

Blue Tarp Season

By Bethany Bruno

The tarp snapped over the roof's wound. Blue plastic pulled tight against a sky that had already done enough.

A strip of bright blue plastic, nailed over the back slope, lifted at the corner and slapped down again, flat and impatient, as if the roof had started talking back. Blue tarps still stitched the neighborhood after Frances and Jeanne, nailed down over roofs that hadn't stopped leaking. Wind off the St. Lucie River tugged at it, testing each nail head, each torn grommet, each weak point.

I parked on the street because the driveway was crowded with a contractor's trailer and a white sedan with FEMA paperwork on the dashboard. The yard had been cleaned but not healed. Palm fronds stacked at the curb. A bent gutter laid out on the grass like a broken arm.

The house sat in Stuart's historic district, one of those places with a deep porch and trim that made strangers slow down when they drove past. A plaque was bolted near the steps. Down the block, other old houses wore the same blue bandage.

From a distance, it almost looked coordinated.
But up close, it looked desperate.

I grabbed my tool belt and climbed the front steps. The porch boards creaked under my boots. The air smelled of river mud, gasoline, and that sour sweetness that came after water sat too long inside walls.

The door opened before I knocked.

A woman stood there in an oversized, raggedy T shirt and cutoffs. Her damp hair was twisted high into a clip, but loose strands clung to her temples, as if her scalp couldn't hold them. Her jawline broke out in the stubborn way of hormones, not heat. She had the careful expression of someone who'd spent weeks answering the same questions from strangers and trying not to break.

"You Wade?" she asked.

I nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

She stepped back to let me in and moved ahead of me down the hallway without offering anything else. That told me what I needed. She didn't want company. She wanted repair.

Inside, the house felt cooler than outside but not by much. The air conditioner ran hard, pushing damp air around as if it couldn't decide where to put it. A dehumidifier hummed in the hallway, steady and resentful.

Furniture had been pulled toward the center of the front room and draped with sheets. In the hallway, a corner of drywall had been cut out, exposing insulation that sagged and darkened where it had taken water.

I followed her to the kitchen.

A table sat under a ceiling fan that turned too slow to help. The tabletop was buried in paper. Insurance forms. Contractor estimates. A spiral notebook with names and numbers. Yellow legal pads labeled in block letters: FRANCES. JEANNE. A third pad with one line across the top: WHAT'S NEXT?

There were other papers too, shoved half under a folder as if someone had tried to hide them. Or, tried to forget they existed. A clinic invoice. A brochure with a baby's face. A receipt for something called a hormone trigger shot. Near the folder, an orange prescription bottle lay on its side with the label turned toward the table, next to a plastic cup that left a ring of water.

A cat crouched under the table, half in shadow, eyes open and unblinking. Its tail made a slow, irritated sweep against the floor each time someone raised their voice.

A man stood at the sink with his back to us, holding a coffee mug under the faucet as if he'd forgotten what he'd come there for. He was tall and lean, gray at the temples, with the posture of someone bracing for accusation.

He turned when he heard us.

"You're late," he said.

The woman's jaw tightened. "He's right on time."

The man's eyes flicked to her, then away. He wiped his hand on his shorts.

He shook my hand quickly. "David."

The woman didn't offer hers. She stayed by the table, palms pressed flat to the edge as if she needed something solid.

David nodded toward the back door. "Come on."

We went out onto a small porch. The yard showed a brown line of floodwater along the fence. In the far corner, soaked sheetrock had been stacked on a tarp. It looked like the remains of a house that had been peeled out of itself.

David pointed up. "Back corner. That's where it's coming in."

From below, the tarp looked intact, but I could see where nails had torn through. Wind worked at blue plastic as if it hated it.

I gave him a short nod and set my ladder at the side of the house.

As I climbed, their voices drifted out through the screen, half swallowed by the river wind.

“Did you let it in again?” Caroline asked.

“It’s not ours,” David said. “It just shows up.”

“It always shows up.”

A pause, then his voice, tired. “Because you feed it.”

Caroline didn’t answer right away. When she did, it was quiet and final. “Because it’s hungry.”

I got onto the roof and crouched near the tarp. Heat rose through the shingles. The sun didn’t know the difference between an ordinary year and a year where water climbed into living rooms. It kept burning down with the same Florida certainty. Across the street, a man worked on his own tarp, hammering slow, moving as if he was walking on a body.

The shingles here were old and curled at the edges. The ridge vent had shifted. The tarp covered a section ripped open down to the decking. Somebody had thrown it up in a hurry after Frances, back when people still called it a once in a lifetime storm.

Then Jeanne came and taught everybody what that phrase was worth.

I lifted the tarp edge. Water stains ran down the plywood. Underlayment was torn. In one place, you could see daylight through a split board.

I worked my way toward the back corner, following the leak like a trail. It wasn’t one spot. It was a sequence. Nails backed out. Shingles missing. Flashing loose. A small opening that let in small water that became large damage over time.

