

~ The Rescue ~

by Kim Baldwin

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Dedicated to the Queen of the Double Standard

Disclaimer: This is a little different than my other stuff. A big more angst than usual. Fair warning.

My friends say I'm fearless. It's far from the truth, but I guess I do tend to live on the edge a bit more than most. I've been hang gliding in North Carolina, whitewater rafting in West Virginia, spelunking in a Kentucky cave. Even dog sledding above the Arctic Circle. Bungee jumping is on my list too, and I'll eventually try jumping out of an airplane. *Live your dreams*-that's my motto.

But I've never rushed headlong into anything. Safety first, and all that. No foolish risks.

Not until today.

All things considered, this early September trip had been rather mild in comparison to some of my other adventures. Ten days of solo paddling off Nova Scotia, Canada, hop scotching between tiny offshore islands at a leisurely pace, my sea kayak loaded with all the comforts of home. Tent and sleeping bag, Thermarest chair, a few good books, great meals, even a couple of nice bottles of Merlot.

Life was great for the first eight days. Blue skies, mild temperatures, the sea mirror-calm until late afternoon, by which time I'd be setting up camp for the night. I'd see an occasional fishing boat in the distance, but no other signs of civilization. It was still pristine wilderness along this stretch of coastline, and I've felt at home in the woods all my life.

But everything was a little too great. I got complacent. I lingered longer than I should have at one particularly scenic campsite, enjoying the antics of a colony of seals and feasting on the residents of a convenient clam bed just offshore. I got a little behind the schedule I had set. *No matter*, I told myself, *I'll just push a little harder the last couple of days and I'll be fine.*

I woke up sometime before dawn on the ninth day to a howling wind that shook the tent with a ferocity that set my teeth on edge. Afraid the nylon would shred to tatters at any moment, I stuffed loose odds and ends into my dry bags lest they be lost to the gale. It was only my body weight that kept the tent itself from blowing away like some giant Macy's balloon; the stakes had pulled out of the sand even before I'd awakened.

The wind heralded an approaching storm front that dumped sheets of rain onto my tiny island. It rained solid and steady for the next 20 hours, forming rivers under and around the tent.

And most disturbing of all, there was no letup in the wind. I marveled that the tent remained intact. There was no sleeping.

With every hour that passed, my anxiety grew. I had another 20 miles to go to reach the port of Yarmouth, my takeout point, where I'd return my kayak to the outfitter I'd rented it from and catch the ferry back to Boston. The distance could be done in one day if conditions were perfect. But I knew I'd be going against the tide part of the way. And if the wind kept up, I could really be screwed.

If I missed the ferry, I'd have to wait three days for the next one. The article I'd written about the trip for *WomenSport Magazine* would not make its deadline, and I'd be hurting to pay my bills for the next couple of months.

Unthinkable.

Sometime after midnight on the tenth day the rain finally stopped and the wind let up enough for me to be cautiously optimistic.

I threw my gear together and got underway at first light. The waves were a little higher than I was really comfortable with; I could see whitecaps out beyond the protected cove I was in. But the tide would be with me for now, so I pushed off with a grim resolve.

I began to reconsider the wisdom of my decision almost immediately. The waves that looked only moderately disturbing from a distance were truly frightening up close.

I approached the waves at about a 30-degree angle, surfing a bit on each one as it came up beneath me, bracing for the slight loss of control as the crest carried me along. Then again as the kayak fell away in the trough of the wave.

There was no room for error. I took long, deep pulls with my paddle, stopping to brace now and then when an errant wave would break the pattern and unnerve my fragile sense of control.

I ran on pure adrenalin for a good long while. But I was exhausted both mentally and physically before I'd even hit the halfway mark to Yarmouth.

I didn't allow myself to quit. I was paralleling a string of small islands, close enough together that I was certain I could make one if I got into trouble.

It was still possible to make the ferry, I told myself. Possible. *But it'll be close, very close.*

The islands protected me from the worst of the wind, but I could tell it was picking up. Every time I got between the islands, I got the full force of it across the open water, and it was becoming increasingly difficult to maintain control through those gaps.

Still eight miles or so from my destination, I came around the point of one island and my stomach dropped at the sight of the churning waves ahead, in the broad stretch of water until the

next spit of land.

I should have headed ashore there and then gone no further. But I wasn't thinking entirely clearly in my fatigue. I pushed myself past common sense.

I never saw the wave that took me.

It upended me so fast and so powerfully the paddle was wrenched from my grasp. I knew I'd never be able to Eskimo roll and right myself again without it. So I grabbed the loop on my spray skirt and popped it free of the cockpit and slid out of the boat, grabbing for the front deck line as I hit the surface and sucked in air. For a moment, I was lost, the waves so high around me I couldn't immediately see beyond them.

