

THROUGH MY EYES NATURAL DISASTER ZONES

series editor Lyn White

ANGEL

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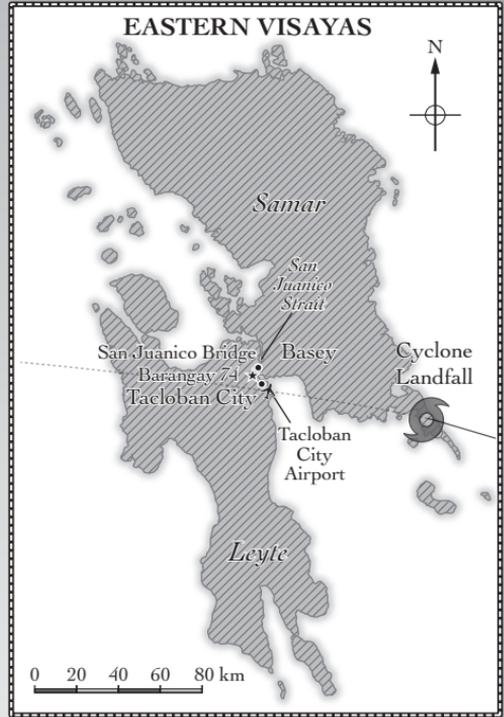
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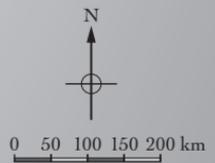
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For the people of Tacloban City





MALAYSIA





One



Angel and her father are heading home. They have been fishing all morning and the baskets in the small boat are filled with silvery fish. Angel is perched at the front above the *bangka's* pointy prow and her father is at the rear, steering the rudder as the outrigger churns through the waves. Juan's normally calm, untroubled face is creased with worry for a storm is coming, and coming fast. The sky is getting darker every second, the wind is up, and rain is beginning to pelt down.

The little craft hugs the shore and Juan squints. He's trying to make out the distant outline of Tacloban City as they cut through the water, riding wave after wave, each one bigger than the last, but the horizon is obliterated by mist and rain.

Angel, gripping the seat hard to avoid flying out as the boat leaps high, turns, trying to catch her father's eye. He looks through her as if she's not there, scanning the ocean, trying to read the next roll of the waves that threaten to flip them over.

A big black seabird is here too. Angel keeps catching it out of the corner of her eye as it circles, tracking them from a distance, but each time she tries to look at it properly it melts into the mist.

There's a peal of thunder and a flash of lightning. The rain is almost horizontal. Angel's head is full of the roar of the wind. She calls out to her father but the words are blown away before they reach his ears. Again and again she tries to get his attention with her cries.

'Papa! Papa!' It's futile. Juan is entirely focused on the task at hand.

He guns the motor hard, doubling the roar in Angel's ears, and the boat surges forward and up the next mighty wave. It can't be much further, we'll make it home, Angel thinks. But then, the acceleration suddenly drops away. The little boat hangs, silently suspended on the brink of the wave as if teetering on a cliff.

'PAPA! HELP ME!'

She screams in terror, and is flung into the sky, the wind carrying her up into the whirling eye of the storm...



Angel wakes with a gasp and is quickly swamped with relief. Her bed is ruffled and cosy and daylight is peeping into the upstairs platform where the family sleeps, but the other beds are empty. Everyone is awake now. Downstairs in the living area, her mother is moving about preparing breakfast. She can hear her twin brothers, Carlo and Cristian, scuffling about teasing each other.

Angel burrows into the bedclothes, her mind still troubled by the nightmare. She often dreams of being on the sea with her father in his sturdy little *bangka* and she always feels safe and happy when she is with him. Not this time.

For the last few days there have been regular radio reports predicting that a major storm is brewing in the vicinity. A few neighbours have TV sets and yesterday Angel and her father dropped by a friend's house to watch the news bulletins. They saw grim-faced journalists and maps of the Philippines covered in vast, swirling pinwheels. People were arguing: were the reports exaggerated or should they all be heading for the hills? At home later her parents brushed off the warnings. Fierce storms regularly pummel the coastline where they live, but Angel's family is well prepared and they always make it through unscathed. Why should this one be any different?