Voices rose through the vent. I tried not to listen. That was part of the job. Still, the roof felt thin, and sound traveled the way water traveled. It found the weak places.

“I’m not saying it’s fine,” David said, his voice tight as if he was holding something in. “I’m saying we have to handle it.”

Caroline answered low, the way you speak when you don’t want the world to hear you but you can’t stop yourself. “You keep acting like it’s fine.”

“I’m not acting.”

“Yes, you are. That’s what you do.”

There was a pause. A chair scraped. Something set down too hard, glass on the counter.

“We’re not selling,” he said.

“Stop saying *we* when you mean *you*.”

Wind slapped the tarp and I lost them for a second. When the sound cleared, her voice came back sharper, as if she’d decided to touch the bruise on purpose.

“You brought home a crib.”

“It was on sale.”

“You hid it behind a sheet,” she said. “Like a dead thing.”

“Don’t.”

“Don’t what?” she snapped. I could hear the disbelief in it, the exhaustion. “Don’t remind you you’re the one who wanted it first?”

David’s voice rose, fast with panic. “We don’t have money for all of this.”

Her voice didn’t rise. That was what made it worse. “Then why do you keep spending it on pretending?”

Silence. Then David again, quieter, as if he hated that he was admitting it.

“I didn’t want them to see the mold.”

“You didn’t want them to see anything that doesn’t fit your story,” Caroline said. “The house. Us. The empty room.”

“I’m trying to protect what matters,” he said.

“What matters to who?” she asked. “The district. Your father. The plaque.”

“Stop.”

Caroline’s voice stayed steady. “You wanted a family so bad you turned it into a project. So, I did what they told me. I took the pills. I did the shots. I let them turn my body into a schedule.”

“I never asked you to do that,” David said.

“Yes, you did,” Caroline said. “You never had to say it, and yet I heard you anyway.”

A beat, then his voice went smaller, almost pleading. “I’m trying to protect what we have.”

“Say it,” she said. “Say what we are.”

“We. Are. Fine.”

Her voice went flat. “Mendacity.”

The word landed through the vent like a dropped tool.

I pressed my palm to the decking and felt heat rising through the wood. Florida held heat. Houses held heat. People held it too, until it burned through.

I finished the patch on the back corner. I replaced what I could with the closest match I had, knowing it wasn’t enough. You couldn’t do perfection in disaster season. You did what held for now.

When I climbed down, Caroline was in the yard with work gloves on, stuffing wet insulation into a trash bag. Her forearms were streaked with dust. Sweat ran down her temple and disappeared into her hairline. She kept pushing insulation down with more force than she needed, as if she wanted it gone.

David stood in the doorway watching her.

Neither of them spoke to me. They didn’t need to. The roof was my part. The rest was theirs.

I went inside to check the ridge beam because David had asked, and because I’d seen the daylight line from above.

The attic access was in the hallway. The panel door stuck from humidity. When it swung open, heat poured down like breath from an oven.

The attic smelled of damp wood and old insulation. My flashlight beam cut through dust and caught spiderwebs that trembled with my movement. The rafters were old heart pine, dark and solid, the kind you couldn’t buy anymore without taking it from another house.

Even good wood softened when water stayed.

I crawled toward the back corner, probing the ridge beam, listening for the small groan of boards that had started to separate. In one place, daylight showed through a split like a thin white line. From inside, the damage looked less like a hole and more like a scar.

Near the back slope, half hidden under insulation, I found a steamer trunk.

Metal corners rusted brown. Leather straps cracked. Someone had dragged it forward, disturbed the dust around it. The lid sat half open.

I didn't go through people's things. That was a line I kept, even in other people's wreckage. Still, my light fell on what was visible, and my stomach tightened.

A paperback lay on top of a stack of letters tied with string. The book cover was warped from moisture. A cigarette burn cratered the corner.

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof.

The letters beneath were swollen and browned at the edges. On the top envelope, the return address was written in careful handwriting, then scratched out and rewritten, as if the person sending it couldn't decide what name to claim. The postmark read Stuart, 1978.

The last name on the return line wasn't David's. It wasn't hers.

I didn't read the letter. I didn't untie the string. But I didn't need to. Secrets didn't have to speak to be loud.

Below, footsteps creaked. The attic ladder squeaked.

Caroline called up once, only my name, and when I answered she didn't ask a question. She didn't climb. She left me alone with the beam and the trunk and the heat.

I came down and told David what I could tell him without stepping into their marriage.

Water in the ridge beam. Damage in the decking. A roof that would need more than a tarp.

David nodded, eyes fixed on the table, on the papers, on the storm names written in block letters like they were dates on a headstone. His gaze snagged on the clinic invoice, then slid away from it as if it burned.

Caroline kept stuffing insulation into the bag until it was full.

