

# Chapter 13 – Gunpoint

*Diane Drayton is a strong mother of two and a grandmother. She spent Hurricane Irma in the family home her father originally built and she later expanded to house her own family at Todman Estate, Tortola. Diane's mother, Mrs Adeline Leonard, a darling 87-year-old, still resided at the home under Diane's attentive care. Both in their late twenties now, her daughters Tishan and Chelsea, along with Chelsea's adorable 3-year-old son, Micah, had moved to their own places. However, the family came together at the familiar family home to ride out Irma. They were joined by a good family friend, Christine, who would have otherwise spent Irma alone.*

*Interviewed 26th October, 2017*

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As the Press Officer for the Royal Virgin Islands Police Force, I was well-informed about Irma and had been tracking the storm closely. Leaning on the side of caution, I was preparing for a direct hit, despite the chance of it going slightly north. While the situation and threat were serious, it all seemed manageable up until that weekend when it was still in the region of a reasonable storm, a Category 3. The house had withstood several Category 3 and 4 hurricanes without any serious damage. I remember hearing on Monday or Tuesday that Irma had strengthened to a Category 5 with sustained winds of 175 miles per hour and then 185 miles per hour. Disbelief was the feeling. "Something must be wrong," I thought. "That's unreal, unheard of! Those numbers just can't be right; something must be wrong," I kept telling myself. "Nothing can withstand that kind of wind force!" The situation was unnerving.

Sitting at the crest of a hill, fully exposed to the north side of the island, I knew that geographically the house was in a vulnerable spot. But you can't pick up your house and move it; you can only do everything in your power to prepare, and prepare we did. We had made all the plans to ensure that by Tuesday, the day before the storm, the house was squared away. I didn't cut any corners. Our trusty handyman, Hugh, ensured that all the hurricane shutters, both in the vacant upstairs unit and in the downstairs unit where Mum and I lived, were securely in place. Apart from the fact that we lived in the downstairs unit, we had made a conscious decision to ride out the storm in that space. With our hurricane shutters in place, solid walls around us and partly sitting under a concrete roof in the back half of the unit, though naturally nervous, we felt reasonably safe. In my wildest dreams, I would never have predicted the reality that unfolded.

Tuesday night found us all at Todman Estate. We secured the cars and did some last-minute preparations around the house. Already, every now and then, you could hear a howling gust sweep up and over the hill, forewarning of Irma's arrival. I remember viewing a video sent through WhatsApp of Irma pounding one of the other islands on its way to us. Irma was blowing trees across the landmass there as if they were cotton balls on toothpicks. I thought, "God has to intervene here!" Anticipating downed lines by sometime early in the morning, we used the last hours of communication to reach out to friends in the outside world and request prayers.

We woke up to no electricity the following morning. With the winds already picking up, we decided to quickly cook some breakfast and shut off the gas lines while it was still safe enough to go outside. As the morning wore on and the storm really set in, the family settled into the living room. We conversed and sang together. Unknown to us at the time, those were our last moments in that

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room.

The small, rectangular glass strip across the top of the wooden living room entrance door allowed us to witness the first strike. It started when the big mango tree that towered over the outside deck gave way, collapsing in front the entrance door. Shortly after this, we heard a relentless banging coming from upstairs. Peeping out, Tishan realised that a hurricane shutter on one of the windows had come loose and decided that she could fix it. She braved the storm and went upstairs. Taking longer than expected, Chelsea went to help. Thankfully, they both made it back unscathed.

With that fire under control, it was only moments before another caught on and the fire intensified. It was now the hurricane shutter in my bedroom that had come loose and started to slam against the closed glass window. We shut the bedroom door that led to the living room to isolate it. Behind the closed door, we listened as the shutter beat the window without mercy, each blow sounding worse than the one before. Then there was quiet. The banging had suddenly stopped as the winds finally took the shutter away. In Chelsea's words, "Outside was stark white. It was as if someone had hung a white sheet over the windows." Relief and worry hit us at the same time. While safe from a shattering window for the moment, one by one, our hurricane shutters seemed to be peeling off under the unnaturally intense force of Irma's winds.

It was then that we decided it was time to take Mother into the safe room that I had prepared. Strong at heart but her body now frail, walking about for her is slow. The room was at the very back of the house, tucked into the hillside, and was originally used by my older daughter. In preparation, I had cleared it of any unnecessary stuff and stocked it with our hurricane essentials. We made her comfortable on the bed and went back out between the kitchen and hallway to the safe room to keep tabs on things. Intense noises filled every space. We continued to pray.

Water started pouring through under the kitchen door, as if a firehose had been turned on outside. Instinctively, I attempted to keep pace mopping but before long realised that was pointless. Pacing the hall, Chelsea watched as the dark shadow beneath the closed door to the bedroom disappeared and was replaced by light. She instantly understood the meaning of this silent warning.

"Oh my God!" Chelsea's scream shattered the air above Irma's roars. With an animal-like protective instinct Tishan yelled, "Put Micah in the room!" She immediately snatched him up and tossed him down the hall into the safe room. Thankfully, he landed on the bed and nestled next to his great-granny. Christine and I scrambled behind Chelsea and Tishan into the safe room with only enough time to slam the door behind us before we heard what sounded like a massive explosion. In one fell swoop, everything north of that safe room, including the two bedrooms and the living room, was no longer standing and the daylight previously shut out by hurricane shutters, walls and a roof poured in. The house was an open sepulchre.

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*End of Sneak Preview*



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