

# TELL ME WHAT HAPPENED

## Season 5 - Bonus Episode

### Bridesmaids Rescued From Hurricane Helene

**Torah Kachur:**

Kayla Donnelly is getting married in a couple months, but before her big day, she's planned a weekend to remember.

**Kayla Henry:**

There were 11 of us total. And it included a lot of my friends and also my future sister-in law.

**Torah Kachur:**

They've booked a cabin in the mountains of North Carolina, just outside the town of Asheville.

**Kayla Henry:**

So, the property was absolutely stunning. And then the house was kind of perched on like a hill or cliffside. And just beautiful trees everywhere. It just was beautiful.

**Torah Kachur:**

The weather isn't great, but they aren't letting that bring them down. They've got bags of potato chips, plenty of white wine sangria, and the best friends in the world.

**Kayla Henry:**

We were so excited. We were really happy. You could tell that the house was damaged. I didn't know how bad it was.

**Torah Kachur:**

A giant tree — a hundred feet tall or more — has come crashing through the roof. Outside the storm continues to rage.

**Kayla Henry:**

You could just tell that trees were going down, but you couldn't get a super clear view of anything because of the wind and the rain and all of the debris just flying everywhere.

**Torah Kachur:**

There's no power. No cell service. And they have very little in the way of food or water.



**Kayla Henry:**

Complete shock and disbelief and just having really no idea what to do.

**Torah Kachur:**

I'm Torah Kachur. This is a bonus episode of *Tell Me What Happened*, true stories of people helping people, an original podcast by OnStar. Every day when you wake up, you don't know if you'll be a person who needs help, or if you'll be a person that helps someone else. It's important to remember that it's in all of us to be either one of those things every day.

Kayla lives in Boston. She's got a great job in human resources with a medical supply company. And she's engaged to her high school sweetheart. With their wedding day just a few months away, Kayla and her best friends plan the perfect bachelorette weekend getaway.

**Kayla Henry:**

I'm not too into like crazy party life or anything like that. I like more casual, like wineries and restaurants and champagne bars and things like that with my friends.

**Torah Kachur:**

That rules out Vegas, Nashville, or a trip to a big city.

**Kayla Henry:**

I have always loved the mountains. So, I figured a cabin destination was something that I would be interested in.

**Torah Kachur:**

They scour the internet until they find the perfect spot perched on the side of Elk Mountain above Asheville, North Carolina.

**Kayla Henry:**

I've stayed in mountainous areas where you see the mountains off in the distance, but I've never been at that altitude before.

**Torah Kachur:**

It's a full day of travelling just to get there, the last bit being a drive up a narrow backcountry road that twists and turns for nine miles winding its way uphill through the forest.

**Kayla Henry:**

The way that the cabin was set, was almost like cliffside. So everything below the cabin went downhill, so it kind of went downhill with a bunch of trees and then for miles and miles in the backyard all you could see was trees.

**Torah Kachur:**

Inside it's warm and cozy.



**Kayla Henry:**

It was very much log cabin vibes. All of the walls were wood. So it really did feel like you were in a traditional log cabin with just the upgraded amenities, like a beautiful kitchen, great beds and baths.

**Torah Kachur:**

Despite the remote location, they've got an action-packed couple of days planned.

**Kayla Henry:**

We got there Thursday and the plan that night was just kind of to stay in the cabin unpack. And we were having a private chef come that night.

**Torah Kachur:**

They eat, they drink, and they post photos on Instagram – smiling and laughing, all 11 of them wearing matching flannel pajamas. That was the theme of the weekend: a “Flannel Fling Before the Ring.”

**Kayla Henry:**

We had plans on the Friday for a mountainside picnic at a winery. We had planned Saturday to go downtown.

**Torah Kachur:**

With so many of their activities planned for outdoors, they had been keeping a close eye on the weather forecasts. Hurricane Helene was expected to hit the coast of Florida that weekend, but that's 600 miles away. Still, Kayla reached out to the winery about their picnic plans.

**Kayla Henry:**

They thought it was just going to be rain. So, they were just moving the location basically of our picnic. But they still plan for the show to go on.

**Torah Kachur:**

One by one they call it a night. Eventually even Kayla goes to bed.

