

Partly Cloudy

Book I

Chapter 1: Owen and the Hurricane

September 1987

The blues bar pulsed with energy; the gritty notes of a saxophone weaved through the hum of conversation and the clink of glasses. Owen leaned against the polished mahogany bar, nursing a whiskey and savoring how it landed in his stomach and burrowed in. The dim lighting cast a warm glow across the room, glinting off the rows of bottles and the exposed brick walls adorned with vintage posters and neon signs.

Owen raised his glass in a silent toast to his future as he sat at the bar. He knew law school would be challenging but was ready to tackle it head-on. If he could sail the seas and survive months-long deployments in the Navy, then he could handle reading a few hundred pages of case law and intense classroom debates.

With a grin, Owen downed the last whiskey and set the glass back on the bar. Suddenly, he felt a cold splash down his back, followed by a feminine gasp. He turned to find a beautiful brunette, her hand clasped over her mouth, an empty glass in the other.

"Oh my god, I'm so sorry!" she exclaimed, eyes wide with genuine remorse. In a panic, she snatched a handful of napkins from the bar and hastily patted the expanding wet spot on his shirt. "I was trying to get through this crowd. I looked left when I should have looked right."

Owen couldn't help but chuckle at the incongruence of the flustered apology, the eyes pleading for mercy, and her necklace of alternating plastic penises and boobs. "It's alright," he assured her, taking the napkins from her hand. "I needed to clean this shirt. I've been wearing it for a thousand miles. I'm Owen."

She smiled then, a radiant, heart-stopping smile that made her green eyes sparkle in the dim light. "I'm Sara," she said, extending her hand. "Please let me buy you a drink. I'm so sorry."

"Drink it with me?" he replied, shaking her hand. Her skin was soft and warm, and he held on a beat longer than necessary.

"Well, Owen, it's your lucky day. You've been officially baptized in a New Orleans hurricane." She signaled the bartender for another round, her sundress swishing around her tanned legs as she leaned against the bar.

As they waited for their drinks, Owen studied her more closely. She was beautiful, with delicate features, full lips, and dark hair that cascaded over sun-kissed shoulders. But something more—a wit in her eyes and confidence in her posture—drew him in.

"So, what brings you to New Orleans?" he asked, accepting the fresh whiskey from the bartender.

"Oh, my god! Bachelorette party! You don't think I wear this every day?" Sara replied, holding up her necklace. "My college roommate is tying the knot next month. We're here to celebrate her last days of freedom. What about you?"

Owen nodded. "Just out of the Navy. Five years. I'm headed to Austin for law school."

"Dress whites and brains," Sara teased, her eyes twinkling mischievously. "It's a deadly combination."

Owen grinned, enjoying the easy banter. "I could say the same about you. What do you do when you're not assaulting bar patrons with sex organs and fruit drinks?"

Sara laughed, a melodic sound that filled the room. "I'm a journalist working for a small paper in Houston. Real small, like 'we pay *you* to read it' small. Chasing stories, righting wrongs, you know, the usual."

* * * * *

They talked for hours, the world around them fading into the background—the music, the chatter, the chiming of glasses. They were deep in conversation when a commotion caught their attention. A young woman, one of Sara's bachelorette party friends, stumbled towards their table, her high heels wobbling dangerously with each step. She found Sara's arm and koala-hugged it for support.

"Sara!" she exclaimed, glossy-eyed, her words spilling like Scrabble tiles. "There you are! We've been looking for you!"

Sara laughed, steadying her friend. "Hey, Jess. I'm catching up with Owen here. Owen, this is my college roommate, Jessica."

Jessica turned her attention to Owen, her eyes widening in admiration as she took in his chiseled features and broad shoulders. "Well, hello there," she purred, her words slightly slurred. "Sara, you didn't tell me he was so gorgeous."

Owen chuckled, extending his hand. "Nice to meet you, Jessica. I'm Owen."

Jessica grasped his hand, then slid it up his arm and onto his shoulder. "You know," she stage-whispered to Sara, her voice carrying across the bar. "He's magnificent up close—like ridiculously handsome. How do you even concentrate on what he's saying?"

Sara rolled her eyes good-naturedly. "Jess, you've had too much to drink."

But Jessica was undeterred. She leaned closer to Owen, her eyes narrowing as if she were studying a fascinating specimen. "Do you know how smart Sara is?" she asked, her words running together. "Like, scary smart. She will win a Howitzer Prize one day, mark my words."

Owen grinned, glancing at Sara. "I don't doubt that."

Sara shook her head, suppressing a smile. "Okay, Jess, it's time we got you water and food."