When I finally glimpsed the nearest island, I was horrified to see it getting further and further away by the second, as the wind carried the boat toward the churning water ahead.

I knew I had to stay with the kayak. But overturned and filled with water, it had transformed from a sleek and agile vessel into an unwieldy barge. I had no chance at the island behind me, but the wind might just take me close enough to the next one that I could make it to shore. I had a spare take-apart paddle lashed to the rear deck, under my gear.

I wasn't at all confident I'd make it. I was warm enough in my neoprene wetsuit and my PFD was keeping my head above water, but my arms and legs already felt like lead, and I wasn't sure how much longer they'd obey my determination to proceed.

I gripped the forward toggle of the kayak and kicked hard toward the distant island, trying to establish a rhythm and maintain forward progress, however miniscule. I had to switch hands frequently to ease the incessant painful cramping of the muscles in my arms and shoulders, and each time I did, I seemed to slip backward just a little.

My heart was racing, and I had swallowed so much water I felt slightly nauseous as I was tossed about between the swells.

A rogue wave lifted me up and I got my first good look at the island I was nearing. The coastline I was heading for was a cauldron of foam and spray, where the breakers crashed against a solid rock wall, 30 feet high.

Further down, the shore was only slightly more hospitable. I could see a tiny spit of rocky beach where I might land. But to get there, I'd have to pull the boat through a crowded maze of rocks and boulders jutting up from the chaos of angry surf.

The closer I got, the bigger the rocks grew, and so did the roar of the breakers, a pounding symphony of white noise, loud in my ears, disorienting.

The boat was thrashed about in the chop. I struggled to keep hold of the toggle until my arm burned, but a monstrous breaker crashed down on top of me and hit me like a wall, a numbing

blow that tore the kayak from my hand and swept me away from it with astonishing speed.

As I clawed my way back toward it, I watched in horrified fascination as the boat rode the crest of a wave toward a van-sized boulder and smashed to pieces. My dry bags popped to the surface like corks and bobbed away out of reach, disappearing behind the next big wave.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

There was nothing left to do but get myself in without suffering the same fate as the kayak, and I put the last of my strength into it, collapsing in the shallows and vomiting up some of the sea water I had swallowed.

When I regained my equilibrium, I stumbled up onto the narrow beach and studied my surroundings. Five feet inland, the rocky terrain rose sharply upward 30 feet or so and leveled out at the edge of a dense forest. It was one of the bigger islands in the chain; probably 30 acres or so, I guessed.

I took off my spray skirt and PFD. Clipped to the front pocket of the life jacket was a whistle and a small night strobe. I reached inside the back pocket for a small dry bag I had packed that morning and inventoried the contents. Waterproof matches, 3 pocket flares, a nearly paper thin survival blanket, 3 power bars, a mirror, a Swiss Army Knife, a few fish hooks and line, a small flashlight and a First Aid Kit.

I'd filed a float plan with the outfitter I'd rented the kayak from, and they'd send someone looking for me, I knew. But probably not until I was a few days overdue. That seemed to be my only hope. The fishing boats I'd seen seemed to be operating too far out to sea for me to signal them.

I'd been relatively warm in the water, but the wind was raising goose bumps on my exposed skin, and the thought of a fire was enough to get me moving again. I slipped my PFD back on, threw my spray skirt over my shoulder and trudged up the rocky slope, slipping and sliding, mechanically putting one foot forward, then the other, ignoring the dull ache in the backs of my legs. I could feel the sharp edges of the rocks through the thin soles of my river shoes, but I plodded on until I reached the trees at the top of the hill.

I paused on the edge and sat to catch my breath. I could see further down the coastline from where I'd landed-it was another long stretch of sheer cliffs and high breaking waves.

I went into the forest, breaking off dead limbs and gathering them into a bundle beneath one arm, searching for a good spot to make camp for the night. I was happy to have the supplies that I did, but I kicked myself for not sticking a bottle of water in my vest. I was even angrier at myself that I'd not had on my paddle leash when I'd started out that morning.

If I'd not lost my paddle, I'd likely not be in this mess. Nor would I be if I'd followed my gut this morning and stayed put. But here I was, and I had about three hours of daylight left. The wind was really huffing through the treetops now, and dark clouds were moving in from the east. It smelled like it was going to rain again, and I didn't look forward to the prospect of getting caught

in another deluge without a tent.

I found a small clearing where I could safely build a fire, and set my pile of wood down. I considered making a lean-to of pine boughs, but decided to use the available daylight to continue searching for some sort of ready-made shelter; an overhang of rock, a dense conifer, a large overturned tree. Something that would take a little less work.