**Kayla Henry:**

And then in the middle of the night, I would say I woke up at like two or three hearing incredibly loud winds. But I'm a light sleeper, I'll wake up, but I won't get up. So I was like, oh it's fine. I mean, nothing I can do about it now. It'll probably be fine in the morning. I honestly didn't think much of it. And then at about six in the morning, I heard a group of my friends just screaming, And that was when a tree had crashed into the living room.

**Torah Kachur:**

Five of her friends — the early risers — were sitting on the couch drinking coffee when the giant tree crashed through the roof.



**Kayla Henry:**

There was wood all over the floor from the roof panels that had fallen in and from the wall that it had damaged and water coming through. And I think we were just in a state of shock, honestly, because I could not believe that that had happened.

**Torah Kachur:**

They do what they can to deal with the damage.

**Kayla Henry:**

But the ceiling was so high, there was no way we could reach anything or try to patch anything up or anything like that. It was a very high, like vaulted type ceiling. So all we could do really was put towels on the ground and over the couch.

**Torah Kachur:**

Meanwhile, flying debris makes going outside too dangerous.

**Kayla Henry:**

So honestly, all we could do was wait it out. We didn't really know what else to do. We were kind of in disbelief.

**Torah Kachur:**

It's early afternoon. The storm has passed. After all the mayhem, the entire mountainside is eerily silent. Tentatively, they step outside.

**Kayla Henry:**

That was when I realized, oh no, we are certainly going to be trapped here for a while. There was a huge tree just on the driveway that we had to get through that blocked the whole entire thing. And then when we got to the main road, it was completely covered in fallen trees. Trees that had been there for hundreds and hundreds of years by the looks of them. So they were very large. So there wasn't really like a way to get through it easily or to see much into the distance. All you could see was trees down. The first thing honestly that went through my mind was guilt for bringing 10 of the closest people in my life to the spot where I knew we were gonna be trapped.

**Torah Kachur:**

Back inside, they take stock of their situation. They have no power, no way to contact the outside world, and also no running water.

**Kayla Henry:**

As soon as everyone woke up, the toilets weren't flushing. That was our first tell that the water was out. So at that point, we knew from the very early morning that all we were going to have was the bottled water that we had left. I think we had maybe two cases of waters. It was not a lot.

**Torah Kachur:**

They also don't have much food. Between the private chef and the planned dinners



out, they hadn't done much in the way of provisioning. They gather in what's left of the living room. There's a massive hole in the roof and debris everywhere, but it's the only place all of them can be together.

**Kayla Henry:**

So some of the girls cried. I believe I probably cried too at some point that day when we had came inside and were like, my God, this is horrible.

**Torah Kachur:**

Afternoon turns to evening.

**Kayla Henry:**

So, it was pitch black in the house. We found a little box that had fake candles and a flashlight. So we had those perched up in the room and we all just kind of stayed in the living room and just played like mindless little games. Like what's your top three movies? What's your top three favorite TV shows? And we just like went around like trying to do things to keep our mind distracted.

**Torah Kachur:**

For dinner, they have one package of pasta and single jar of sauce. They cook it up on the gas stove and pass it around for everyone to have a bite. As the night wears on — Kayla has two other things on her mind.

**Kayla Henry:**

My matron of honor and my best friend Lexi had just found out she was pregnant about a week before we went on this trip. So she was newly pregnant, so that immediately scared me. One of my other friends is a Type 1 diabetic who has an electronic pump that requires a charge. So that made me nervous as well.

**Torah Kachur:**

After a few hours, they all go to their beds and try to sleep.

**Kayla Henry:**

The next morning, things started to get a little bit more dire. I think the spirits definitely declined. I think we really started to set into the fact that this was a really serious situation.

**Torah Kachur:**

They talk about an escape plan. Some of them want to head out on foot, find their way down the mountain and get help. Others argue that they don't know the route and they'd get hopelessly lost.

**Kayla Henry:**

Close to sunset, just before the sunset, we heard a voice calling down to us. And honestly, I could not believe it. That was like the most hope I had had when I heard an unfamiliar voice like yelling, "Hey, anyone down there?"