Angel pushes her uneasiness aside and bounces out of bed. Nothing is going to spoil her special day! She scrambles into her simple school uniform: white shirt, grey and blue tartan skirt and matching tie. Then she runs a brush through the long hair that ripples all the way down her back and draws it into a strong metal clip. This is how she wears it every day. Even though it's beautifully thick and shimmers like black silk she prefers to keep it neatly out of the way. Her best friend Issy sometimes looks at her and sighs, 'What a waste!'

She climbs down the ladder and her mother, Veronica, glances up from the rice cooker and says

jokingly, ‘Ah, here she is at last. Sleeping in on your birthday. I hope this is not a sign of things to come!’

‘Lazy bones! Lazy bones!’ chants Cristian from the table where he and Carlo are working their way through bowls of sweet boiled green banana.

Angel smiles. She usually gets up early like her father, before her mother and brothers. She loves the quiet house in the morning as Juan potters about. Sometimes father and daughter sit quietly on the front porch together while Juan sips his scalding, sweet black coffee and plans his day.

‘When did Papa leave?’ she asks her mother.

‘Very early, just after dawn, I think. He’s trying out the new motor on the boat and he wants to make sure he gets plenty of fish for tonight.’

Angel feels a thrill of excitement about the birthday feast as she crosses the cool cement floor out onto the porch. The atmosphere is still and muggy and she fills her lungs with the salty air. She barely notices the strong fishy scent that she has lived with all her life. Their house sits just metres from the seawall, with a steep drop to the water, and a clear view across the narrow San Juanico Strait to the island of Samar. Her grandparents live over there on their patch of farmland. She wonders if they have heard the storm warnings. They don’t even have a radio. It’s a good thing that they’re coming to the party tonight and will hear all the news.

The silvery morning sky is streaked with pink – a sign of bad weather – and giant thunderheads are gathering. When she looks to the left, she can see far

in the distance the thin line of the San Juanico Bridge snaking across from Leyte on her side of the strait all the way to Samar. To the right, her gaze follows the long curve of the foreshore as it stretches away towards the busy city of Tacloban. She can just see the tower of the Santo Niño church in the centre with its five storeys painted a deep orange colour, and the big storage sheds where the boats unload their fish down on the seashore. Beyond that she can make out the huge white dome of the convention centre. Angel barely remembers the small fishing village that she was born in. Tacloban is now a buzzing capital with shopping centres, government buildings and even a cinema.

Angel scans the shoreline, studded with fishermen's houses just like hers. They make up a colourful mishmash of different shapes and building materials. Some are stronger and sturdier than others, but she suspects most of them are the same inside, small and basic, with a living space downstairs, a sleeping platform upstairs, a narrow roof-space for storage and a porch out the front to catch the breeze.

Her father built their house with his own hands. It's not big or fancy like the new, Western-style villas that are popping up on the hillside overlooking the city. Some of them stand behind high security fences with guards on duty. Her house is simple, but solid, made of timber with a floor of cool, grey cement and a roof of iron built to withstand the seasonal typhoons that cartwheel across the Pacific and through the central Philippines. Next door, the Filipino flag on Mrs Reyes' flagpole hangs

limp and still, the proud yellow sun concealed among the drooping red and blue folds.

‘Pangaon kita, let’s eat!’ calls out Veronica. ‘Have some breakfast now before these greedy boys wolf down the lot!’ The twins are eight years old and it seems to Angel that they never stop eating. Cristian is larger and stockier than Carlo, who is small and slim like his father, but they both have the same huge appetites and seemingly boundless energy.

Before she can move inside, Angel’s attention is drawn to a dark shape in the sky overhead, and a black seabird glides into view. The bird swoops in low, almost as if it has its eye on her, and then it turns and flaps away over the water.

Angel shivers.

Come on, Angel. It’s just a bird, she tells herself, and with one last glance at the gathering clouds she goes back inside for breakfast.



Two



The radio is on and the announcer is reciting another grim weather forecast. ‘No need for that this morning,’ says Veronica and she switches to a music station.

As the children eat their eggs and rice, Cristian can’t resist teasing his big sister. ‘Hey, you’re getting old. Soon you’ll be a wrinkly little lady like Mrs Reyes!’

Angel just rolls her eyes as the boys shriek with laughter.

‘At least when Angel is a wrinkly old lady she will have more teeth than Mrs Reyes!’ jokes Carlo.

