



LUCIANO SABATINI

The Day
that Changed
Long Island

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North Carolina

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INTRODUCTION

Superstorm Sandy made landfall in the New York/New Jersey Metropolitan area on October 29, 2012. While it was gone by the next morning, the devastation it caused in less than a day made Sandy at that time the second costliest storm in our history, surpassed only by Hurricane Katrina. It created permanent physical changes, including an inlet that was carved out of the Fire Island barrier beach that still remains today. Over a thousand homes in low-lying areas were so badly damaged that they were never rebuilt. New York State bought out property owners and let nature reclaim the land.

The hurricane pummeled infrastructure of the Long Island area, destroying beach boardwalks, flooding subway tunnels with millions of gallons of saltwater, and contaminating homes with spillover from sewage treatment plants. Many small business owners didn't have the resources to rebuild and were closed permanently. Even larger facilities like the Long Beach Medical Center couldn't be repaired. Millions of tons of sand were washed ashore, clogging sewer systems and streets. In Brooklyn's Brighton Beach, the boardwalk's wooden stairs leading to the shore were completely swallowed by the sand, making the beach almost level with the boardwalk. All that remained were handrails that looked like stumps rising from the sand.

The real hardship created by Sandy can't be measured just by the destruction of material things. Many people were forever changed by Sandy as they experienced the trauma of watching their homes and communities inundated by floodwaters. Some had to live with friends and relatives for months and even years while their homes were repaired. Others had to find a new way to make a living.

This book is a novelized account of one family who lived through this terrible time.

CHAPTER 1

FOOLED BY TROPICAL STORM IRENE

Lucas laughed at the report on the radio. “They’re making a fuss over nothing again, Sybil. When I went out to get the mail, the sky was fine.”

His laugh had a certain bravado about it. Lucas was a proud, second-generation Italian-American. In his culture, it was not manly to show fear but rather to remain calm and in control.

Sybil sighed. She did not want to go through this again.

It was late August of 2011, and meteorologists were warning that a huge tropical weather system was barreling its way up the Atlantic Coast. The images on the news of huge ocean waves, power failures, flooded homes, and downed trees were intimidating but looked tame contained in a small television screen. Outside, the sky was darkening as the clouds rolled in. The wind was picking up and blowing in different directions. Leaves and other debris appeared to be racing down the street. The electric cables running from the street to the house were starting to sway like two jump ropes dancing high above the ground. According to the reporter, millions of people were preparing for the destruction that seemed inevitable. Lucas shrugged.

Sybil paced nervously behind him. “Come on, Lucas; stop procrastinating. We don’t have much time to get our TVs and furniture upstairs before the storm comes.”

Lucas was finishing his laundry and casually turned his head. “My dear, you’re being neurotic again. We’ve been through this before. You’re overreacting to the weather reports.”

Another doomsday forecast was predicting certain disaster. They didn't need to do anything or go anywhere. They had been married twenty-eight years and lived in a split-level house on West End Avenue in Massapequa. Now sixty years old, Lucas was tall and thin with blue eyes and graying hair. He had recently retired from his career as a school administrator and had become an adjunct professor at Hofstra University. Sybil was a fifty-two-year-old high school math teacher. In contrast to Lucas, she was petite with brown hair, brown eyes, and few signs of aging. Many thought that she was much younger than her age. They had three grown children. The older two, Tara and Greg, had moved out and were living on their own while the youngest, Gina, was starting her sophomore year at a college in New Jersey.

Soon after Lucas and Sybil were married, Hurricane Gloria struck Long Island in September of 1985. Because their house was in a flood zone with canals on either side, they received warnings that they should evacuate. Some of the neighbors boarded up their homes and evacuated for higher ground. The weather folks created much hysteria, but there was relatively little damage. Gloria knocked down electric cables, some trees were blown down, and their house lost a gutter and a few roof tiles. Lucas, a lover of nature, even had fun walking outside during the eye of the storm but made a hasty retreat inside as the winds began to pick up again. Other storms had come and gone over the years with similar results: there was a lot of hype created by the media with little consequence for the homeowners.

"I'm not doing a bunch of work for nothing," shrugged Lucas, taking his time folding the laundry.

Sybil rolled her eyes frantically. She was determined to get through to him. "They're predicting over a foot of rain and massive flooding. All the furniture and electronic equipment on our ground floor will be flooded. Please show some urgency!"

Taking a deep breath, Lucas conceded. “Okay, but if this turns out to be a colossal waste of time and energy, I won’t do it the next time.”

After spending two hours moving furniture, computers, photocopiers, and other items into their living room upstairs, they stopped to rest. Sybil began to wonder if they should remain in their home, especially since the worst of the storm was supposed to arrive at night. She had stocked up on flashlights and candles, expecting that they would lose power, but the thought of trying to sleep through howling winds in complete darkness was unnerving to her.

The phone rang, and it was her sister Kathy. “Hi Sybil, are you still storm-proofing your house?”

“We just finished, but I’m afraid to stay here tonight.”

