

Washed Away  
By Loretta Eidson

Jenna's arms shook when she pushed herself from the floor and lifted her head. A humid breeze hit her face. Her eyes popped open, and she took in her surroundings. A horrifying scream escaped almost collapsing her lungs and straining the veins in her neck.

Her heart thrashed against her chest, and her knuckles whitened when she gripped the sides of the small boat as it bumped recklessly against each wave. She dared not move. Her soaked body trembled, and nausea loomed. A dam of tears burst over her cheeks like a tsunami, only to be swept away by a drenching salty wave.

How did she get in the middle of the ocean? Her head throbbed. The rough waters would capsize the boat at any moment and thrust her into an underworld of hungry sharks. She didn't want to die, not like this.

"Help. H-e-l-p." Her cries were muffled and swallowed by the ocean like a thirsty sponge. "God, please help me." She dropped her head and sobbed, keeping a firm grip on the sides of the small Jon boat.

Minutes seemed like hours. The waves calmed, and the sun grew higher and hotter.

Jenna forced herself to reach into the back pocket of her jeans and retrieve her cell phone. The low battery message displayed on the fogged, moisture-beaded screen. The phone shut down. "No, don't die, please don't die on me."

She pressed the power button and begged her smartphone to come back on. The screen lit up, but for how long? Wet, shaky fingers typed a quick message to Dale. "Help. In small boat in middle of ocean. No land in sight. Alone. Scared."

The green sending bar slowed at the half-way mark. A red, send failure message displayed, and her phone succumbed to blackness. She held it to her chest and wept. She'd never felt so isolated—and afraid.

Regrets spilled from her lips. "Should've gone home when Dale said he had a late meeting. Why did I walk down to the boat dock alone? Does anyone even know I'm missing?"

Her fingers slid through matted, wet curls. She rubbed her pounding head. *Ouch*. A knot? Did I fall?

Another thump rocked the boat. Jenna let out a yelp, gripped the metal seat, and stiffened. A fin, no, two fins. A whisper slipped through staggered breaths. "Sharks." *Oh, God, please help me.*

Hours passed, and her muscles ached. She dared not move or make a sound for fear the noise would draw them closer. Fins slowly disappeared into the depths of the ocean, but her fear escalated. Would they return and bring more sharks with them?

Sweat rolled down her back, and the sun scorched her bare skin. Her tongue raked across cracking lips, tasting the salty ocean water. She needed a drink, or she'd dehydrate.

Jenna shifted her eyes from the ocean to the floor of the boat. A blue tarp lay in a pile at the opposite end. She loosened her grip and eased off her seat, making sure she didn't rock the boat.

She tugged at the tarp and pulled it back in hopes of finding bottled water or—something. Her nose curled, and she gagged at the foul odor of dead fish. No water and no food, only a few stray fishing hooks laying in the boat's metal crevices.

Weakness from over-exposure to the sun coiled through her body like a slithering snake. Clouds rolled across the darkening sky blocking the sun's rays. Another storm. Her hopes of being rescued diminished.

Jenna laid down again and curled into a fetal position, covering herself with the smelly tarp. Raindrops pelted the plastic while she clung to the tarp and prayed. The boat tossed, and darkness prevailed.

Terror thrust her into a hopeless state. Her stomach knotted while she waited for a wave to scoop her away. She'd never see Dale again, and he'd never know what happened to her. No wedding, no family, no future.

A bell clanged.

Was she delirious or dreaming? She pushed the tarp aside, exposing herself to the wind and rain. A buoy rocked and flashed its red light. Was someone there? Could that faint light in the distance be a lighthouse?

"Hello. Anyone there?" A man's voice yelled from an approaching boat, and a spotlight flashed on her face.

"H-e-l-p. I'm here." She thrust one arm in the air and waved frantically.

The vessel floated closer and bumped her boat. "I'm Roy, the lighthouse keeper. Saw this Jon boat headed for the rocks and thought I'd better check it out? Let's get you to shore."

His tight grip pulled her on board with one jerk. Her knees buckled, and she dropped to the floor. A fountain of tears exploded. "Thank you, thank you for saving my life."

"Now, don't you cry. You're going to be okay." He helped her to a seat. "Your name Jenny?"

"How did you know?"

“Here, bet you ain’t had anything to eat or drink.” He handed her an orange Gatorade.

“Don’t drink too fast or it might make you sick. Coast guard’s been searching for you. Some guy named Dale got a message you’d been washed away in a small boat.”

“Dale is my fiancé. But—that text didn’t go through. My phone died.”

“I don’t know. The Lord must be watchin’ after you. Your disappearance went out over the radio.”

*Thank you, Lord. You heard my prayer.*

“Yeah, someone reported seeing a guy knock you over the head and toss you in a boat. Tide was up, and the undertow was strong. Didn’t take long for it to float away and get lost in these waters.” Roy readjusted his cap and sped toward the shore. “Police have him now, so you don’t have to worry about him anymore. Said his name was Benny Denton.”

Her head felt like a top, spinning fast. Her heart plummeted. “Benny Denton?”

“Yep, you know him?”

Jenna gasped and stared at Roy. “He’s my father.”