

This Story  
Might  
Save  
Your Life

Tiffany Crum grew up on a dairy farm just down the road from a maximum-security prison. A long-time Californian, she worked a variety of jobs in the film industry before earning her MFA in creative writing. She now lives in Atlanta with her husband, sons, and dogs, and spends her free time trying to keep her vegetable garden alive.

*This Story Might Save Your Life* is her debut novel.

# This Story Might Save Your Life

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*Dedicated with all the sparkling hearts  
to Matt, Mason, and August*

# Part One





# Joy Moore

## Day Zero

A blast of hot wind shakes the house, rattling the windows. Outside my basement studio, the towering sweetgums thrash and sway, flinging their prickly seedpods down the hill.

“We’re rolling,” Benny says. “Whenever you’re ready.”

My focus slides back to my best friend. Back to his ruddy beard, to the untamed curls squashed by his oversized headphones, to the workstation where we sit in our ergonomic swivel chairs—anywhere, everywhere but his eyes. “Ready.”

Benny doesn’t comment on how distracted I am as we start recording. I force myself to pretend nothing is wrong, and as usual, my anxiety falls away as we find our rhythm. By the time we wrap our rambling podcast intro, I’m more at ease. Benny is leading the episode today, which means I’m in the hot seat ad-libbing survival tactics for the life-threatening topic of his choice.

He’s watching me now with an impish grin. “What do you know about humpback whales? Anything specific?”

“Beyond the giant mammal part?” I look to my sister-in-law at the opposite end of the table, hoping for a hint, but Mallory’s focused

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on the mix board; she adjusts a fader, turns a knob, and sweeps her platinum blond hair into a low ponytail. Into the mic, I say, “Embarrassingly little.”

“Excellent.” Benny leans back in his chair, hands clasped across a faded black T-shirt from our original merch line. Our catchphrase stretches across the front in white block letters: WHAT DOESN’T KILL YOU MAKES YOU . . . A SURVIVOR. “Let’s say you’re kayaking along the Pacific coast. It’s a warm fall day. Cloudless skies. Glistening water. You’re working up a sweat. Life is good. Then all at once, dozens of sardines start hurling themselves into your boat.”

“Delicious. Have you ever tried fried sardines? My mom used to make them with toast and this parsley caper sauce—”

“Focus, Joy. These aren’t lunch. You’ve just paddled yourself on top of a bait ball.”

I regretfully inform him I’ve never heard of such a thing, and he explains that it’s a tightly packed school of fish. A defensive measure they take when a predator is nearby. “Or, in this case, when a predator is directly beneath you.”

“You could’ve maybe led with that.”

“An enormous jaw opens, you’re knocked out of your boat, and you find yourself inside the gaping maw of a fifty-foot mammal. What do you do?”

According to Benny, this unbelievable-yet-true misadventure befell a woman in San Luis Obispo just last week. If I wasn’t currently avoiding the internet at all costs—for reasons I will not allow myself to dwell on right now—I would’ve called dibs on this story the instant the headline popped into my feed so that Benny could be the one puzzling his way out of this whale.

“I need more,” I say. “Is this a tandem kayak? Are you inside the mouth with me?”

“If I tag along, are you going to let me live this time?”

I may or may not have hypothetically sacrificed him to a few wild animals on various episodes over the past four years. “I make no promises.”

He snorts. “You’re alone.”

I make puppy-dog eyes and remind him that without his assistance I will both figuratively and literally end up sleeping with the fishes.

He’s unmoved. “Guess you’ll have to work fast, then.”

“Cruel.” I sigh. “So, thinking out loud here—I suppose the first course of action is to prop open his jaw somehow and scream for help.”

He holds up a hand. “Can we stop to imagine this for a second? You’re soaking wet, tangled in seaweed, and flailing around with thousands of fish on a tongue the size of a pickup truck. Even if you do manage to stand up—and that’s a big if—you’re still shouting for backup from *inside* a ten-foot mouth.”