I walked on through the forest, stopping abruptly after only a minute or two when I heard something in the distance-- a regular, rhythmic pounding, like someone chopping a tree or setting a fence post. Could be a woodpecker, I reasoned. But it sounded more man-made to me. Too loud, too regular.

I hurried toward the noise, my heart pounding in my chest and my fatigue momentarily forgotten. Was it possible someone else was camping here?

The noise ceased as suddenly as it began. I kept on toward the spot where last I'd heard it, and in no time spotted a structure of some sort through the trees.

It was a cabin. A small log cabin, completely surrounded by a high, wrought iron fence. I felt like Alice stepping into Wonderland, it was so unexpected.

There was no one about, but there was a thin trail of smoke coming from the chimney.

I approached the fence and followed it around until I reached the gate on the opposite side. I tried it. It was locked.

Like the fence itself, the gate was seven feet high, and made of heavy iron bars close enough together to prevent human entry. And there was no going over the top. Each bar had a sharply pointed tip that struck me as being intended more as an impenetrable barrier than a decorative embellishment.

There was no bell or knocker.

"Hello?" I called out. "Is anyone there?"

I studied the cabin. It was a charming little place, with a fieldstone chimney and screened-in porch. Several small bird feeders were hung off the porch eaves, and two large feeders on poles were set before the massive picture window that dominated one side. There were birds everywhere; flitting between the feeders and sitting on the fence, singing from the trees that surrounded the cabin on all sides.

A small satellite dish was attached to one corner of the house, and I could see several solar panels lined up side by side along the roof.

"Hello?" I tried again. Then louder. "Hello? Is someone home?" Nothing. "Please! I need help!"

I saw movement out of the corner of my eye, and followed it. A small window in the front. Didn't that curtain just move? I wasn't certain.

"Please!" I hollered. "I've had an accident and lost my boat!"

Still nothing. Apparently my serendipitous discovery of the place was not the godsend I'd hoped it would be. I was fairly certain someone was in there watching me, but unwilling to answer or help.

Thunder boomed in the distance. *Great.*

I wasn't ready to concede defeat quite yet. I was going to be pretty wet and miserable tonight without some help.

"Please! I know someone's there!" I shouted. "I've lost all my gear, and I have no water or food!" Okay, I did have three power bars, so that was a bit of a white lie. But I thought my chances of getting help might be better if the cabin's occupant knew how desperate I was.

Still no answer. I glanced at the chimney. The smoke trail was gone. The fire in the fireplace had been extinguished.

I felt a fat raindrop hit my face. Then another. *Peachy. Just peachy.*

I glared at the house, getting angrier by the minute at the occupant's refusal to acknowledge me.

"I'm not going anywhere!" I yelled in frustration. "I need help!"

This might be foolish, I admitted to myself, as the raindrops began to splatter around me. The cabin's owner might be a real creep, and I was pretty defenseless. But it sure looked like whoever was inside was more afraid of me than I was of them.

Finally I heard a sound- the little window where I thought I'd seen movement earlier slid open. "Go Away!" shouted a voice from within; female, though I could see no one. "You're trespassing on private property!"

"I need help!" I hollered back. "Please! I wrecked my kayak, and lost everything. I'm stranded here!"

There was a long silence before the woman answered me. "Who are you with? How many of you are out there?"

"There's just me!" I shouted back, irritated at the woman's refusal to help. It was raining in earnest now, and I was getting miserably cold again. "Please! I won't hurt you! I just need help!"

There was another brief silence as the woman seemed to consider my words. "I don't let anyone into my home," she answered finally.

I tried to keep my exasperation out of my voice. *What is her problem?* "Look, I'm not dangerous, and I'm not a thief or anything. I have no other options."

This time the silence seemed excruciatingly long. I stood there shivering for at least five minutes until finally the front door opened and the cabin's owner emerged, her face partially hidden by the hood of her raincoat.

She was about my age, I guessed-probably early to mid forties. She was dressed in a faded flannel shirt and blue jeans, and wore rubber boots that came up to her knees and seemed too big for her. She eyed me warily as she approached the gate. At 5'10", I towered over her by several inches.

"I appreciate this," I said, forcing a smile on my face, trying to reassure her of my benign intentions.

She looked scared to death of me. Her eyes were wide, her breathing rapid. Her hand shook as she reached for the latch to unlock the barrier between us.

It took her several seconds to gather the courage to actually throw the bolt and let me in.

She stepped back as I came through the opening, putting distance between us.

I offered my hand. "I'm Karen Carlson," I said by way of introduction, but the woman turned on her heels without a word and headed back toward the house without shaking my hand.