But Jessica wasn't finished. She pointed a finger at Owen, her expression serious. "You better treat her right, mister. Because if you don't, I'll ... I'll ..."

She paused, lost her train of thought, then made a left-face turn, sharper than Owen had ever executed.

"Bathroom," she mumbled before turning on her heel and making a beeline for the restroom, leaving Sara and Owen staring after her in amused disbelief.

Sara shook her head, a rueful smile playing at her lips. "I apologize for my friend. She gets enthusiastic when she's had a few too many."

Owen chuckled, leaning back in his seat. "No worries. I'm flattered she thinks I'm good enough for you."

Sara raised an eyebrow, a playful glint in her eye. "Oh, you think you're good enough for me?"

Owen grinned, holding her gaze. "I don't know. I want to find out."

The moment stretched between them, the air crackling with a delicious tension. Sara bit her lip, which made Owen's heart skip a beat. He felt this night was just beginning and couldn't wait to see where it would lead.

Sara glanced at her watch, a flicker of disappointment crossing her face. "I should get back to my friends," she said reluctantly. "I'm glad I spilled that drink on you, Owen."

"Me too, Sara." He hesitated, not wanting the night to end. "Listen, would you like to grab a bite to eat? There's a 24-hour diner just down the street, and I could use some coffee to balance out the whiskey."

Sara lit up, her sly smile on her face. "I'd love that ... you'll have to sneak me out of here," she said, gathering her purse with ninja speed and agility.

"Lead the way, Captain."

Chapter 2: Stay

September 1987

The diner was a classic: all chrome, fluorescent lights, and vinyl, with a menu that had not been changed or cleaned in decades. As they settled into the booth, the waitress appeared, her pen poised over her notepad.

"What can I get you folks?" she asked, her voice a perfect blend of Louisiana charm and late-night weariness.

Owen glanced at the menu, his eyes scanning the offerings. "I'll have a coffee and a slice of the pecan pie," he said, pointing at the picture on the menu.

Sara nodded, confidently closing her menu. "Make that two coffees and two pies. If we're going to tackle the world's problems, we're going to need sustenance."

The waitress, a middle-aged woman with a shock of red hair and a face that had seen too many late nights and double shifts, grinned knowingly as she jotted down their order. Her pen slashed across the notepad with quick zips, its scratching noise rising above the sound of the bustling dishes and conversations.

"Coming right up, sugar," she drawled, her accent as thick and smooth as oil washing up on the Louisiana coast. "You two just go on talkin'."

She winked at Sara, her eyes twinkling with a mix of 'been there, done that' and maternal approval. "I suppose y'all are gonna need a refill or two before the night's over," she continued, tucking her pen behind her ear and giving them a conspiratorial smile. "I'll keep the coffee coming as long as you keep the conversation goin'."

She turned on her heel and sashayed back to the counter. Owen watched her go, a smiling smirk on his lips.

"I think she's onto us," he whispered to Sara, leaning across the table like a spy sharing a secret.

Sara laughed, "Well, we don't want to disappoint her, do we?" she teased, her foot brushing against his under the table. "I say we give her a show—a real Roman Holiday, full of witty banter, soulful gazes—and a dramatic declaration or two."

Owen grinned, his heart beating at the sparkle in her eyes. "To epic romances and nosy waitresses."

Sara leaned back in her seat, her eyes meeting Owen's. "So, tell me about yourself, Owen. What's your story?"

Owen chuckled, running a hand through his hair. "The usual. Boy meets Navy, he falls in love with Navy, and he realizes he can't marry Navy because it's illegal in forty-three states."

"A tale as old as time," she quipped, her eyes sparkling with joy. "But seriously, what made you join the Navy?"

Owen's smile faded slightly, his gaze turning inward as he contemplated Sara's question.

"Honestly?" he said, his voice low with emotion. "After my dad died, I was treading water. I needed a path, so I joined the Navy."

He paused, his eyes distant as he remembered the confusion, the anger, and the overwhelming sense of loss that had consumed him in his teenage years. "I was only twelve when it happened ... heart attack, they said. Quick, painless. But for me, for my mom? It was like the world had ended."

Sara reached across the table, her hand finding him, "I'm sorry about your dad," she whispered, her voice filled with a tenderness that made Owen's heartache. "That must have been tough."

Owen nodded, swallowing hard against the lump in his throat. "It was, and I was a jerk," he admitted, his fingers curling around hers, clinging to her like a lifeline. "I acted out, blamed my mother for everything."

He shook his head, a rueful smile playing at the corners of his mouth. "The Navy brought clarity," he said, his voice becoming more lively and precise. "I needed that."