‘That’s enough, you two. Have some respect for your elders,’ scolds Veronica, who is busy making noodles for the party in the kitchen. It has a wooden table and chairs for dining and a cooking area off to the side with a single tap over a sink. Juan whitewashed the interior walls and Veronica has added little personal touches with colourful pictures of beaches and mountains as well as Bible scenes and a plain wooden cross hanging on the wall.

‘Now get going or you will be late for school.’ Her voice is sharp but there is a smile on her lips.

‘Sorry, Mama. Love you, Mama.’ One after the other the boys hug her goodbye.

‘Cheeky scoundrels,’ she calls after them. ‘Be good!’

Angel kisses her mother and Veronica regards her daughter approvingly.

‘Have I told you how much like your father you are?’ she says.

Angel smiles. Her mother has told her, many times, and Angel never tires of hearing it.

Veronica returns the smile and waves her tea towel at Angel. ‘Have a wonderful day, birthday girl.’



Angel walks along the busy Pan-Philippine highway towards Tacloban with the boys skipping in front. Up ahead the dark thunderclouds are blotting out parts of the sky. It’s only 7 a.m., but the air is already stifling. All that moisture means there is plenty of lush green vegetation around. People say all you have to do is poke a plain old stick into the ground and a day later it will have sprouted leaves!

The children pick their way down the busy footpath leading into the city. The roadside is jammed with stores selling fruit and snacks, motor oil and plastic containers, and the road itself is seething with cars, motorbikes and jeepneys.

Tacloban is divided into more than a hundred barangays and Angel’s family lives in Barangay 74.

After about ten minutes they reach Angel's old elementary school in Barangay 6, where she leaves the boys at the gate.

'See you here at three-thirty,' she calls after them as they disappear inside the drab grey building. They will eat their school lunch of rice, meat or fish and gravy in their classroom. It's a long day, but they have been coming here since they were five years old and are used to it.

Angel keeps walking along the busy road for another ten minutes to her junior high school. She is in her first year and she is determined to study hard so that she can graduate from high school and go on to college. She is good at all the basic subjects at school like Maths, Science, English and Philippine literature, but Social Science is her favourite subject, and she is looking forward to that afternoon's geography lesson.

'Angel! Angel! Wait up!'

She turns around and there's Issy, her best friend, running up with her brother, Justin, behind her. 'Happy birthday to you!' Issy chants, grabbing Angel by the hand. 'Now we are both teenagers – woo-hoo!'

Issy and Angel have known each other forever. Their mothers have been good friends ever since they were both newlyweds and sang in the church choir together. Issy's father also started out as a fisherman like Juan, but some years ago he opened a market stall and now he makes a very decent living selling fish that other people catch. The two families often go to church and socialise together.

Issy and Angel are devoted friends but they are also different in many ways: while Angel is quiet and serious, Issy is loud and playful. She loves make-up and following all the latest fashions and music trends. Today her shoulder-length hair is coiled up into an elaborate plait and she has hot-pink studs twinkling in her ears. Her warm, infectious smile draws people to her and she is well liked and loves to be sociable.

‘I can’t wait for the party tonight. I’ve been praying for the storm to hold off until tomorrow. Justin has too, haven’t you, kuya?’

Issy’s big brother is fifteen and in his first year of high school. He acts like he is annoyed by his chatty, popular little sister but he is secretly very proud and protective of her and diligently walks her to and from school every day. A full head taller than the girls, he flicks his long fringe to the side and peers down at Angel.

‘Good luck being a teenager, pipsqueak,’ he says sarcastically, ‘you’re going to need it.’ And he strides off. Angel frowns after him. She just doesn’t get Justin; he always seems to be as grumpy as Issy is cheerful. She wishes he’d stop treating her like a silly little girl.

‘Don’t mind him,’ says Issy. ‘He’s got to study for a big maths test tomorrow so no partying for him.’ Angel knows Issy thinks that she and Justin are very similar – both serious, sensible, and highly motivated – and hopes that one day they will stop being at loggerheads.

The two girls link arms and chat excitedly the rest of the way to school. Even though the plain boxy building was painted bright green a few years ago, it is already

faded and grubby again. Inside, the students are restless, most of them fidgeting in the heat, wondering when the storm will hit and whether it will be bad enough for them to be sent home early. The lessons are mostly taught in English, but sometimes in Filipino and even a bit of Waray-waray, which is their regional language.

