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Saturday, June 29

The monster barreled in unannounced, a dense black predator devouring the unwitting summer night. Ruthless. Fire-breathing. Intent on destroying all in its path.

I was in its path.

I was going to die.

Boom!

Snap!

Thunder cracked. Lightning burst overhead and streaked toward a bobbing horizon, turning narrow swaths of sky a sickly yellow green.

Boom!

Snap!

Again and again.

The air smelled of ozone, angry water, oil, and mud.

I was hunkered low on the deck of a nineteen-foot Boston Whaler, wind whipping my jacket and hair, rain pounding my hunched shoulders and back. With all my might, I clung to a steel upright, desperate not to be flung overboard. Or electrically fried.

The boat belonged to Ryan's buddy Xavier Rabeau, never one of my favorites. Ryan was in the stern. Rabeau was under cover in the center console. Of course, he was.

Rabeau's twentysomething *blonde*, Antoinette Damico, lay in a fetal curl beside me. Though not yet hysterical, she was moving in that direction.

We were heaving and pitching in the middle of a roiling St. Lawrence River. The outboard was dead, overwhelmed by the ceaseless waves hammering it.

Later, meteorologists would speak of the climatic phenomenon in near reverent tones. They'd talk of microbursts and tornadoes. *La microrafale et la tornade*. They'd name the storm Clémence, either appreciative or ignorant of the irony in their choice. They'd explain in two languages how the impossible had happened in Montreal that night.

But a full postmortem was still in the future.

At that moment I could only grasp with all my strength, heart pounding in my chest, ears, and throat. All that mattered was staying aboard. Staying alive.

I knew little about boats, less about restarting an ancient Evinrude whose one hundred and fifty horses had all fled the stable. Badly wanting to help, I was helpless. So I cowered between the rear seats, bracing with my feet and white-knuckling the upright supports. Inwardly I cursed Rabeau, who'd been so focused on loading into the boat sacks of supermarket snacks and a cooler of iced beer—only beer—that he'd left every life jacket behind in the trunk of his car. Bastard.

I also cursed myself for failing to ask about safety vests before leaving the ramp. In my defense—not his, he owned the damn boat and should have been more responsible—when we boarded, the air was cool and dry, the few passing breezes as gentle on my skin as the brush of butterfly wings. A billion stars twinkled in a flawless sky.

We'll have an incredible view of the fireworks, Ryan had said, excited beyond what seemed fitting for a fiftysomething ex-cop.

What could go wrong? Rabeau had said.

Everything.

When I lifted my head, drops sluiced down my face, watery javelins blurring my vision and stinging my cheeks. Never easing my grip, I raised up and pivoted on my toes.

Ryan was aft of me, tinkering with the rebellious motor. Though the downpour obscured most detail, I could see that his hair was flattened in places, wind-spiked and dancing in others. His long-sleeve tee was molded to his spine like the skin on a porpoise.

Snap!

Boom!

The boat lurched wildly. The cooler skidded, tumbled, then shot up and sailed over the starboard side. Easing back down onto my butt, I watched the perky blue YETI disappear, a cuboid shadow riding the ebony chop.

Around us, other boats were struggling to return to shore, their multicolored lights winking erratically through the veil of water. An overturned catamaran bobbed roughly twenty yards off our port side. Helpless. Like me.

Closing my eyes, I willed a safe landing for those on the cat. Hoped their captain had followed regs and provided life vests.

Beside me, Damico was alternating between crying and barfing, impressively, managing to do both simultaneously. She'd abandoned the first of the plastic Provigo sacks used to transport her boyfriend's munchies and brews and was starting to fill the second. Now and then, when the deck reangled sharply, she'd wail and demand to be taken ashore.

Rabeau was rocking and rolling at his captain's chair, feet spread, awaiting word from the stern. Each time Ryan called out, Rabeau tried the ignition. Over and over, the two repeated the sequence. Always with the same outcome.

Nothing.

Then the sound of Quebecois cursing.

Hostie!

Tabarnak!

Câlice!

Above the cacophony of wind and waves and male frustration, my ears picked up an almost inaudible sound. A high, mosquito-like whine. Distant sirens? A tornado warning?

I offered a silent plea to whatever water deities might be watching. Clíodhna, the Celtic goddess of the sea? Where the hell did that come from. Gran, of course. Christ, I was losing my mind.

The bow shot skyward, then dropped from the crest of a high wave into a trough.

Thwack!

A sound rose from Damico's throat, a keening thick with silvery-green bile.

I reached over and placed a hand on her shoulder. She lowered the Provigo sack and turned to face me, mouth an inverted *U*, a slimy trail of drool hanging from each corner. Lightning sparked, illuminating the skeletal arch of the Jacques Cartier Bridge behind and above her.

I felt tremors of my own. Swallowed. Vowed not to succumb to nausea.

Not to die. Not like this.

Death is inevitable for us all. From time to time, we ponder our passing. Visualize those last moments before the final curtain. Perhaps because I'm in the business of violent death, my imaginings tend toward the dramatic. A tumbling fall and fractured bones. Popping flames and acrid smoke. Crumpled steel and shattered glass. Bullets. Nooses. Toxic plants. Venomous bites. I'm not morbid by nature. The odds are far greater that the climactic setting will include pinging monitors and antiseptically clean sheets.

I'll admit it. I've considered every possibility for my closing scene. All but one.

The one I fear most.

I've viewed scores of bodies pulled, dragged, or netted from watery graves. Recovered many myself. Each time, I empathize with the

terror the victim had endured. The initial struggle to stay afloat, the desperation for air. The dreaded submersion and breath-holding. The inevitable yielding and aspiration of water. Then, mercifully, the loss of consciousness, cardiorespiratory arrest, and death.

Not an easy way to go.

Point of information: I have a robust fear of drowning. Don't get me wrong. I'm not afraid of rivers, lakes, and pools. Far from it. I body surf and water-ski. I swim laps for exercise. I'm not afraid of going into the water.

I'm afraid of not coming out.

Irrational, I know. But there you have it.

So why was I there, in an open boat, about to die during the mother of all storms?

Fireworks.

And love.