I followed her.

She paused briefly at the door, as if once more rethinking the wisdom of letting me in. Turning to face me but averting her eyes, she said, "Please don't touch anything," in a quiet voice before finally granting me refuge from the rain.

I left my spray skirt and PFD on the stoop and stepped inside, dripping onto a large mat. I surveyed the room. It was a cozy retreat, with a kitchen in one corner and a small desk with a computer on it in another. There were built-in bookshelves everywhere jammed with books, comfortable-looking overstuffed furniture and...*art*, I realized, looking around. *Great art*. There were watercolors on every wall; animals in nature scenes, so realistic they looked almost like photographs. A fawn's head and neck emerging from tall grass, a raccoon baby clinging to a tree. And here and there about the room were sculptures. More animals, but these were less detailed, more fluid, free-flowing shapes, with poses and expressions that captured the essence of the beast or bird portrayed. An otter, poised on hind legs in comical curiosity. A bear lounging in the sun. Obviously all by the same artist. And quality work.

There were several pieces displayed on tables and in bookcases, but there was no sense of clutter to the room. In fact, it looked obsessively tidy. The kitchen sparkled. The wood floor shone.

I glanced toward the woman, who was watching me from a few feet away. She had taken off her raincoat, to reveal short black hair that looked as though she cut it herself. She was not unattractive, but she apparently didn't care much about her appearance, if her hair was any indication.

"You have a lovely home," I said, forcing myself not to stare. "I'm sorry to intrude on you this way." I was shivering with the cold, and wished the fire was still burning in the fireplace. "And I'm sorry to be dripping water all over your mat, Miss...Mrs...?" I added, hoping she would volunteer her name.

"I'll get you a towel," the woman said, ignoring my prompt. She started toward one of three doors leading off the room we were in, but paused after only a couple of steps. "Stay there, please," she added, before disappearing into the bathroom and returning with a large fluffy towel. She got only close enough to me to hand it over at arm's length, and once she did, she retreated a few steps.

"Thank you," I said, and immediately set about drying myself off.

"Where are the people you were with?" the woman asked, narrowing her eyes.

"I wasn't with anyone," I repeated. "I was paddling by myself, and overturned. My kayak broke up on one of the rocks on the other side of the island as I tried to bring it ashore."

"You were out here all *alone*?" she asked, in a voice that suggested she didn't believe me for a minute.

"Yes, I'm on vacation. I've been camping out on the islands for the last week or so."

"The weather was too rough today to be out in a boat," the woman declared, as though that made me a liar.

"Well apparently you're right or I wouldn't be here," I conceded, trying not to show my irritation. "I was supposed to be back in Yarmouth by tonight to catch the ferry, so I was probably a little more foolhardy than I should have been."

The admission seemed to convince her, finally, that I was telling the truth.

"I don't have a telephone," the woman said. "And I'm having problems with my computer and can't get online, so I don't have a way for you to contact anyone."

My face fell at the news.

"The boat that brings my groceries is supposed to be here on Wednesday. You can leave with them," she supplied, looking not at all happy herself, at the prospect of putting me up for the next four days.

"The people that I rented the kayak from may send someone out to look for me before that," I offered. "But probably not for a day or two, at least."

I heard her sigh. "Then you'll be staying here," she said, as if to herself. She glanced around, looking at her things, biting her lip. I wondered what she was thinking.

"I don't like strangers in my home," she admitted. "I don't have anywhere to put someone up for the night."

"I'm sorry to impose," I apologized again. I was a bit surprised by her candor. "I'm fine on the couch, if that's all right with you."

She sighed again, and nodded her head in reluctant agreement.

"Look, I hate to ask," I began, as I wrapped the towel around my shoulders. "But I lost all my clothes. All I have on under this," I gestured at my wetsuit, "is a bathing suit. Do you have some warmer clothes I can borrow until I'm picked up?"

Her eyes got wide, as if my request was completely out of the question. She opened her mouth to object; I could see it in her eyes. But she took a deep breath and shut it again, and seemed to reconsider.

"I'll see what I have," she said. She went into her bedroom and shut the door behind her.

You're an odd one, I thought, trying to put myself in the shoes of my rather paranoid and antisocial hostess. You live way out here, all alone. Cut off from the world, in a spit-and-polish house. What happened to you to make you this way?

She returned a couple of minutes later with a flannel shirt, sweatpants, and a pair of white athletic socks. "You can change in the bathroom," she said, nodding her head in that direction.

She seemed nervous and fidgety as she waited for me to move from the spot on the mat where I'd been glued since I first arrived.

It was clear she didn't want me here. I made her extremely uncomfortable; an experience I hadn't really had before. I was determined to put her more at ease, since I'd be imposing on her for at least a little while.