“I look like a sea monster, don’t I?”

“You do.”

“No one is helping me, are they?”

“They are not.”

“Okay. In that case . . .” I rub my palms together. “I’ll swing on his uvula and jab him in the barnacles until he spits me out.”

Benny’s been shaking his head since *uvula*. “There’s so much wrong with what you just said. What are you jabbing him with? And don’t say—”

“My sword, obviously.”

“Joy.” He sounds exasperated, but he loves it when I do this. “Why do you always have a sword? Where is this sword coming from?”

“Listen, the only way I’d ever end up in this position is if there’s an alternate universe in which I’m an actual pirate. So it’s legit this time: I get a sword.” I pause. “Also a peg leg.”

Thirty minutes of riffing and tangents go by in a flash. By the time Benny is ready to reveal the woman's true survival story, my limbs are loose, my cheeks hurt from smiling, and—

The power goes out with a startling whoosh.

The three of us blink at one another as we remove our headphones, dazed in the sudden half dark.

"It's not just us, right?" I get up to check the breaker by the stairs. Everything is in order. "You think it's the whole neighborhood?"

The house judders with another violent gust, and a succession of cracks fire off outside. I spin around and regard the spray of dead palm fronds littering my private terrace. Detritus from a neighbor upwind. Xander and I don't even own a palm tree. We all watch a plastic bag zip past the window and tangle in a nearby bush.

"Give me anything, any other weather but the Santa Ana winds," Mallory says. She's wearing her go-to outfit: training joggers with a tank top and Birkenstocks. Crossing her arms, she rubs her bare shoulders and shudders. "Makes my skin crawl."

My gaze lingers on her as I return to my seat. Throughout most of my marriage to Xander, my sister-in-law has remained an enigma—the distant, unflappable younger sister with whom he emigrated from Denmark as a child. It's only since she relocated to Los Angeles for our assistant producer job six months ago that she's begun to reveal these flashes of vulnerability, these tiny chinks in her armor.

She's probably worried about the dry sagebrush lining the canyon between our house and hers, perfect kindling for a wildfire. I open my mouth to tell her it'll be okay—the fire department hasn't even issued a red flag warning yet. But then I remember the last time I lost power during a Santa Ana storm and keep quiet. They don't call this hot wind Satan's breath for nothing.

Superstitiously, I rub the bronze-plated head of our Arthur Fonzarelli desk statue. The Fonz. Fonzie. He beams at me with both thumbs up: *Ayyy*. He's been our lucky charm since Benny and I first

topped the podcast charts, and I make a silent wish for a dose of his laid-back *Happy Days* mojo right now.

“Well.” Mallory shakes her limbs as if sloughing off a bad memory, and then she’s back to business. “Since we’re just sitting here, Xander asked me to knock a few things off the to-do list.”

Benny turns to me. “Where is he, anyway?”

“Another damage control meeting with the lawyers,” I say. Waking from my midmorning nap, I’d watched from our bed as he styled his sleek blond hair, one shade darker than Mallory’s, while whispering his arguments to his reflection in the mirror. He looked tired. Tired but handsome in his slim-fit navy suit. “You just missed him.”

Mallory clears her throat, shifting our attention back to her. She reminds us that our deadline for new advertising partnerships is quickly approaching. We have multiple possibilities to choose from: furniture e-tailers, website builders, emergency survival gear brands. “And there are at least a half dozen meal kit delivery services on the table.”

“No food ads,” I say.

Mallory looks like she’s about to counter, but Benny beats her to it. “You heard her.”

She jots this down, and Benny and I agree on our top choices with minimal discussion. The room is growing warmer without air-conditioning. The windows in this hundred-year-old hillside Spanish home are single-pane, and the draft snaking through them smells of earth.

“One more thing,” Mallory says, and her ice-blue eyes soften, like she might not want to say what she’s about to say. “Xander had a call from the Comedy Store. A main room act canceled, and they asked if you’d be willing to fill the gap for three nights.” When we don’t answer, she adds, “Xander and I thought it might help move negotiations along if Apex Plus saw you getting back out there.”