**Torah Kachur:**

This is *Tell Me What Happened*, a podcast created by OnStar to showcase how important a human connection is when you need help, whether you're on a sinking cruise ship, running from an avalanche, or trapped in a mountain cabin.

**Ben Moore:**

My wife and I have been in Asheville for almost 20 years now.

**Torah Kachur:**

That's Ben Moore. A 40-year-old cyber security expert.

**Ben Moore:**

We've been married for thirteen years now. We have a two-and-a-half-year-old. We've got two dogs. We go on a walk every night for a couple miles.

**Torah Kachur:**

They live in a historic farmhouse that was built in 1880. It's a perfect example of what makes the area so unique: a marriage of historic charm and modern amenities.

**Ben Moore:**

Asheville in general is a vacation destination or it's a place where people like to see themselves retiring to. At one point it had kind of been a bit of a hippie community up in the mountains.

**Torah Kachur:**

Today, it's regarded as an arts community and a destination for both foodies and outdoor adventurers.

**Ben Moore:**

So, we're right in the Blue Ridge Escarpment and we have a bunch of different natural areas that are around us like Pisgah National Forest. And so everywhere you're looking, you can see a mountain range in the distance. In the valleys is kind of where you have most of the cities and towns here.

**Torah Kachur:**

That's what Asheville is — a thriving city of 95,000 people, tucked into a mountain valley. In September of 2024, all that changed.

**Ben Moore:**

My wife was out of town on a girl's trip.

**Torah Kachur:**

Ben has invited his parents over to help with their daughter while he's working.

**Ben Moore:**

So, you know, Thursday night, typical kind of night with the folks and daughter, just spending time together and having dinner. Not really, you know, spending any time



thinking about or preparing for the storm.

**Torah Kachur:**

They know some weather is coming — residual effects from Hurricane Helene that has made landfall down in Florida. But all the forecast is calling for in North Carolina is some rain and maybe some wind.

**Ben Moore:**

We're on the very eastern side of the mountains, right? And so with the way that storms move from the west to the east, typically a lot of the energy gets taken out of storms as they come through.

**Torah Kachur:**

Ben tucks his daughter into bed and calls it a night. He wakes up early the next day to the sound of howling wind.

**Ben Moore:**

And you could kind of tell that something was, you know, a bigger magnitude than what we thought.

**Torah Kachur:**

Friends of his who live up on Elk Mountain start sharing photos online.

**Ben Moore:**

So they were sharing pictures that already looked like complete and total destruction, wind related destruction. And that was, you know, call it eight, nine in the morning.

**Torah Kachur:**

An hour later the power goes out and his internet connection disappears.

**Ben Moore:**

It was pretty clear that I wasn't gonna be able to get on my conference calls and do my work for the day. So we spent the morning just kinda hanging out in the living room and drinking coffee.

**Torah Kachur:**

From his living room, Ben looks out over his front yard through a giant bay window.

**Ben Moore:**

And the first tree that we lost was probably a 36-inch diameter elm tree. And it laid right down my driveway.

**Torah Kachur:**

Minutes later, a 90-year-old Norway Spruce, even bigger than the elm, topples to the ground. By mid-afternoon, the storm has passed, and Ben gets to work clearing the downed trees. Using a chainsaw, he clears his own driveway and then starts



helping his neighbors. What Ben and his neighbors are dealing with is just a minor inconvenience compared to what is happening lower in the valley: The French Broad River has flooded over its banks and the entire city center of Asheville is underwater. The streets are running like rivers and residents are stranded on rooftops. Thousands of people have lost their homes, and across the region more than 100 people have died. Ben starts to wonder about his friends up on Elk Mountain — the ones he was messaging before the power went out. Are they trapped? Are they hurt? So, he decides to go find them.

**Ben Moore:**

The main goal was like just to make first contact and say, “Are you guys okay? Do you have enough food? Do you have enough water?”

**Torah Kachur:**

There are multiple routes up to the ridge where his friends live, but all of them are blocked.

**Ben Moore:**

There’s trees everywhere here and it’s woodsy. It’s mountainous, and they’re all giant old-growth trees for the most part that fell. There was two spots at least where there must have been 20 of these like three-foot diameter trees dropped just right on top of each other like pickup sticks.

**Torah Kachur:**

He drives as far as he can, then leaves his truck and starts walking.