"Will you tell me your name?" I asked. I knew that her reluctance to offer it earlier had not been a mere oversight.

She chewed on her lip again and looked at me. "Jennifer," she said, after a long moment.

"Pleased to meet you, Jennifer," I said. "I'll be happy to reimburse you for the inconvenience," I offered. "But I lost my wallet, so I'm afraid I'll have to mail it to you."

She shook her head. "That's not necessary," she said. "Why don't you go ahead and change."

I nodded and took off my river shoes to leave them by the door, trekking across the cool wooden floor in my bare feet. The bathroom was as tidy as the outer room; the chrome shiny, the mirror above the sink devoid of smudges.

I started undressing, glancing about the room as I stripped off my wetsuit. The bathtub looked as if it had never been used. The towels on the shelves over the commode were neatly folded and lined up perfectly with each other.

Nothing at all like my place.

I hung my wet things on the shower nozzle.

My eyes were drawn to the one oddity in the room. A damp kitchen towel had been draped over a small object that sat on the counter by the sink.

I resisted the urge to peek. At least for a couple of minutes. I pulled on the flannel shirt. It was a tight fit. The sweatpants were far too short for me; they ended at mid-calf and made the white socks look ridiculous, but I was warm again, and dry, so I had no complaints.

I nearly made it out of there without looking under the towel. But my curiosity got the best of me. I'd suspected that my hostess had created the sculptures I'd seen, and my suspicions were confirmed when I lifted the towel. Beneath it was a work in progress, a rabbit in mid leap. It was exquisite.

But the artist obviously didn't want to volunteer that information, so I decided not to mention it for the moment.

When I returned to the main room, I found Jennifer puttering about in the kitchen. She turned when she heard me.

"I was going to make coffee. Do you want some?" she asked.

"That would be very nice. Thanks," I responded. I remembered her request not to touch anything. It made me reluctant to just make myself at home, though I'd obviously be here a while. "Mind if I sit?" I asked.

"No," she said. "Where ever you like," she added, though she gestured toward the couch so that's where I planted myself. Now that I was warm and dry again, and had a comfortable place to relax, the exertions of the day and the long stretch without sleep combined to make me almost instantly drowsy. I yawned as Jennifer handed me a mug of black coffee and retreated with her own to an easy chair a few feet away.

We sipped the coffee in silence, neither making an effort at small talk. I yawned again. "I'm sorry," I apologized as I covered my mouth with my hand. "I didn't get a lot of sleep last night

with the storm."

"Do you do this a lot?" Jennifer asked. "Travel alone, I mean."

I nodded my head. "I write articles for magazines about the trips I take; five or six a year, at least."

She sipped her coffee and looked at me curiously. "Are they always kayak trips?" she asked.

"No," I said. "But they pretty much all fall under the category of outdoor adventure vacations-dog sledding, rafting, horseback riding, stuff like that."

"Aren't you ever afraid?"

"Afraid?" I repeated. "You mean afraid of having an accident?"

She nodded. "That, and just afraid of what might happen if you're all alone. You might meet up with someone who wants to hurt you."

The odd comment made me wonder again what kind of history this woman had, to make her so fearful. I shook my head. "I'm usually more careful than I've been on this trip. I've never been injured. And I've had really good experiences with people when I'm on the road," I said. "I've found that most folks are happy to lend a hand if I need one." I couldn't stop a small grin. "Though I'm not usually asking them to put me up, lend me their clothes, and feed me."

Jennifer smiled for the first time since I arrived. "I couldn't do what you do," she said, shaking her head.

"Do what?" I asked. "Travel alone?"

"Any of it," she admitted. "Too dangerous. And I couldn't ask strangers for help. I just couldn't."

"Not the gregarious type?" I inquired, stifling another yawn. The caffeine was not doing its job.

She shook her head and smiled again. I could tell she was finally beginning to relax a little. "Not so much," she replied.

I tried not to chuckle at the obvious understatement. "I really am harmless," I said.

"I'm sorry if I seemed rude earlier," Jennifer said. "I'm not much for company. I kind of have a 'thing' about my privacy."

"No need to apologize," I responded. "A stranger barges in out of nowhere, and you have to open up your home to them. I can see where it's not on the top of your list of favorite ways to spend a Sunday afternoon."

"Sunday night," she corrected, and I realized she was right. It was fully dark outside now, and the clock on the wall read 8:02. The ferry would be pulling out of Yarmouth without me right about now. But it made no difference any more. My magazine article and camera with accompanying pictures were floating around in a dry bag somewhere.

I didn't want to think about that at the moment.