“I have a spare bedroom. Why don’t you come here?”

Sybil was relieved and accepted her offer. Now came the tough part: convincing her husband to leave with her.

“Lucas,” she called to him. “Kathy has just invited us to stay there tonight. They have a bedroom for us.”

He shook his head in disagreement. “If we leave the house and lose power, the water pump will shut down and the basement could flood. We just spent \$25,000 finishing the basement.”

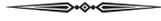
“I know that we could lose the basement.” Sybil had sensed the panic in his voice. “But the thought of staying here terrifies me.”

“I’m not leaving,” he insisted. “We’ve had so many false alarms over the years that I would prefer to just stay here. If we have a power failure, I can start the generator. I’m not risking that pump failing when we’re not here.”

Sybil sighed. “Well, I’m not staying here. I’m heading to my sister’s house for the night. If you get hurt or need assistance, there will be no one to help you.”

“I won’t need any. I’m not about to run away from another trumped-up media event.”

Her husband was stubborn and full of male ego. There was no reasoning with him.



As Sybil packed up her things, Lucas noticed that most of the people on the block were leaving as well. Am I going to be the only person to remain here? he thought to himself. By late afternoon Sybil was gone, and West End Avenue felt like a ghost town. Only three families stayed behind. Lucas tried watching television to distract himself, but he was too fidgety to sit still. He paced around the house, second-guessing himself. Was he flirting with disaster by underestimating Mother Nature?

About an hour after Sybil had left, the phone rang. It was his brother-in-law Todd, Kathy's husband.

"Lucas, are you crazy? You're putting yourself in harm's way. Please leave before it's too late and come to our house."

Lucas surmised that Sybil was making one last attempt to get him to leave by having another man talk some sense into him. He replied with conviction, "Todd, I'll be fine. This storm will be a dud like all the others." His words sounded brave, but they masked the fear and trepidation he was feeling.

The house became so quiet that it was deafening. As darkness fell, he ate leftovers while listening to the pitter-patter of raindrops on the window and a growing howl from the escalating wind of the fast-approaching storm. He made sure that there was plenty of fuel in the generator and moved it closer to the house, placing it under an overhang where it would stay dry. He placed an extension cord between the water pump in the basement and the generator outside. Then he sat himself on a recliner positioned between the two. In this way, he could quickly plug them together when the power went out.

By midnight, the full force of the storm had arrived. The wind

shrieked and the lights flickered. Suddenly, the television and lights went off. The water pump became silent. His house had lost power, and a quick look outside revealed that the entire block was in the dark. With a flashlight in hand, Lucas hurried outside to start the generator. With a few pulls of the throttle it started, and he connected the cords which brought the water pump back to life. He lit candles in the area surrounding the recliner. Lucas tried to sleep on the recliner, but the ferocious wind whipped the trees, and debris rained down on the side and roof of the house. After several hours, the worst of the storm had passed and daylight peeked through the clouds, but there was another danger. High tide would be peaking in two hours, and weather forecasters had predicted massive flooding in low-lying areas. Sybil called his cell phone to see how he had made out. He told her that the generator was working, and the basement was dry.

“Lucas,” she said, “you should take your car and move to higher ground. You can wait out the high tide there and then go back to the house when it begins to recede.”

He decided to check out the flooding in the streets for himself. As Lucas walked out his front door, he saw his next-door neighbor, Barry, a tall, thin, almost bald man in his mid-seventies. He was one of the few remaining original homeowners on the block and had bought his house on West End Avenue fifty years ago. Barry was the block historian and could tell you stories of the original homeowners who had lived there and all the challenges they faced over the years. Barry, his wife Barbara, and Lucas were among the few who hadn't evacuated their homes. The street was flooded, but the water was about even with the top of the curb.

Barry looked at Lucas with the confidence of a weather forecaster. “It looks about the same as Hurricane Gloria, and the floodwaters of that storm didn't reach our homes.” Lucas agreed with him, but high tide hadn't arrived yet, so he decided to heed Sybil's advice and

move to higher ground. He got into his car and slowly drove to the parking lot of a strip mall about half a mile north of his home and waited there.

At around noon, Sybil called again and told Lucas it was safe to return home. As he drove back to the house, Lucas could see that the water had reached the sidewalks but no further. When he entered his house, the generator was still working, and the basement was dry. As the neighbors began returning, they discovered their flooded basements and downed trees. Sybil returned by early afternoon and was surprised to see how much better off they were than their neighbors.

“Well, Lucas, I guess you were right,” she admitted. “I might have overreacted to the weather reports.”

“You weren’t alone,” Lucas said with a smirk. “Almost the entire block fled, and they’re now paying the price.”

He felt like a triumphant hero for facing the storm and saving his basement. Within two days the power was restored, the furniture was returned to its proper place, and the debris from the storm was cleaned up. It turned out to be an inconvenience but nothing more. Knowing that the \$25,000 investment to finish their basement was not laid to waste by Irene was a major source of satisfaction to him.