**Ben Moore:** I think it was around three o’clock, maybe even a little closer to four. And the sun at that point is setting somewhere around six.

**Torah Kachur:**

He hikes uphill for an hour and a half — a two-mile walk that normally would have taken less than half that. His friends are, as he expected, oblivious to the flooding in the city — but very aware of the destruction on the mountain.

**Ben Moore:**

They were looking out over absolute decimation, right? Imagine a forest, right? If God took his hand and just pushed that forest down or snapped it off. The entire side of a mountain from the bottom to the top just completely laid flat.

**Torah Kachur:**

Ben tells them how bad things are down in the valley and makes it clear that all the resources are focused on saving the city, so there’s no help coming anytime soon. Having made sure they’re okay, and mindful of the coming darkness, Ben begins his descent.

**Ben Moore:**

I started walking back the direction I came, and looked down, off the road to my left.



I saw a girl standing in a driveway. I said, "Are you okay?"

**Kayla Henry:**

So we all ran outside

**Ben Moore:**

Three or four girls came up to the top of the driveway. I think they were even wearing socks, right? Like just ran out of the house.

**Kayla Henry:**

And he was up at the top of the driveway and told us that we would be biblically and then f-word if we did not hike down the mountain ourselves.

**Ben Moore:**

I basically said, you know, hey things aren't gonna get better here.

**Kayla Henry:**

He said that we were going to be trapped there for a very long time, most likely. It was gonna take a lot of manpower to get all those trees down. And he gave us instructions and directions on how to get down the mountain.

**Torah Kachur:**

Ben's instructions are urgent, specific, and full of crucial details.

**Kayla Henry:**

He gave us like full-blown directions on how to get down, where to turn, all of that, as we're like typing it in our notes apps on our phone.

**Torah Kachur:**

He describes the route they need to take to get out. Not the winding road they had driven up two nights ago — the shorter, more direct route he had just hiked up.

**Ben Moore:**

And I told them to not bring any luggage with them because there's some points that it was a tight enough squeeze that you probably wouldn't wanna be passing, you know a checked-bag-sized bag with you.

**Torah Kachur:**

And with that, Ben turns and leaves. Anxious to get down to his truck in the fading daylight. That five-minute conversation: Those directions and instructions. Is the trigger they need to plan their escape.

**Kayla Henry:**

And I mean, we didn't know this man at all, but we took everything he said as like the Bible because we were so ready to get out of there. And again, it seems so silly because it had only been 48 hours, but it felt like a whole lifetime. And just to be lacking food, at that point we were really hungry. We basically had nothing. So



anything he said, I was like, I'm just gonna do it.

**Torah Kachur:**

The next morning, at 8 a.m., all 11 of them start hiking.

**Kayla Henry:**

The morale was higher than it had been the previous day. I think we were all just so ready to get out at that point that we were just ready to go. We were just like all business ready to hike down the mountain.

**Torah Kachur:**

Their morale is high, but their readiness is not. This was supposed to be a bachelorette party, not a wilderness excursion.

**Kayla Henry:**

We packed for picnics and bar nights and things like that. We did not have hiking clothes. We were all basically wearing our pajamas down because we did not have the proper attire to be hiking down a mountain.

**Torah Kachur:**

Most hikes in the forest involve walking between the trees. But this forest was lying on its side.

**Kayla Henry:**

It was horrible. It was over and under trees. Just every step you took, it was just trees the entire way for hours of hiking. So you're going over and under all different sizes of trees through like thick brush.

**Torah Kachur:**

Kayla's shoes are soaked and slipping. And her legs are numb from exertion.

**Kayla Henry:**

We were falling all over the place. Like it was so slippery. Our legs kept getting stuck in trees. We were all so tired and malnourished and just hungry and thirsty.

**Torah Kachur:**

Along the way they keep checking the notes they made — mindful of every detail of Ben's directions. After two hours, they stop to eat the last of the snack bars and drain the water bottles they've brought from the house. Looking around her, Kayla is overcome with the realization of how fortunate they actually are.

**Kayla Henry:**

I felt awful for the people that this wasn't their vacation, it's their home so I couldn't even imagine, like, not having another city to escape to because you have your house here, your pets here, loved ones here, kids here, and not everyone could make that hike down the mountain because of that.