"Would you like something to eat?" Jennifer offered. "I could make you a sandwich or bowl of soup."

"No thanks, I'm fine," I lied, though in fact I *was* pretty hungry. I just felt as though I'd been enough of an imposition for one day. I was less successful at hiding how tired I was. "I'm sorry," I apologized again when another big yawn overtook me.

That's about the last thing I remember.

I woke up during the night desperately needing to pee, and found myself stretched out on the couch, a down pillow beneath my head and a flannel blanket covering me.

The illuminated clock on the microwave told me it was 2:43, so I was surprised to see light leaking out from around the closed door to Jennifer's bedroom. But I didn't hear any sound from within. *Maybe she sleeps with the light on?*

I did my business in the bathroom and winced at how loud the flush sounded in my ears. The bedroom was just on the other side of the wall and if Jennifer wasn't awake before, she probably was now.

I paused in the doorway, listening.

I heard a *CLICK*, then the sound of a television. The theme to "The Big Valley", barely audible.

I crept back to the couch, wanting to apologize for waking her, but sensing she'd probably rather I not. I fell back asleep almost at once.

I woke up the next morning to the sound of tapping-fingers on a keyboard, unmistakable. I stretched and pushed myself up on one elbow so I could see over the back of the couch. Jennifer was sitting at her computer, typing with two fingers. Muttering softly under her breath.

Jennifer has a computer. I hadn't really registered that the night before; I'd been so tired. *She'd said she was having trouble with it and couldn't get online.* Maybe I could fix that. Then I could e-mail the magazine and explain things. *Fat chance.* I should go back down to the beach, I decided. Maybe the dry bags washed ashore.

"Would you like me to take a look at that and see if I can get you back online?" I offered. "I'm pretty good with computers."

She looked horrified at the prospect and immediately shook her head. "No. I don't think so."

"Why not?" I asked. "I won't screw it up, I promise."

"NO," she said, too loudly. She realized it too, and a flush began to blossom under her cheeks.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I was just trying to be helpful. Pay back your kindness to me."

I watched Jennifer take a deep breath. She wouldn't look at me. "You're here because I have no choice," she said. "I'm not being kind."

It was an odd thing to say, I thought, and I wasn't sure at first how to respond.

"You unlocked the gate, even though you didn't want to," I said. "I think you wanted to be kind, you were just afraid to be."

She nodded, and looked at me then. "Is there anything you're afraid of?"

"Lots of things," I said.

"Like?"

She was asking the tough questions now. Time for both of us to be facing our demons, apparently.

"Like cancer," I said, not recognizing my own voice. "And Alzheimer's."

She knew she'd hit a nerve. She got up from her chair and came over to sit on the couch. She sat on one end and I sat on the other, but it was still the closest she'd come to me since I'd met her.

"Tell me," she said.

I shook my head, fighting back tears that sprang from nowhere. "Too raw," I croaked.

She nodded, and got up and went to the kitchen. "Coffee?" she asked over her shoulder.

"Please," I answered.

She let me compose myself, pattering around in the kitchen, understanding the distance I needed probably better than anyone had in a long while.

When the coffee finished brewing, she returned to the couch with two cups. "I made some blueberry muffins, they'll be ready in a few minutes."

I thanked her for the coffee, and listened to my grumbling stomach take note of the forthcoming food.

"I want to go back to the beach after breakfast, to see if any of my gear washed up," I said. "I know it's a long shot, but everything was in dry bags."

Jennifer nodded. "There are a couple of places where things tend to wash up a lot. I'll show you."

We sipped our coffee in silence until the timer *pinged*, announcing the muffins were ready. I felt guilty eating four to her two, but she'd made a dozen and I was ravenous.

I changed back into my wetsuit for the trip to the beach, and took along my PFD. Jennifer carried a pair binoculars, and we set off back the way I'd come. I retraced my steps and stood at the top of the hill I'd climbed. No sign of any of my four dry bags; the two yellow ones containing my food and clothes, the red one that had my camera, journal and other possessions, or the blue one that held my sleeping bag and pillow.

We walked down to the beach and took a closer look. Nothing. We climbed back up and Jennifer took me through the forest toward the far end of the island, and down to another rocky beach littered with drift wood and bits of flotsam. Still nothing.

All the while we searched, Jennifer asked me questions. Mostly about where all I'd been, what I'd seen and done. I got the impression she hadn't traveled much, but maybe had wanted to.

She seemed much more relaxed this morning, and certainly chattier. Ever since I'd admitted that I too, was afraid of something. Something that made me a little crazy thinking about it too much. I think she knew the feeling.

"There's one more place we should look," she said, after the third stretch of beach proved fruitless. "It's where the supply boat comes in."