As the morning wears on, Angel keeps watch out the window. Storm clouds pile up over the city and sharp gusts of wind tip motos onto their sides and send plastic bags and pieces of loose litter twisting into the sky.

The rain begins bucketing down and the teacher covers the classroom windows with long wooden blinds, tying them down at the bottom to strong metal bolts. There's no real need for glass in the windows in such a warm climate, except when the rain turns horizontal and pelts in, damaging their few precious books and leaving big puddles on the cement floor.

The day seems to drag on forever. Even the geography lesson seems dull and boring as the rain pours steadily outside. At last it's three-fifteen and the students burst out of the classrooms. Luckily, the rain has stopped and Angel hurries to collect her brothers. On their way home the boys cavort in the wind, skipping and spinning, chasing the flying leaves and litter kicked up by the gusts.

'Hurry up, you two, we have to get home before the rain comes back.'

Carlo and Cristian laugh and tease her, running around her in circles. They're so glad to be free after being cooped up inside all day. When she finally gets to the house, Angel sees her father's *bangka* securely

tethered but fighting the ropes as the wind and swell push it up and down on the heavy wash of the waves. The old taklub basket Juan uses to catch fish is swinging wildly from the mooring post and she runs to untie it before it's torn away into the gale. A deafening thunder-clap booms overhead and the sky opens. A few heavy drops soon become a teeming downpour and Angel ducks into the house, completely drenched.

Her mother is at the timber table, filleting piles of fish.

'Is Papa still at the market?' Angel asks.

'Yes he is. It was a good catch today so as soon as he got home he went straight there.'

At that moment Juan comes in the door behind her, shedding a dripping raincoat as he goes.

'Hello, birthday girl!'

'Papa! How was the market?'

'We sold out of everything, but I kept plenty of fish for the party,' he says happily.

Angel's father is not a big man – only about a head taller than her – but he is lean and agile and very strong. He could pass for much younger than his forty-odd years, if it wasn't for the vivid white streak that flares up from the side-part in his thick black hair. He jokes that it gives him an air of wisdom and authority.

Angel reaches for a towel and quickly pats herself dry so that she can start helping her mother.

Juan places his hand lightly on her shoulder. 'I have something to give to you.' The boys crowd around as he extracts a small box from his pocket and hands it to his daughter.

Generally, birthdays don't involve extravagant presents in their family, but Angel is turning thirteen, and Juan has been saving this gift for a long time. Veronica dries her hands on a cloth and moves over to stand by her husband.

For a moment, the family is silent, and the only sound is the rain pounding the roof. They all wait expectantly for Angel to open her present. She turns the tattered little box over in her hands. It looks old. It's made of faded jade-green paper, tied with a frayed golden ribbon.

She looks at her parents, unsure.

'Open it,' urges her father softly.

Obediently Angel unties the ribbon and lays it carefully on the kitchen table. She slowly opens the lid. Inside, nestled on a piece of soft, white cotton, is a single, silvery pearl on a sturdy golden chain.

'I saved every month from my work on the cargo ships, and bought that pearl for your mother as a wedding gift,' Juan tells her. 'But she asked me to give it to our firstborn daughter instead. She said, "Save it for the day when she is old enough to take care of it." I have carried it with me ever since and now it's that time.'

Angel has never seen anything so beautiful or owned something so valuable.

'Oh, Papa.'

'Wear it always, my Angel, and you will know that I am with you.'



Three



The rain has stopped and the clouds are slinking away across the evening sky.

‘Only a rainstorm after all,’ says Angel, relieved. She is outside with her father, helping to string the rainbow party lights along the roofline.

‘There she is!’ someone shouts and the two of them turn around.

Staggering down the road is a tall skinny man with a shock of white hair and a short plump woman in a bright headscarf. The elderly couple is laden with plastic bags and all smiles. Angel runs to her grandpa, Pedro, and reaches up to kiss him on the cheek. Then she hugs her grandma, Gloria, and takes the bags that are weighing her down.

‘Look at this young lady,’ chuckles Pedro. ‘I swear she is three inches taller.’

‘Thank you, dear,’ says Gloria, shaking her cramped arms. Despite their advancing years, Pedro and Gloria

are very healthy for their age. A lifetime working the farm has made them strong and fit.

