its nasty side later on."

"Mario said you spent some time in Antarctica. What's it like there?"

"Harsh, gray. Everything's gray – the sea, the sky, the ice. The waves, the wind, they don't flow, they crash. You feel like something bad could happen anytime. The envelope gets stretched so thin, it feels like you're always just this side of disaster."

"You sound like a voice-over for *The Twilight Zone*," Terry laughed. "You should be on TV."

Felix lowered his voice an octave. "Charging the storm. The view from *Frodo's* guts. Brought to you by Visa ... *priceless*."

"Not bad!" She threw back her head and laughed.

As they crested the bridge, Felix pointed to the northeast. "You can almost see MacDill from here. The runway goes right up to the bay."

Once across the bridge, they went through one more causeway, this one flat over the water. Within minutes, they reached the Dale Mabry Gate to the Air Force base. They passed

through security and drove straight to the hangar where the hurricane-chaser plane waited. She parked in a small lot off to the side. They got out and entered through a service door.

Felix pointed to the biggest of three planes inside the structure, a turbo-prop aircraft that took up most of the space. "Miss Toledo," he said, "meet Miss Piggy."

Terry looked up and down the fuselage, top half painted white, bottom half silver, baby-blue stripe across the middle, and shiny black nose cone. She set up her camera on a collapsible tripod ten feet in front and stood under the plane's nose. Microphone in hand, she flashed a movie-star smile and began talking. A half-minute later, she waved Felix into the shot and asked him questions about the storm and his role in the flight. As other team members arrived, she repeated the procedure, turning the camera on and off with a hand-controlled remote. By the time she was done, the pilot was warming up the engines. She recorded a final comment and then, with Felix's help, repacked her equipment.

By the time they finished, everyone else was already aboard. The ground crew was ready to roll the plane onto the tarmac. She picked up the bag and started up the plane's ladder.

Felix marveled at the ease with which Terry clambered up while wearing a skin-tight skirt and 3-inch stiletto heels. Her hips, round and firm, tightened with each determined step and stretched the fabric to her shape. As he stood back and watched the luscious flexion of her gorgeous muscles, for an embarrassingly juvenile moment, he imagined her rubbing deep-knee bends against the brass pole of the Velvet Swing Saloon. The memory of his Aunt Carolina, who once prodded him to become a priest, popped up in his mind. He made a quick thank-you-God sign of the cross and congratulated himself for turning her down flat.

Once Terry went through the door, she turned and stuck out her head. "Aren't you coming?" she asked, brow wrinkled, tongue tip licking across her upper lip.

Felix slapped the side of his head like a boxer shaking off an uppercut. "Be right there!" he hollered and scooted up, two rungs at

a time.

* * * * *

Felix led Terry to a window seat facing a bank of monitors and asked her to sit, then took a seat next to hers. Across the aisle, Wright punched keys on a computer. They were in an area behind the cockpit and in front of the dropsonde systems console.

The plane taxied down the runway, picked up speed, and went airborne. It rose gracefully and streaked smoothly through a cloudless sky. Below, Tampa Bay shimmered in the pink morning light. At five thousand feet, the plane banked left and headed south over the Gulf of Mexico. Once the seat belt sign went off, Terry unfastened hers and took out the video camera. Felix watched her as she went around the various stations, taping the team members as they performed their specific tasks. Then she returned to her seat and filmed Felix as he turned knobs and fiddled with a joystick while watching a monitor. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"Testing the cameras mounted on the nose." He gestured towards the console facing him. "The knobs control the focus and magnification. I point them right, left, up, or down with the stick. Check out the images on the screen." He placed a hand over a computer mouse. "Left click takes the picture. Or I can set the program to auto-run and get snapshots at pre-set intervals."

"What do you look for?"

"The size of the waves at a given spot. We're looking to improve the SLOSH model."

"The *what* model?"

"It stands for 'Sea, Lake and Overland Surge from Hurricanes.' SLOSH for short. It's a computer model for predicting the height of the storm surge. We're developing a probability graphic for our website and are trying to make it more accurate."

"Cutting-edge." Terry smiled. "I'm impressed."

The plane had climbed to thirty thousand feet and cruised smoothly through clear blue skies.

"What now?" She stifled a yawn.

"Nothing much for the next hour. *Frodo's* still a ways out." Felix reached up and opened an overhead compartment. He took out a small pillow and offered it to her. "Relax, take a nap, there'll be plenty of excitement later."

