

A Short Story

by

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Betrayed

Seagulls squawked somewhere in the distance and beckoned bank manager Jenna Pearson back from unconsciousness. She fought against the overwhelming brightness and opened her eyes. Wispy white clouds moved at a steady pace against the blue sky. Her head lay against something hard and throbbed. A fishy stench dripped from wet fingers and rolled across her cheek. Nausea stirred from the constant rocking.

She bolted upright, and the swaying intensified. "Where am I? How did I get on this boat?" Miles of blue-green Atlantic water surrounded the small vessel with no land insight. Her shaky fingers latched onto the warm metal sides. A rapid pounding thundered against her chest.

Am I having a nightmare? Wake up.

She blinked and refocused. "This can't be real." Breathless whispers seeped from her lips. "I . . . I can't breathe." She gripped her throat and took a deep breath, then released it slowly. "Don't panic. Think. Figure this out."

A partially rusted boat motor hung at an angle on the stern. Corrosion from the ocean's saltwater had eaten away most of the metal parts, including its mounting brackets. The boat's rusty floor sent a shiver across her shoulders. Would it hold her weight if she moved? Her head spun.

Her stepfather's words jumped to the forefront of her mind. *Small boats can maneuver somewhat along the coastline, but they can't withstand the powerful waters of the Atlantic.*

Warm, humid wind tossed her hair. Salty waves from the Gulf Stream splashed and drenched her clothes. A scream escaped and emptied her lungs of breath. She stiffened and fought against her rising phobias of the ocean, sharks, and seclusion.

"Just breathe. Someone will find me." She pushed the hair from her face and scanned the distance. No signs of human life. Nothing but dark skies on the horizon. Jenna tightened her grip on the scarred metal sides of the boat.

Tears clouded her vision. A quick swipe of her hand helped clear the unwanted blurriness. No wonder her muscles rebelled with movement. Bruises the size of large fingertips surfaced on her exposed arms. Had someone grabbed her? Why couldn't she remember?

The waves grew restless and slammed against the vessel with the rising wind. "No, no, no! Don't capsize. Please." Too many documentaries convinced her that there was a hungry underworld of sharks waiting for a quick dinner. "I don't want to die, not now and not like this."

"H-e-l-p." The vast ocean swallowed her cries like a thirsty sponge. "God, please help me." She stared across the restless swells and sobbed. Pain shot through her white-knuckled fingers as her death-grip squeezed tighter. *Don't move.*

Jenna widened her eyes. A monster wave rolled toward the boat's stern. Fear coiled knots in her stomach. She sank to the floor and hunkered down, then squeezed her eyes closed and waited for the ocean to swallow her. Certain death mere seconds away.

"No-o-o-!" The jackhammer in her chest threatened an oncoming panic attack. Tears erupted like a tsunami and blended with splashing saltwater.

The wave's roar grew closer.

God help me.

The boat rocked and tilted. Her body lurched toward the opposite side. *Don't flip over!* One hand lost its grip. Her arm flailed. She searched for something to grab. The back of her hand slammed against the edge of the metal bench. Needles of pain shot up her arm. Reckless waves tossed the vessel with brute force.

Soaked and terrified, Jenna opened her eyes and sucked in another breath. She'd survived. Were there more to come? Troubled waters continued their tormenting roller coaster, with no end in sight. Lulls between the waves deceived her sense of survival.

"My cell phone." She released one hand and slapped her soaked jeans back pocket.

It's still there.

Jenna forced wet fingers into the pocket and retrieved her cell. 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 phone to her chest and cried.

"Please help me."

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

The green sending bar slowed at the half-way mark. A red send failure message displayed, and the phone succumbed to blackness.

"God, I'm so scared. I'm petrified of sharks, and I hate isolation. Why is this happening to me?"

Jenna pushed matted, wet curls from her face and shoved the phone back into her jeans pocket. She rubbed the relentless throbbing at the back of her head again. *Ouch.*

Her calf cramped. "Ohhhh!" She stretched out her leg, grabbed the muscle, and massaged it. A flashback hit her thoughts. "Why did I walk to the boat dock alone? Did I fall? Does anyone know I'm missing?"