Sara nodded, her thumb tracing gentle circles on the back of his hand. "I can't even imagine how difficult that must have been," she murmured, her eyes shining with empathy. "But I'm glad you found your way. And I'm glad it led you right here, right now."

* * * * *

They exited the diner just before dawn, and the streets were calm. Owen walked Sara to her hotel, their hands brushing together as they navigated the sidewalk.

"I had a great time tonight," Sara said as they reached the hotel entrance. "I'm glad I came out with the girls, even if I abandoned them halfway through the night."

Owen chuckled. "I'm sure they'll forgive you, given the circumstances."

Sara looked up at him, her eyes searching his. "I don't usually do this," she said softly, "but come up?"

Owen's heart raced, his mouth suddenly dry. "I'd like that," he managed, following her into the hotel lobby and room.

They stumbled into Sara's hotel room, their laughter echoing off the walls as they navigated the unfamiliar space without breaking their embrace. Owen's shirt was already halfway unbuttoned, courtesy of Sara's nimble fingers in the elevator, and her dress was riding up in a way that made his heart race.

"You know," Sara mumbled against his lips, her hands roaming over his chest, "I don't do this on the first date."

Owen grinned, his fingers tangling in her hair as he pulled her closer. "Oh, so this was a date?" he teased, nipping at her earlobe. "I thought it was a chance encounter with a clumsy stranger."

Sara laughed, the sound vibrating against his skin. "Excuse you," she retorted, her eyes sparkling with mischief. "I prefer to say I 'entered with a splash.'"

"Hi, I'm Owen. Please drench me to activate engaging conversation ..."

"And besides, any encounter that involves pie and 'make sure Flo can hear' romantic conversations automatically qualifies as a date."

* * * * *

They spent the day and the next night intertwined, conversing, laughing, and exploring with tenderness. They shared stories of childhood misadventures, teenage crushes, and adult triumphs and failures. They mapped each other's bodies with reverent fingers and hungry mouths, discovering places that made them gasp and sigh.

At one point, Sara looked up at him, her hair a wild halo around her face, her eyes soft and vulnerable in the daylight streaming through the window. "It's surreal," she murmured, fingertips brushing his cheek, "finding you. It's like we were both lost, wandering our paths and somehow ended up in the same place, headed in the same direction."

Owen chuckled and kissed her palm. "I like this path," he said, his voice light with affection.

When checkout time could no longer be avoided, they reluctantly untangled themselves and prepared to face reality outside their cocoon.

"I don't want to go," Sara mumbled, burying her face in his chest. "Can't we stay forever, living on room service and pay-per-view movies?"

Owen laughed, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. "No job, remember?" he said, fingers running through her hair. "Besides, we've just started our adventure."

Sara looked up at him, her eyes shining with hope and trepidation. "Promise?" she asked, her voice small and vulnerable.

Owen cupped her face in his hands, his thumb brushing her bottom lip. "Promise."

As they parted ways, Sara went to Houston, Owen went to Austin, and Owen was light with possibility and heavy with longing. In the following weeks, they called each other every night, the connection they had forged that night growing stronger with each conversation. When Sara suggested driving to Austin for a weekend visit, Owen jumped at the chance to see her again.

That weekend turned into a week, then two, until one morning, wrapped in Owen's arms, Sara turned to him with a smile, "You know," she mumbled, her voice still rough with sleep, "I've gotten used to this."

Owen chuckled, fingers running through her hair, gently working out the tangles. "What, waking up to my morning breath and Eraserhead hair?"

Sara grinned, propping herself up on one elbow to look at him. Teasingly, she wrinkled her nose in mock disgust and said, "Well, the morning breath is quite something. But the hair? It's doing it for me."

Owen raised an eyebrow, a slow smile spreading across his face. "Oh, really?" he drawled, his hand drifting down to the small of her back. "And what else does it for you?"

Sara bit her lip, her eyes sparkling with mischief. "Hmm, let's see," she mused, her fingers tracing lazy patterns on his chest. "There's the way you take ten minutes to brush your teeth. You let me have the last piece of pizza, even though I know you want it. How you smile at any three-year-old, no matter what ridiculous thing they are doing."

She trailed off, her voice becoming softer, more serious. "I don't think I'm going back to Houston," she said, her fingers quieting over his heart. "I've already fallen in love with Austin and you."

"Stay, Sara."

Sara laughed, shocked at how easily her words had landed on him. "You'll be stuck with me, sailor boy," she said, brushing her lips against his. "I hope you're ready for an era of bad puns and burnt toast."