**Torah Kachur:**

Finally, after three and a half hours of hiking, they come across a group of volunteers with chain saws cutting fallen trees and clearing the road. One of them is a retired firefighter.

**Kayla Henry:**

We all piled in the back of his pickup truck, all 11 girls, and he brought us to a town called Weaverville that was probably about 20 minutes away. That ride is when we realized a lot of devastation and cars were flipped off into little big banks of water that had collected rainwater. Houses were looking destroyed. It was really bad. Everything was like complete muddy disaster.

**Torah Kachur:**

They get dropped off in the parking lot of a hardware store — huge lines of people looking for chainsaws, generators, anything to help them recover.

**Kayla Henry:**

Immediately what I noticed was everyone was just so nice. They were like, we have water bottles in our car. I have snacks. Someone bought us a ton of food in there and gave it to us in the parking lot. I mean, knowing that these people live here and are also in a situation themselves that they can't escape from, and were just bachelorette girls on a trip and trying to get home, I mean, it was incredible.

**Torah Kachur:**

Kayla and her friends make their way to the airport in Charlotte, three hours away. From there they get flights home to Boston. They are battered and bruised. Breaking out in rashes from poison ivy. One of them spends three days in hospital dealing with a reaction to bee stings she got during their descent. But they're home.

**Kayla Henry:**

My fiancé did pick me and my sister-in-law, Jess, up from the airport and just seeing him and being home was the best feeling. But also, I definitely did feel a lot of guilt for being able to just up and leave that when a lot of people didn't have that opportunity.

**Ben Moore:**

There's no way to overstate the devastation that those towns went through. People who, you know, they were living in trailer parks that were close to the river, the last time that somebody saw them, they were on the roof of their house, you know, they were just gone.

**Torah Kachur:**

Ben continued working to help people around him. Cutting trees, delivering groceries, whatever was needed. About a week later, a friend forwarded him an article from a Boston newspaper talking about a group of bachelorettes saved by the kindness of some mysterious man.



**Ben Moore:**

And they were laughing because they said, surely this is you. But the thing that struck me about them after everybody got off the mountain was their first interest was not to be selfish, right? They didn't go to the spa and hang out like I would. They actually turned around and started fundraising.

**Kayla Henry:**

We were getting a lot of media attention as well when we got home. And I didn't feel that it was completely right. Because when you're looking at it, I mean, I know when I was in the situation, it was absolutely horrible, but I mean, at the end of the day, we survived and only had to deal with that for three days. And these people are gonna have to deal with it for the foreseeable future. I mean, completely rebuilding their homes, their lives, everything. So I think that really sparked us to develop a plan on what we could do to help them.

**Torah Kachur:**

Kayla and her friends raised \$15,000 dollars.

**Ben Moore:**

And they ended up giving it to a local charity. So, the fact that they took a harrowing experience and turned it into something that benefited the people who were also impacted, that was just really amazing.

**Torah Kachur:**

Hurricane season used to be something only of concern to sailors and people who live in low lying coastal communities. But in the past 20 years we've seen their frequency and intensity increase. We've also seen hurricanes hit areas not traditionally thought to be at risk. Hurricane Helene, in September of 2024 — the one that flooded Asheville — was the deadliest storm to strike the mainland U.S. since Katrina hit New Orleans, 20 years before. Johnny Jet is a travel advisor and influencer. He's been to over 100 countries and if something can go wrong on a trip, he's probably seen it. Have you ever had a stranger help you in a pinch when you're traveling?

**Johnny Jet:**

My God. Many times. I mean, many times.

**Torah Kachur:**

What's most memorable one?

**Johnny Jet:**

The one that just popped up to my head was I was in Japan, first time to Japan. I was taking the train to the airport and I'm running late as usual. And all of sudden we made a stop and this lady who didn't you know, she didn't speak any English and I didn't speak any Japanese. She's telling me to get off the train because she saw my bags. Anyway, she basically got me off the train and told me to go to this other train because the train split in half and the car that I was in was going to the wrong direction. And if she did not save me, I was done because there was a typhoon



coming and I was like one of the last flights out and I'm just so thankful to her till this day, I mean, and this is 20 something years ago.