I followed her to another hilly overlook. We spied it at the same time. A bit of yellow floating on the water, a little way from shore. "That's one!" I whooped, as I slipped down the rocky slope in my river shoes toward the beach. I had rather it had been the red one, but I was excited nonetheless at the prospect of recovering at least some of my things. *Clothes. Be clothes*, I chanted to myself.

I waded out and retrieved the bag from water up to my chest. I knew from the feel of it what was inside. "My clothes!" I hollered back toward the beach, where Jennifer was watching me through her binoculars. She waved at me in acknowledgment.

"No sign of any of the other bags?" Jennifer asked when I rejoined her.

I shook my head. "Just this. But at least I have my own clothes again," I said. "Not that I didn't appreciate those fine loaner duds," I hastened to add, which brought a smile to Jennifer's face.

She was smiling more today, and I suddenly realized how much I was liking that smile, bad haircut or not. I'd been stealing glances at her all morning, in fact. There was something about

Jennifer that I found intriguing. Compelling. Sexy? *Oh crap. Where did that come from? When did that happen?*

Jennifer sure wasn't what I was used to. Or used to be used to. It had been a very long time since I'd thought about anyone at all that way, but I'd have said that my tastes ran toward tall blonde extroverts, not petite, dark-haired loners.

She questioned me some more on the way back to the cabin, and I realized how much I'd volunteered, though I knew virtually nothing at all about her. Other than she had a 'thing' about privacy. And neatness. And she apparently was a very gifted artist.

Jennifer excused herself to the bathroom when we got back, and I took the opportunity to study one of the watercolors up close. The signature read "J. Flynn". I would have bet money.

When she finished, I changed into jeans and a sweatshirt, grateful to be in my own clothes again.

"How about a grilled cheese sandwich?" Jennifer asked I emerged.

"That would be great. Can I make them?" I offered.

"No," she answered, once more just a little too sharply. I pretended not to notice. *Doesn't want you touching her computer, doesn't want you in her kitchen.*

"When did you start sculpting?" I asked in my most nonchalant manner from the couch as she started the sandwiches.

She didn't answer for so long I'd decided she wasn't going to.

"My father taught me when I was a kid. He liked to whittle soap."

I knew it was a big step, that admission. "I like the otter the best," I said. "May I hold him?"

"Yes, if you're careful."

The little guy begged to be touched, with his ragged growth of whiskers and soft underbelly. His whimsical expression of playfulness appealed to me. He reminded me of the seals I'd been watching.

"You capture the essence of the animal's nature beautifully," I said. I watched the smile spread across her face at the compliment before setting the otter back on the end table where he'd been.

"Thank you," was all she said.

"What about the watercolors? Have you always painted?" I asked.

The smile faded. "You seem to know a lot about me," Jennifer said, in a way that made it clear

she wasn't very happy about it.

"I guessed," I admitted. "I peeked at the rabbit, and saw the similarities in the subject matter between the paintings and the sculptures."

"Oh," she said.

"I don't mean to pry," I said. "Or make you feel uncomfortable. I just wanted to let you know how much I like your work. I think it's wonderful. Do you sell it?"

She nodded. "On E-Bay."

"I love E-bay," I said. "You sure can get anything there." The online auction site was the perfect sales outlet for someone like Jennifer, I realized. She had the world to sell to, and as long as she had pick up and delivery service, she'd never even have to...

I had to know.

"Jennifer," I said, unable to bite my tongue though I knew I might upset her with my question. "Do you ever leave this island?"

She didn't answer. She didn't look at me. She finished making the sandwiches and carried them over and set one in front of me. This time she sat a little closer to me on the couch.

"Who got cancer?" she countered, taking a bite of her grilled cheese.

I choked on mine, and had to take a sip of water.

I don't know why or how I answered. It was the first time I'd been able to say her name out loud in months.

"Sheri. My wife. My best friend, since we were twelve."

"When did she die?"

"One year, 11 months... and three days ago," I said. "It all happened very quickly."

"And Alzheimer's?" she prodded gently.

I took a deep breath. "My mother."

Jennifer nodded, and waited patiently for me to continue.

"She doesn't know who I am any more. Hasn't in a long time. It's tough," I said, wiping an errant tear from my cheek.

"How old is she?"

Very perceptive, I thought. "63," I said.

"When did she start showing symptoms?"

Bingo. You win the prize. "About ten years ago," I said, trying to keep my voice from cracking. "Her mother was about the same age."

She nodded. "No wonder you're fearless. You know, fear can eat you up inside. I'm so tired of being afraid."

"What happened to you?" I asked.

She shrugged.