Inside, Veronica fusses around her parents, drawing up chairs and bringing them cups of tea. Their farm on the island of Samar is only about forty kilometres away, but travelling the rough, bumpy roads by jeepney can take a couple of hours, especially in heavy traffic. Before the San Juanico Bridge was built they would cross the strait by boat. The sea was far less reliable, but on a good day the journey would take half the time. Now they have to travel all the way up to the bridge, cross the two-kilometre span, which is usually bumper to bumper with jeepneys, cars and motos, and then catch another bone-jarring jeepney all the way down to Barangay 74. It's a sweaty, cramped journey at the best of times, but quite an ordeal at their age.

Angel is opening the plastic bags and marvelling at the variety of food that Gloria and Pedro have brought with them. Her mouth waters as the delicious smell of baduya nga pasayan wafts up. Angel loves her grandmother's shrimp fritters and is excited to see that she has also made lumpia rolls and light, buttery corioso cookies. The family's wooden table is crammed with dishes for the guests to help themselves to. There are platters of fresh fried fish and shrimps and bowls of pancit, with delicious morsels of chicken and seafood peeking out among the slippery noodles. In the centre is a mountain of fragrant rice with crunchy vegetables, a pile of fried chicken and Gloria's spicy lumpia rolls. Afterwards, Veronica will put out plates of sweet taro pudding.

‘What a feast!’ exclaims Cristian and he manages to snatch a lumpia before Veronica can shoo him away.

‘Maupay nga gab-i, good evening. Any room on that table for more?’ Their neighbour, Mrs Reyes, stands in the doorway holding a plate of fried bananas sprinkled with sugar.

‘Maupay nga gab-i to you, Mrs Reyes. Let me help you with that,’ says Veronica. She takes the plate and sniffs appreciatively. ‘Marasa, salamat! Delicious, thank you!’

‘Waray sapayan, you’re welcome,’ says Mrs Reyes and smiles at the compliment. She is a tiny woman with twinkly brown eyes and a small round bun permanently fixed on the top of her head, like a bread roll. No one knows exactly how old she is, but it seems like she has always been in the neighbourhood. She can often be heard singing along to the radio at the top of her crackly voice and she wears brightly coloured shirts and baggy knickerbocker shorts tied at the knee. The children giggle at her antics; once she chomped her way through a whole fried chicken even though she has lost almost all of her teeth! But Veronica won’t hear a word said against her. ‘She’s just lonely. Her husband died years ago and her children all left to work in the city and on the cruise boats. She scarcely ever gets to see her grandchildren.’

Mrs Reyes is a good friend and neighbour and the family includes her in all its celebrations and activities. Sometimes Juan helps her fix things around the house, but she is fiercely independent and proud that she is still so self-sufficient.

‘Pedro and Gloria! How lovely to see you on this happy day. You are very brave to take a chance on the weather,’ observes Mrs Reyes.

‘We wouldn’t miss this birthday for the world,’ replies Pedro. ‘It’s not every day your beloved granddaughter leaves her childhood behind.’

Angel ducks her head shyly.

‘Don’t worry about us. We will leave for Samar first thing tomorrow and be home in plenty of time!’ says Gloria.

A young man with spiky gelled hair, beefy arms and a huge grin comes in lugging an impressive karaoke machine.

‘Where shall I set this up?’ he booms.

‘Sebastian!’ shout Cristian and Carlo together.

Juan has arranged for their neighbour to play music at the party. Sebastian works as a fisherman to support his wife and baby son, but he loves pop music and enjoys DJ’ing for a small price at local celebrations. It’s a wonderful surprise for Angel and her friends, who love to sing and dance.

A few minutes later Issy arrives and at the sight of the microphones and flashing lights she claps her hands in delight. ‘Woo-hoo! Let’s get this party started!’

‘Just a moment,’ announces Veronica firmly. ‘Before we begin the festivities, let us give thanks for all the good things that we have here tonight.’ Obediently, everyone bows their heads and Veronica utters a short prayer.

Her eyes tightly closed, Angel reaches up and lightly

touches the pearl around her neck. Her lips curl into a smile of pure happiness.



When they arrive at school the next day, Angel and Issy are full of chatter about what a great party it was. The little house was bursting with friends and neighbours and there was plenty of food for all. The best part, though, was the karaoke.

‘Sebastian is such a good DJ!’ says Issy.

‘And he’s got great moves too. He can really dance,’ says Angel.

‘Hey, I didn’t know Carlo had a good voice!’ says Issy.