**Torah Kachur:**

We often hear about travel advisories, travel warnings. What do they actually mean?

**Johnny Jet:**

Sure, so well, travel advisories are official recommendations issued by governments or international organizations to inform citizens about safety risks when they're traveling. So for the U.S., Level 1 means exercise normal precautions. Level 2 is exercise increased caution. Then Level 3, which is reconsider travel. That means there's significant safety or security concerns. And, also, there could be ongoing conflicts. There could be a serious health outbreak. There could be a natural disaster. So you should consider postponing your trip or at least thoroughly assess your risk before going. But if you're traveling internationally, I would sign up to the STEP program if you're American, and that will tell the government where you're going. And that way, if something does hit the wall, they know where to find you. And then Level 4, which is the last level: Do not travel. This means, you know, the situation is very dangerous. And if you do go, no one's going to come help you.

**Torah Kachur:**

When should you be concerned, maybe actually consider changing your travel plans?

**Johnny Jet:**

Always monitor the news and the weather when you're traveling in advance. And if they say there's a big storm coming, you know, do you really want to be in that destination, especially a foreign destination, if there's a major storm coming? So, I would, I would monitor it, download certain apps. There's a lot of great ones. My favorite one for domestic travel is Max Tracker. It's what almost every Floridian uses for hurricane season. I think it's by a meteorologist in Florida, but I mean, that will tell you in advance. I was one time in Barbados at a conference and I looked at that app and I was like, oh, there is a storm brewing. And again, we got out of there.

**Torah Kachur:**

Let's say you find a great deal on a trip, a cruise or some all-inclusive and it's during hurricane season. Should you avoid it?

**Johnny Jet:**

I mean, it all depends on where you're going. So if you go down to like the ABC, you know, Aruba, Bonaire and Curacao, they're out of the, the, hurricane belt and they usually have all kinds of, like assurances. So if there is a hurricane, they will refund you and all, and even the other places that are in hurricane zones, including Bermuda. If you book a hotel and a hurricane is coming, they will refund you or you can postpone it for another time and always get travel insurance. And make sure you buy your insurance when you book your trip, because you can't buy your insurance after a storm is named.

**Torah Kachur:**



What are you looking for in insurance packages in terms of what are the options that you'd want to have?

**Johnny Jet:**

Buy it from a third party. So if you're going on a cruise, don't buy it through the cruise company, because if the cruise company goes out of business, you're not going and you buy your insurance through them, you're not going to get covered. So always get it from a third party and you need to find out what's covered and what's not, because every policy is pretty much different. I mean, there are most, most coverage does not cover like scuba diving or skydiving. And people might think it does. And then, you know, something happens, you're not going to be.

**Torah Kachur:**

How do you prepare for a trip that may have delays or cancellations?

**Johnny Jet:**

You know what? Again, I sign up to all the airline alerts. And also if you have a trip booked on an airline, they usually let you know. If not, I mean, sign up to newsletters. I have a daily travel tip and I, in my newsletter, I say what travel waivers are being offered. And that way, you know in advance, and I tell people, listen, if you don't want to deal with rolling delays or possible cancellations, change your ticket in advance. That way, if a big storm does come like they think it is, and they're usually right you don't have to scramble or stay on the phone for hours. I mean, sometimes it's eight hours and then try and get a seat on the next flight out because you know what? Chances are they're going to be full. But if you do it in advance you're going to be on that plane when other people got to wait days. So, I always say, listen, if there's if there's a big travel waiver or storm coming, I will take advantage of those travel waivers and act early and that way it will make our travel so much smoother and more enjoyable and safer.

**Torah Kachur:**

Johnny, thank you so much for joining us.

**Johnny Jet:**

Thank you for having me. I truly believe it, as corny as it sounds, the more people travel internationally, the less prejudices there will be in the world and, and fear. So, you know, people are people all over the world.

Most people are good and they just want, you know, they want a better life for their kids and they want to be happy and healthy.

**Torah Kachur:**

That's it for this episode of *Tell Me What Happened*, true stories of people helping people. I hope today you find a stranger out there that you can help, or maybe, one who will help you. On behalf of OnStar, I'm Torah Kachur. Please be safe out there.