It may have been rough on her, but I couldn't just leave it at that. She'd opened up my old wounds, and I was determined to do the same. Not to be malicious. Somehow I knew it was helping me; to face what I'd been running from. I hoped the same might be true of her.

"What happened, Jennifer?"

She shook her head.

I pressed on. "You can trust me."

She looked at me with a hopeful expression. "Can I?" she asked.

I nodded. "I think you know that you can. Don't you?"

Jennifer got up and started to pace. Every now and then she would reach out and touch one of her sculptures as she passed by it, as if for reassurance.

"I got straight A's as a kid," she began. "An only child."

I nodded, having no clue where this was headed.

"I was in plays at school, and took piano. Tap dancing. My parents came to all my plays and recitals."

Such a social butterfly then. What happened? I wondered, but kept silent.

"Then I discovered I was good in art, and entered all sorts of art fairs and things. My parents were both really proud of me. They took me out for ice cream after every performance, every blue ribbon."

I was afraid to say anything for fear she'd stop.

"Then, when I was sixteen, I fell in love with the girl next door."

I stopped breathing.

"My parents listened at my door one night. You know....when we were...."

I nodded, but Jennifer wasn't looking at me. She was staring at a spot on the wall.

"Back then, no one talked about being gay. I was real naïve. I didn't really know there was anything wrong with it. Didn't have any idea my parents would....would...."

"What did they do?" I whispered.

"Nothing right away. They waited until I went to school the next day. Then they searched my room and confiscated everything. Every letter, love note, little piece of jewelry she'd given me. I never saw them again." Jennifer took a deep breath and closed her eyes. "Or her." A tear slid down her cheek. "When I came home, they told me how disturbed and sick I was. How she'd polluted my mind and soul, and how they were going to send me far away so I could ask for God's forgiveness."

My mouth was hanging open. I looked at the forty-something woman sitting in front of me and all I could think of was, *Oh, you poor kid.*

"There were no more recitals. No more plays, or art fairs. They told the nuns at the convent school to search my room every day, to make sure I had broken off all contact with Kathy. When I came home for the holidays, they'd listen in on all my phone calls. Kathy's family had moved away."

I was shaking my head, saddened beyond words at the explanation for Jennifer's 'privacy issues'.

"I left the convent school at eighteen and never saw them again. They passed away a few years later," she said.

I reached over and laid one of my hands on Jennifer's. She didn't flinch or move it.

"I fell in love once more, when I was 35," she offered, pouring out the rest of the story as though anxious to be finished. "We were together for a year. Until the day I came home from work to an empty apartment. I mean, truly and completely empty. Every stick of furniture, all my clothes. All my artwork. All gone. She took every dollar in our checking account and left me to pay the two months back rent we owed because she'd taken that, too."

"How did you get through it?" I asked. I wanted to hurt the woman who'd done that to such a wounded, fragile soul.

"I stayed with a kind co-worker until I could get back on my feet," she said. "But I don't know if I ever got completely through it."

She moved her hand until she was holding mine. "I haven't been off the island in two years," she admitted. "But I feel better than I have in a long while. Talking about it and all."

"I know what you mean," I said. "You're easy to talk to, Jennifer."

"I think I'll take the boat back with you to Yarmouth," she decided. "See how it feels."

"That would be a good thing, I think," I encouraged her.

"I'm really fucked up," she said bluntly, her hand starting to caress mine with slow, tentative touches. "Maybe I should see someone about it."

"Might be worth checking out," I said. "A lot of people find therapy really valuable."

"I never thought I could trust anyone again, Karen," she said. "But I really do believe in my heart that I can trust you-that you'd never do anything to hurt me. Why is that?"

I shrugged. "I don't know, but I feel the same about you, Jennifer. Some special kind of understanding, some kind of connection, that I can't put into words."

She looked at me. "I don't want you to leave. Do you know how weird it is for me to say that? To feel that?"

"I think I can imagine," I answered.

"I want time to get to know you, to see if... to find out whether we..." Jennifer stumbled over the words, but I knew what she was getting at. Her hand gripped mine tighter.

"I have nothing waiting for me back at my place, Jennifer," I said, looking into her eyes. "Nothing that can't wait for a while."

Her eyes grew moist, and she leaned in slightly toward me, lifting her head to kiss me.

It had been such a long time that I'd lost the recollection of how sweet and tender that first kiss can be, when you're falling in love.

It's going to be one of my more risky adventures, this. Opening up my heart again, to someone with no shortage of 'issues' of her own. Bungee jumping might be a lot safer. But when I'm kissing Jennifer, I'm certain this one will be a lot more exciting in the end.

THE END

Thanks for reading. Feedback welcome. E-mail me at: woodsbard@yahoo.com

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