*Negotiations. Getting back out there.* The words are thorns in

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my side. The eye-wateringly lucrative distribution deal we've been thrashing out with Apex Plus has been in a holding pattern since the disastrous events of August. But a live show is not the answer.

"When do they want us?" I ask.

"Two weeks from Thursday." She consults her phone. "October eighteenth."

Benny watches me, waiting for my response.

Mallory moves closer and takes a seat on the desk beside my computer. "I know what you're thinking, but we could hire security. Eyes everywhere."

A laugh bubbles out, and I cover my mouth.

"That means no." Benny sounds disappointed.

"You haven't even considered it," Mallory says, more to me than him.

"We don't have to." His tone is firmer now. I meet his gaze, thanking him with my eyes, and he nods. "We're not ready."

They volley arguments for a while. Benny reminds her that we're still cleaning up messes. That we wouldn't have to find new ad partnerships if business was operating as usual. Mallory points out that we're back in the top ten as of last Friday. Neither outright mentions the "incident," as we've taken to calling it, or the resulting social media storm. The fact that I haven't left the house in six weeks. Instead, they talk around the situation using words like *delicate* and *optics*.

"You don't have to decide right now," Mallory says finally, glancing down at my laptop, which has remained on, unaffected by the power outage. I follow her gaze to the tabs at the top of the screen.

"Great. We'll pick this up later, then," I say too quickly, just as a *thwap-BANG* ricochets throughout the house.

"What was that?" Benny asks, already standing.

This time I know it's not a palm frond. My limbs jellify when the sound repeats, and I stay rooted to my chair, pulse thumping in my

throat as Benny and Mallory charge upstairs to the main floor. Outside, the dogs bark fiercely at something in the yard.

I'm still frozen in place when the electricity hums back on.

"It's the window," Benny calls down a few seconds later. "Latch broke."

The words sink in one by one. "What are the dogs barking at?" I call back.

"Coyote. Teasing them through the fence again." A pause. I hear the door to the balcony open and close. "There's no one out there, Joy. Nothing to worry about."

Nothing to worry about. I take a deep, shuddering breath as they discuss DIY fixes upstairs. Toggling through my open computer applications, I find my half of the memoir I'm writing with Benny and scan the chapter I hastily typed out last night.

It's strange seeing your life unfold through the pages of a memoir. These past few months, I've often wondered what Benny and I would've done differently if we'd known this career was going to make us famous, if we could've foreseen how it would all play out.

When I reach my final words, my stomach clenches.

I can't do this. I thought I could do this. I thought I could share my side of the story, but now, knowing it will soon be read, I feel sick.

Closing my tabs, I make a split-second decision. On a scrap of paper, I scrawl out a note, conceal it in my fist, and wait for Mallory and Benny to return. When they do, just a few minutes later, my body—so unpredictable of late—has already grown heavy.

"Shall we get this episode in the can?" Benny asks.

"Actually," I say, "I'm sorry to do this, but would you mind telling me how I'm going to escape this whale tomorrow? I'm starting to fade."

Mallory glances at the clock, no doubt noting I'm off schedule.

Benny shrugs. "Fine by me."

We agree on a time. When Mallory's not looking, I tuck the note—now damp from my sweaty palm—into the fraying pocket of Benny's shorts and press a finger to my lips. *Shh*. He half smiles with confusion as I urge him along. Mallory trails him out, and through the ceiling, I hear Benny call to his dog, followed by the pitter-patter of paws circling in excitement. When the sounds upstairs fade away, I move into my bedroom.

Sleep will come soon, whether I'm ready or not. I set my alarm and slip into bed, picturing Benny unfolding my note, squinting curiously at my request. He was wrong when he said there was nothing to worry about. There's plenty to worry about. Clutching my pillow, I listen to the howling wind, and wait for the storm to come.