

Chapter 11

"Here, grab hold." Joel took her arm and put it around him. Then he wrapped his arm around her and helped her walk. The progress was slow, and the closer they got to the edge of the woods and Lake Superior, the wilder the wind and rain blew. It became difficult to see, and when they emerged on M-26, the raindrops hitting them were almost painful.

"My car is parked at Sand Bay."

"That's about a mile and a half down the road. It'll be okay until tomorrow. No one's going to steal it in this storm. Nobody steals cars up here anyway." They had to shout to be heard over the howling wind. My place is pretty close."

Joel reached up a little higher with his arm and pulled her head closer to him to use his hand to protect her face from the driving rain. After walking what in Chicago might have been about two or three blocks, they arrived at a house, or maybe it was called a cabin. Floodlights mounted on the cabin illuminated the area on all four sides. As they walked to the door, Kristie could see the gigantic waves the storm had stirred up on the lake. She remembered Gordon Lightfoot's song, "The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald." She could well understand how even a huge ore ship could be overwhelmed in a storm like this.

Joel opened the door for her and had to hold on to it so the wind didn't whip it out of his hand.

"Wait here for a sec. I'll get a couple of towels to wrap you up and then get a fire going. It's freezing in here!"

He brought back three large beach towels, wrapping them tenderly around her, and then helped her over to the sofa. Kristie watched the waves crash on the rocks outside the windows as he built a fire.

"Joel, did the Edmund Fitzgerald go down somewhere around here?"

"No, it'd already gotten past the Keweenaw Peninsula. It went down off of White Fish Point at the other end of the U.P."

"Why does the song say that Lake Superior never gives up its dead?"

"Because the water's so cold the chemical reactions don't occur that produce gases inside a body and make it float. This storm out there is a little unusual this early in the year. It's like the November Witches."

"November Witches?"

"That's what the mariners call the vicious storms that swoop down on Lake Superior from the north during November. It was one of those storms that took the Edmund Fitzgerald. It went down November 10."

After finishing with the fire, he followed her gaze out over the dark water and waited a moment before speaking again.

"Come on, let's get you some dry clothes. You really look awful."

"Thanks, Joel, that makes me feel a lot better."

He gave her that devastating smile of his, and she was glad that he still had his adorable sense of humor. She had no idea how it happened that they were once again together nor how long it would last. But she was with him now.

Helping her up, they walked to the other end of the house where he flipped on the light in a bedroom. "Why don't you lie down. I'll be right back with some Betadine and bandages. We need to clean that cut."

Kristie lay down on the bed and waited for him to return. He came back into the room and knelt down to take a look at her leg.

"These pants are too tight. You'll have to take them off."

Her face curled into a smirk. He wasn't the only one who still had a sense of humor.

"Joel, if that's a prelude to some kind of seduction, at least you could be a little romantic."

He picked up a pillow and swung it at her head. She tried to duck but it still connected.

"It's a prelude to me cleaning your cut. I'll turn my back. Just take the pants off, get under the bedspread, and stick out your leg."

Dropping the towel that was still wrapped around her, she did as she was told. "Okay, I'm ready."

When he turned around, she was completely under the bedspread. "The leg?" he asked.

She tugged a little at the bedspread and then stretched her leg out the side.

"This cut isn't as bad as I thought it'd be." He cleaned the cut and then bandaged it. "Tomorrow morning you can take a shower and we'll clean it again, if you like. I'll get some dry clothes you can put on for now."

"Oh? And how is it you have girl-clothes here?"

"I don't. They're going to be mine," he said, looking back over his shoulder. He wasn't gone long. "Okay, here's what I've come up with. I've got pants, teeshirt, sweatshirt, and socks. They'll be pretty baggy, but they're dry." He tossed the pile on the bed. "And here," he added with a boyish grin on his face, "are a pair of my shorts." He held them up with both hands for full display. "They can substitute for your, uh...well, you know. Of course, mine are sexier." He threw them at her.

"Yeah, right!"

"But sorry, I have no bras. The teeshirt and sweatshirt should keep you discreet enough."

Kristie laughed at his antics, but he didn't give her a chance to say anything.

"There's a brush and a comb in the bathroom. I'll change my clothes in the other bedroom and then wait in the living room while you dress." Then in a more serious tone, he added, "We've got a lot to talk about."

* * * * *

Kristie came into the living room about fifteen minutes later. She thought "baggy" might have been an understatement. Her hair was an even worse disaster. She'd towel-dried it and brushed it, but it was straight with no body whatsoever.

"Too bad all the guys at the station can't see me now. I'm sure I'd sweep them off their feet."