The cramp slowly faded. A tightness lingered. Another thump rocked the vessel. Jenna gripped the seat and let out a yelp. A fin, no, two fins appeared. Whispers slipped through staggered breaths. "Sh . . . sharks."

Don't move or make a sound. Any noise might draw the maneaters closer.

Seconds lingered like hours until the waves calmed, and circling fins disappeared into the depths of the ocean. Sunlight emerged from the broken clouds.

Perspiration rolled from her forehead. Beads of sweat streamed down her back. The sun's rays bore down like fire and burned exposed skin. Her mouth grew dry. She raked her tongue across cracked lips. Salty ocean water hit her tastebuds. She needed a drink, or dehydration would consume her.

Stinging, salt-encrusted eyes searched the inside of the boat. A blue tarp lay in a pile near the bow. Jenna loosened her grip and eased off the metal seat. She held her breath and crouched-crawled forward, shifting her weight evenly.

She stretched out her arm and tugged on the tarp. The foul odor of dead fish assaulted her nose. Dry heaves ensued. No water and no food. Dead minnows and stray fishhooks floated in the boat's metal crevices.

Jenna refocused and moved inch-by-inch toward the boat motor at the stern. Its rough surface was like razors and threatened cuts to her hands. Corrosion damaged the propellers. "Does it even work? This thing belongs in the marine salvage graveyard." She muttered.

Warmth oozed from her cracked lips. Blood. The scorching sun took its toll on her body. Frustration rose. She assessed her situation. Water surrounded the boat, but she couldn't drink it.

Focus on the motor.

"Submerge the props. I know that much." She eased the motor back until it was in position and reached for the starter. An empty keyhole. Helplessness fought against her determination to live.

Jenna buried her face in her hands and sobbed.

The sun sapped her strength. Weakness crawled through her body. Nausea threatened with its return. The wind picked up and tossed her hair freely. Dark clouds swirled and blocked the sun. Hope of rescue diminished. Another storm meant tumultuous seas again.

"I don't want to die." Images of what could happen flashed through her mind. Her stomach twisted. "I don't have control of my life. I never have." She cried. "God, you're the only one who can calm the seas. I'm in your hands now."

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Benny Denton stood on the fourth floor of his beachfront condo and scanned the ocean with binoculars. No sign of the Jon boat. "Good. That's good." A sense of accomplishment washed over him.

Life took on new meaning with his flourishing business. For the first time in years, he had a nice place to live and money in the bank. There was no way he'd let Jenna take that from him. "She shouldn't have stuck her nose where it didn't belong. Too smart for her own good."

If only she'd listened to reason and understood his position. Embezzling, laundering? What's the difference? His cash flow mounted with each transaction, and he wasn't physically hurting anyone.

Angry clouds lined the ocean's horizon. He lifted the binoculars again and studied the turbulence forming. "Yes, come on, storm. Do your job and make her disappear for good."

An ache hit his heart. He'd miss her for sure. She was a beautiful, outgoing lady. Too bad she didn't listen. Pain shot through his swollen ankle. *It'll heal. Glad I caught myself after I tossed her.*

He set the binoculars on the end table and eased back into the recliner. With a slight jingle of the ice in his glass, he took a sip of Jack Daniel's on the rocks. "Now, that's what I call success. No more of Jenna's demands that I come clean and no impending jail time. Sadly, life is good without her."

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Raindrops hit her face and tapped on the metal boat. Jenna tilted her head back and caught a few raindrops on her parched tongue. She slid down onto the floor and curled into a fetal position, then covered up with the smelly tarp. Thunder grumbled. Heavy rain beat hard against the plastic. She clung to the tarp and prayed.

"God, thank . . . thank you for the time you've given me on this earth. Thank you for loving me unconditionally. Please reassure Dale that I love him. If I don't make it out of this alive, I'll see you soon."

Wind gusts, mixed with the angry waves, made their presence known yet again. The boat tossed precariously. Darkness prevailed. Terror wrenched her gut. If only she would drown before the sharks arrived. She waited for the final swoop of a wave to wash her away. No future with Dale, and he'd never know what happened to her. No wedding and no family.

A bell clanged.

Am I delirious, or is that the ring of death?

It clanged again.