I wrote the estimate that night at my kitchen table in a rental off US 1. I kept the numbers honest without being cruel. Materials. Labor. What I could do now. What they'd have to do later. I

added a note about the historic board because David would want official language to bless his choices.

I'd grown up in Jensen Beach in a cinder block house that never got called historic. When Frances hit, our ceiling bowed and my mother lined mixing bowls under drips and called it managing. We cut out wet drywall and pretended the rot wasn't spreading because pretending was cheaper than panic.

My wife and I had done our own kind of pretending for years.

We'd bought a little onesie once, on a day when we were feeling brave, and shoved it in the back of a drawer as if it was fragile glass. We kept waiting for the moment we could bring it out without feeling foolish. We never did.

After a while, she stopped saying maybe. Then she stopped saying anything at all.

Two days later, Caroline called and asked me to come back. Her voice sounded set, like a nail driven into wood.

The next morning the heat was worse. The sky was bright and cruel. The blue tarp snapped in the wind as if it wanted out.

David wasn't home when I arrived. Caroline said he'd gone to run errands, which meant he'd gone somewhere to be alone.

I climbed onto the roof and worked the remaining patches, securing the tarp edge, replacing what I could. My shirt stuck to my back. Sweat ran into my eyes. The sun hammered my shoulders.

When I finished, I climbed down and went inside.

Caroline stood in the kitchen holding a trash bag. Her hands shook.

"He's throwing things away," she said.

It wasn't a confession. It was a report.

She nodded toward the hallway. "He told me to get rid of anything that smells like mold. He said the attic's full of it."

The attic ladder was down. Heat poured from the opening. Dust drifted in the light.

Caroline climbed first, one hand on the ladder rail, the other holding the bag strap as if it could keep her anchored.

Her flashlight beam moved across rafters. Dust fell. I heard the soft crunch of insulation under her shoes.

Then she went quiet.

I waited.

Her voice came down thin. "He burned them."

"What," I said, but it came out too small.

"The letters," she said. "They're ash."

A pause, then something worse.

"Not all of it," she said. "One corner didn't go. It's stuck to the beam."

I gripped the ladder rail without climbing.

"I can still read it," she said.

The house held its breath. Even the dehumidifier seemed to listen.

Her voice shook. "It says, 'The doctor said it went untreated too long. I'm sorry. I didn't know I gave it to you.'"

She stopped, and the silence after it was the true sentence.

Then she said, quieter, "There's soot on the string. The ends curled like burnt hair." Her steps shifted above me, uncertain, as if the ladder had moved.

"And the play is gone," she added.

I didn't speak.

"There's a burn mark on the beam," she said. "It still smells. Like pitch. Like wet paper trying to turn into smoke."

"In the attic," I said, because I couldn't make my brain accept it.

"Yes," she said. "In the attic. After two hurricanes."

Caroline climbed down slowly, dust on her knees, sweat on her upper lip. Her eyes were bright with something she refused to let spill.

She dropped the trash bag. It hit with a soft thud.

“I can’t do this anymore,” she said.

It wasn’t dramatic. It was plain, and that plainness made it final.

She looked past me into the kitchen, to the table buried in forms, to the clinic invoice half hidden under storm paperwork.

“I’m going to sell it,” she said. “Or I’m going to try.”

Her voice cracked on try.

“You probably think I’m awful,” she said.

I looked at her hands. The shake she couldn’t stop. The work gloves still on, as if she’d been trying to fix something with the wrong tools.

“I think you’re tired,” I said.

Outside, the tarp snapped again.

Caroline stared at the open attic ladder. “He’s going to come home and act like nothing happened.”

I didn’t answer.

“That’s the worst part,” she said. “That he can do that.”

Her throat worked as if she was swallowing something sharp. Then the words came out, rougher than everything she’d said all morning.

“I took those pills,” she said. “My hair came out in the shower. My face broke out the way it did when I was fifteen. I did it because he wanted a family. Because a man is supposed to have one.”

She looked down at her hands as if she didn’t recognize them.

“I did all of it,” she said. “And he let me.”

I thought about the corner of paper stuck to the beam. I thought about the sentence that ended before it could offer mercy.

I didn’t touch the ladder.

I left it down, exactly as she'd told me to, the way you leave a door cracked when smoke is inside.

On my way out, I passed a closed room at the end of the hall. The door stood open by an inch, as if someone had changed their mind about shutting it.

The cat sat in the hallway facing that door, body still, ears forward, as if it could hear something behind the paint and plaster. It held there a moment, then turned away and walked off without looking back.

Through the gap I saw pale yellow walls, fresh paint that didn't match the rest of the house. A small crib sat under a sheet, the fabric pulled tight and tucked in at the corners the way you make a bed for someone who isn't coming.

A mobile hung above it, still, its little shapes frozen mid turn.

Outside, the tarp corner lifted in a gust and slapped down again, hard as a hand against wood.