"No, I doubt that. You still look awful."

"I thought you might have some crack like that, so I brought this with me." From behind her back, she produced one of the wet towels and threw it at him. He put his hands up to stop it, but it spread out and ended up draped over his head in a most undignified way. She couldn't help but laugh.

As he pulled the towel off, he was laughing too. "Here, have a seat by the fire and watch beautiful Lake Superior." She came over and sat down on the sofa. "I'll fix up a couple of sandwiches for us. The cuisine here isn't the greatest, but you need to eat something."

After they finished the sandwiches, he sat down close to her and took her hand in both of his and rested it on his leg. It warmed her all over to feel his touch.

"So what happened, Kristie? How could your date go back to Chicago without you?" he asked tenderly.

"Oh, he volunteered to take me back. We got here yesterday evening, but when he went in to register at the motel, he got only one room. I asked him to get me my own room, but that wasn't acceptable to him. When I said I'd come up here with him, he just assumed that I understood we'd be sleeping together."

"Yeah, some guys would draw that conclusion." He began caressing her hand tenderly. After about a minute, she spoke. Her tone was serious.

"Joel, what's happening here? What did you mean that you were looking for me?"

"I never missed one of your shows. You announced that you were coming up to the U.P. this week on vacation. I took a chance it would be to the Keweenaw, so I came up. I came up here hoping that maybe...we'd run into each other."

"But why? You made it plain you didn't want..." Her voice faltered.

"I know." He hesitated before continuing. "I was in the midst of an emotional conflict and drew the wrong conclusion. I wanted to keep seeing you, but..."

"But you were afraid to love again after your fiancée died?"

He looked at her in astonishment. "You know about Karen?"

"I know she died while you were engaged."

"How did you find out?"

"A couple of weeks ago, I went to the Sixties Club with a bunch of guys from the station. It came out."

"Oh. Anyway, yes, that was part of it. I was afraid to fall in love again, afraid to get myself into a position where I could be that hurt again. I loved Karen, loved her very much."

"And the other part was that you thought you still loved her?"

"You've got a pretty good intuition."

"In matters of the heart, yeah, I've got a pretty good intuition."

She brought her other hand over and gently touched his. "What happened to Karen?" she asked softly.

"It was the day before our wedding. We just finished the rehearsal and were all going out for dinner, the whole bridal party. Karen rode with the girls, I was with the guys...you know, very traditional. We were all in a hilarious mood at the restaurant. I couldn't wait for tomorrow, to be married to Karen. When we left and the girls all piled into their car, Karen was in the passenger seat. Some guy ran a red light, hit her side of the car. The others were only hurt; Karen was killed." His voice weakened, and tears started to flow.

She removed her hand from his and put her arm around him. "Oh, Joel, I'm so sorry."

After a few minutes, he continued.

"So you're right--on both accounts. I was afraid to love again, to take the chance of being hurt like that again. And I still felt a connection to Karen. As you said, I was still in love with her. I thought my heart should always belong to her. Oh, I dated occasionally but always kept everything on a strictly casual basis...But then I met you..."

His voice trailed off, and he stopped again, the tears still evident. Kristie took her arm down and turned to face him on the sofa so she could watch his eyes.

"You stirred emotions in me that I hadn't felt since Karen. I was so happy

when I was with you. But I was confused. What about all those feelings that were still tied to Karen? I thought I had to step out of your life. That was the wrong conclusion, but at the time I truly believed I was doing the right thing. Now I know that what I actually did was let those feelings get in the way of my only hope for happiness.

"So I came up here hoping to find you. What the result would be, even if that happened, I had no idea."

She continued watching him awhile. What he'd said explained so much, not only Grant Park, but all his feelings for her before that awful day. So she hadn't been wrong! All the feelings, all the joy, she'd felt when they were...going together filled her heart again. She had to tell him how she felt, how she still felt.

"I was heartbroken after we talked that day in Grant Park. But somehow I mustered the determination to move on, find someone new. After all," she said sweetly, "I was a member of a pretty good Internet dating service. Then Roger came along. He was a gentleman, not bad looking, and I guess I liked him a little, at least enough to go out with him. But there was no spark, no real chemistry between us. I didn't feel any, and it seemed clear that he didn't either. We had two dates before coming up here, and I was discouraged after each one. Last night he said he liked me too, and that's why he wanted to sleep together. Said it's just part of the dating scene today. It's clear now that he never really had any romantic interest in me, not the falling-in-love kind. But I wanted to give it every chance to develop...in both of us. Obviously he was looking only for a different kind of chemistry.