Mustering all the strength that remained, Jenna eased the tarp aside and exposed herself to the wind and face-slapping waves. A buoy rocked and flashed its white light. Could that faint beam in the distance be a lighthouse? Was someone there?

"H-e-l-l-o." A man's voice pushed through the distant thunder and downpour. "Anyone there?"

She squinted. Her pulse increased. A flash of lightning revealed a large boat with a cabin. It maneuvered closer. The man's spotlight flashed on her face.

She thrust one arm into the air and waved frantically.

"Yes. Help. I'm here." She managed a hoarse response. *Thank you, Lord!* Her dry, scratchy throat hurt something fierce.

The vessel pushed closer.

"What are you doing out here in that Jon boat?" A scruffy-looking man tossed a life preserver vest into her boat with a rope attached. She grabbed the nylon rope with shaky hands as though her life depended on it—and it did. She unhooked the vest and put it on.

"I'm Roy Steiger, the lighthouse keeper. Saw this little vessel headed for the rocks and thought I'd better check it out. Let's get you to shore before we both drown."

He had a short beard and wore a yellow raincoat with a reflective strip down the arms and sides. His muscular hand gripped her hand and pulled her on board with one jerk. Jenna's knees buckled. She dropped to the floor.

Tears exploded. "Thank you, thank you for saving my life."

"Now don't go sheddin' no tears. You're gonna be okay. I got you." He helped her into the vessel's cabin out of the elements and tossed a blanket around her shoulders. Here, bet you ain't

had anything to eat or drink." He handed her a bottle of vitamin water. "Don't gulp too fast or it might make you sick."

The boat rocked violently in the turbulence. Rain pounded on the roof of the cabin. The noise made it difficult to hear what he said.

We're not out of danger yet.

"How can I ever thank you?" With a light twist, Jenna removed the cap and took a sip of the bottled drink. Orange flavor zinged on her taste buds.

"Just sit there and hold on while I get us back to the lighthouse."

In one swift turn, he dashed up the three steps to the helm of the boat. The motor kicked into gear with a slight jolt as the vessel sped toward the shore. She leaned back on the padded seat and sipped her drink.

Life jackets and ropes hung on hooks on the wall and swung with the boat's rocking motion.

Roy turned his head and talked over his shoulder. "Your name Jenna Pearson?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

How could anyone know?

"The Coast Guard has been searching for you. Some guy named Dale got a message that you'd washed away in a small boat."

Jenna choked on her drink. She coughed. "Dale? He's my fiancé. But—that text didn't go through. My phone died."

"Don't know nothin' about that. The Good Lord must be watchin' after you. Your disappearance went out over the radio."

Tears pooled, then rolled down her cheeks.

Miracles do happen. Thank you, Lord. You heard my prayer. You saved me. Forgive me for doubting you.

"Yeah, someone reported seeing a tall, stocky guy knock you over the head and toss you into a boat. No wonder you've got all those bruises on your arms. Tide was up, and the undertow strengthened. It doesn't take much for a small vessel to get carried away in the current and get lost in these Intracoastal waters." Roy readjusted his stance as they bounced across the water.

"Did anyone catch my attacker?"

"Police have him now, so you don't have to worry your pretty little head about him anymore. Said his name was Benny Denton. Something about you accused him of illegal activity. Said he wasn't going to prison."

She gasped. "Benny Denton?"

"Yep, you know him?"

Jenna stilled and stared at Roy. "He's . . . he's my biological father."

"Thought your name was Pearson."

"It is. Jenna Denton Pearson. My stepfather adopted me when I was ten years old and changed my name."

"Well, I'll be. That ain't right." Roy glanced back at her. "How could any father do that to his own kid? The world sure ain't what it used to be."

Dad said he'd changed. That things were getting better for him. Was embezzlement and money laundering his idea of getting better? And now attempted murder? How could he do this to me?

"I uncovered evidence at the bank of his mishandling of money from the company he works for. When I confronted him, he became furious and told me to mind my own business."

Roy shook his head, then lifted the mic from the wall and held it close to his mouth. "Roy Steiger from Coastal Lighthouse reporting. Jenna Pearson has been found. I repeat, Jenna Pearson has been rescued. Bruised and dehydrated, but she is alive."

The End