‘I know,’ replies Angel. ‘He’s always singing. He wants to be a popstar like Jireh Lim. Not so good with the words though.’ They laugh, remembering Carlo making up his own lyrics when the ones on the screen flashed by too fast for him.

‘What about you?’ says Angel. ‘You did a great version of that Katy Perry song.’

‘Ha!’ laughs Issy. ‘It was only good because Mrs Reyes joined in at the end!’ And together the girls roar the chorus.

When they finally control their giggles, Issy asks quietly, ‘Are you wearing it today?’

Angel glances around at the other students streaming by and turning her back on them she carefully lifts out the pearl on the chain that has been concealed beneath her school shirt.

‘A real Filipino pearl,’ sighs Issy. ‘It’s beautiful.’

Angel smiles proudly as she tucks it back out of sight. She won’t be showing it off very often; it’s too precious.

‘I better go. I need to finish that homework,’ says Angel. ‘I didn’t get a chance to do it last night and I’m worried that Mrs Fernandez might spring a test on us.’

‘Oh come on, Angel,’ scoffs Issy. ‘You’d breeze through a test even if you hadn’t done the reading. And look, here’s Nadia and Jasmine...’

Angel waves as the other girls approach. ‘Catch you later,’ she calls as she heads into the school building. There’s still time before the bell rings and Angel enters the quiet classroom and takes a seat at the back.

The cane blinds are up and there’s a breeze wafting through the barred windows, ruffling the papers of her maths book. Angel hears the heels of her teacher, Mrs Fernandez, clicking in the concrete hallway as she approaches the classroom. Mrs Fernandez pauses to say hello to Mr Mercado, who teaches in the classroom next door, and Angel can hear the pair talking quietly. Their urgent tone makes her tilt her head and shuffle a bit closer to the open window.

‘There were back-to-back bulletins on TV this morning,’ Mr Mercado says. ‘Sounds really bad. Overseas they’re calling it Typhoon Haiyan instead of Yolanda.’

Mrs Fernandez sighs, ‘Yolanda is far too pretty a name for a storm.’

Mr Mercado grunts in agreement. ‘Well, the storm with the pretty name is headed this way. We will have

to close the school and the government wants everyone to evacuate. Above all, we must try not to worry the children. They say it's a super storm.'

Mrs Fernandez scoffs at that. "Super storm"? That sounds like something made up by the cable news channels to me!

Mr Mercado laughs.

Angel leans away from the window and presses her back against the cool, damp wall of the classroom. Another storm, and a super storm at that. *What's a 'super storm' anyway? We have typhoons every year, how bad can it be?*

As Mrs Fernandez comes in followed by Angel's classmates, Angel looks out the window and up at the heavy, grey sky. *Where are you, Yolanda? What have you got in store for us?*



At lunch break Angel tells her friends what she heard the teachers say about the storm.

Nadia's father drives a jeepney and she says the storms are good business for him because of all the people rushing to evacuate. On the other hand, Jasmine says that this morning after they heard the reports, her father announced they would be going to stay with his sister's family, who live further inland.

'We are going to leave first thing in the morning so no more school for the rest of the week!'

'Is that your aunty with the big television?' asks Issy.

‘Two televisions and only one kid!’ sighs Jasmine, who has five noisy brothers and sisters and no television. ‘I love staying with them!’

Issy doesn’t know yet what her parents are planning, but Angel knows what her family will do.

‘My mum will go and stay with my grandparents at the farm. She worries about them. I think she should take the boys this time, too.’

‘What about you?’ asks Nadia. ‘Don’t you feel a bit scared with your house right on the seafront?’

‘Papa and I will stay here to take care of things. We’re a good team!’

‘Angel, look!’ Issy is pointing behind her and Angel turns to see her mother hurrying towards her with Carlo and Cristian close behind.

‘What are you doing here, Mama? School hasn’t finished yet!’

‘That storm we heard was coming? It’s a big one and we need to get ready. I thought I’d pick you and the boys up early. I’ve told Mrs Fernandez.’ Veronica smiles at her daughter’s friends. ‘Don’t worry though, girls.’

She puts an arm around Issy and gives her a reassuring squeeze. ‘Everything will be okay. We’re used to big storms around here, aren’t we?’

Angel hugs her friends. It’s strange to be leaving school before lessons are finished. ‘I’ll see you in a few days when this is all over...’