"But with you..." she began, almost in a whisper, "it's always felt just so natural for us to be together. I felt so alive, so happy, so relaxed, so myself. *Everything I want, I have/Whenever I hold you tight.* I played that song for you, Joel. It's still how I feel. Remember the Seekers? *I could search the whole world over until my life is through/But I know I'll never find another you.*"

Neither of them spoke. Kristie felt her eyes water as she watched him. It seemed like an eternity as she waited, hoping he'd say what her heart desperately wanted to hear.

"It's the same with me," Joel said finally. "In Grant Park that day, you quoted Pet Clark's, 'Kiss Me Goodbye.' I said it was the wrong song. Well, I was wrong. It was the right song, but you had cast yourself in the wrong role. You are my tomorrow. Karen belongs to yesterday."

Kristie smiled through the tears and leaned forward. He took her in his arms, and they hugged each other tightly and stayed that way for the longest time. When they slowly moved apart, she snuggled close to him as he wrapped his arm around her, gently massaging her shoulder. They were looking once more out on Lake Superior.

"Joel, could I see a picture of Karen?"

He looked puzzled. "Yeah, okay. I've got one in my bedroom. I'll get it, but you know, I don't think I'll put it back. It's time to pack it away."

He returned and handed Kristie a framed 8-by-10 picture. Karen was smiling brightly and her eyes seemed to glow and radiate warmth. Her hair was blond.

"She was very pretty."

Joel just nodded his head. She handed him the picture, and he walked over to a closet. After fumbling around a little, he brought out a box big enough to hold the picture and put it inside. Then he came back to the sofa and sat down next to Kristie, putting his arm around her again. They sat in silence for a few minutes.

The shoreline was on the open lake, and the wind was howling outside. They could hear the surf crash on the rocky shore and the driven rain pelt the windows. Inside, the fire crackled softly in the large stone fireplace.

As Kristie looked out over the lake, an eerie sight suddenly came within view on the horizon, a long string of lights far out on the water.

"What's that out there, way out there on the lake?"

"It's an ore ship. Don't they look beautiful at night with their running lights? See the direction it's moving? It's heading east, probably to Cleveland, where the Edmund Fitzgerald was bound. The waters are probably pretty rough tonight."

Seeing the ship out there in the storm created a very cozy atmosphere in the cabin.

"Boy, romantic nights by the fire. Howling wind. Raging water. This is quite a place you've got."

"It is with you here. I can tell you it's not very romantic when you're alone. Say, let's play some rock-n-roll. I've got a special CD up here that I recorded myself. It's a compilation of some of my favorite songs." His voice assumed that tongue-in-cheek tone. "You know, I've always heard that contemporary DJs on oldies stations really don't know the music they play, just read titles and artists off a crib sheet."

"Oh, is that so! Just start the music, smarty pants, and we'll see about that."

"You're on! When each song begins, see how fast you can identify it--title, artist, and year."

For the next hour, they played song after song. Kristie got every one of them. Her longest time was nine seconds. Most of the songs she got almost immediately, after the first two or three notes.

"Impressive!" he said after the last song ended.

She smirked. "What did you say I'd get for a score of a hundred percent?"

"I was thinking a kiss from the host."

"And what makes you think I'd have any interest..." but he didn't give her a chance to finish. He drew her to him on the sofa. Their kiss was sweet, his lips on hers warm and tender.

"You know," she said, "Roger had me play this same game on the drive up here, except in his case it was classical music."

"How'd you do?"

"I got half of them."

"Good for you! I like classical music, too, but it doesn't really speak to the soul in the same way rock-n-roll does." Joel looked at the fire. The last dying embers were about to expire. "It's getting late, and you've had a rough day. If we're going to have any fun up here tomorrow, you'd better get some sleep. You can have the bedroom where you changed. Come on, I'll see if you have everything you need."

They went into the bedroom, and Kristie sat down on the bed.

"Give me all your wet clothes. I'll put them in the dryer." She picked up a neatly-piled stack from the floor and handed it to him. As he walked out of the room, he looked back over his shoulders. "Now we'll just see who's got the sexier underwear."

She was still sitting on the bed when Joel came back in. "Well?" she asked.

"Well what?"

"Who's got the sexier underwear?"

He smiled. "You do." Then he walked over to her. She wondered briefly if he was going to kiss her again, but he didn't. He just smoothed her hair down with his fingers and gave her neck a gentle caress. "Goodnight, Kristie. See you tomorrow."

As he turned to leave, she asked, "Hey, when you came up here, didn't you know the odds of running into me were next to nothing?"

He turned and winked at her. "Not at all. Aunt Grace was praying."

(3069)