"Good idea." She put away the video camera, wedged the pillow behind her neck, reclined the seat and lay back. "I can use a little snooze. What are you going to do?"

"I'll set up the onboard cameras and have them ready to roll so that when we get through the eye wall I can get some low altitude shots of the waves."

"Wake me up before the show starts." Terry dipped her shoulder, laid her cheek against the pillow and closed her eyes.

* * * * *

When the time came to wake Terry from her sleep, the pillow was nestled between the edge of her seat and Felix's shoulder. He had felt her slide toward him, gently, naturally, as if the curve of his upper body had been made just for the moment when she would cuddle against it. Even before he felt her leaning against him, Felix sensed her closeness by the warm sweetness that the scent of her perfume gave to the air around them. Felix hated having to wake her up. He hoped the rest of the team had not noticed Terry's face resting on his shoulder. He'd hear no end to their teasing but, more importantly, he wanted this moment to belong to him alone. He gazed down at her golden face, wanting to touch her skin, smooth as an April Sunday. Instead, he took a deep breath. "It's time," he whispered, shaking her shoulder gently.

There was no sunlight coming through the plane's window. The fuselage rocked as if the aircraft was speeding recklessly over fractured cobblestones. The drone of the propellers reassured them that they were flying, even if the wings were hidden by the dense, gray fog.

"Are we going through?" she asked with eyes half opened.

"Bumping the outer bands. The fun's about to start."

No sooner had he spoken than the plane lunged forward, then jerked up and sideways, caught in an updraft. Terry gripped the armrests on her seat. "Holy smokes!" she gasped.

"You all right?" Felix reached for her arm.

Terry caught her breath. "Got me by surprise, that's all." She smiled.

Torrents of rain streaked against the window but, after a minute, the plane settled into a smooth, level course.

"Are we still in the storm?" Terry asked.

"Sure." He pointed at the console behind theirs. "Fiorelli's about to drop a sonde."

"How come the plane's not shaking anymore?" Terry's head tipped sideways, a fingernail brushing against her dimpled cheek.

"We're riding a wind current. It's not the wind speed that rattles the plane. It's the change in direction, the wind shear."

Fiorelli pushed a lever. A long thin tube slid down the chute next to his console with a swoosh and a pop.

"There it goes," Felix said to Terry. "You can see it through the window."

The dropsonde's parachute fluttered in the gusts and slowed down the object's descent until it vanished into the steel-gray mist.

Moments later, the captain's voice came on the plane's speakers, warning, "Get ready, folks, we're about to hit the eye wall."

Terry took out her digital camera and pointed it out the window, poised to start shooting.

The plane flew through a wall of blackness, wet and stark, then, suddenly, punched its way into clear blue skies. The fuselage shook and jerked upwards, then dropped like a flightless bird and circled toward the raging sea. Bright sunlight reflected off white wave caps. For a harrowing minute, the plane plunged while the engines groaned like an exhausted runner gasping for breath. Terry started taking pictures but, as the plane dropped closer to the ocean, she looked at Felix, face blanched. He noticed the concern

in her eyes. "Is this normal?" she asked through gritted teeth.

He nodded. "It's always like this."

Moments later, the plane picked up speed, buzzed the waves, and climbed to a few hundred feet. It flew over a cluster of small islands that barely jutted out of the water. Terry lowered her eyes, a bit self-consciously. She cleared her throat. "What was that all about?"

Felix noticed the strain in her voice and looked up from the monitors. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." The color returned to her cheeks. "I didn't think the plane'd drop that much."

"The tailwinds in the eye wall are blowing real fast. Faster than usual," he explained. "Maybe two hundred miles an hour. When we fly into the eye, all of a sudden the wind's gone, and the air pressure's low. The plane practically stops in midair and goes into a dive until it picks up speed again."

"I see," she said.

"The first time is always spooky," Felix said. "You get used to it after a couple of runs."

The plane circled low above the islets. Terry raised her camera, pointed it out the window and went back to taking pictures. Several times, they flew through the storm and into the eye, dropping sondes, taking readings, and snapping photos. After one final pass, the plane veered away from the storm and started back to MacDill. Two hours later, as the sun burned orange, flat across Tampa Bay, the aircraft landed.

Once they got off the plane, Terry shook hands with the flight crew members and the team of meteorologists, filmed some final comments, and, with Felix's help, put away her gear. She turned to him. "I'm starving, how about you?"

"I know just the right place. Been to Ybor City?"

"The Columbia Restaurant?" She beamed.

"Great minds think alike," he said with a nod.

