

Birds of Calm
By Kelley Heckart

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Rating: PG-13

Genre: Greek mythology, Paranormal, Contemporary

Heat Level: Sweet

Ceyx and Alcyone is one of my favorite Greek myths. I think the reason I love this story so much is because even death could not break them apart.

Blurb: Is it too late for a second chance at love?

Ancient Greece

Ceyx was dead.

Alcyone tried to grasp onto the terrible thought that she would never see her husband again. She would never again hear his laughter, see him smile or feel his arms around her.

Her knees trembled and she tried to push herself to walk toward the edge of the sea. The cool ocean spray and the briny scent stirred her to awareness. She couldn't believe that while the world around her looked and felt so normal, her husband no longer existed in her perfect world.

But the dream she had last night had been so real. Her dead husband had visited her during the night, bringing with him the smell of poppies. She could still smell the lingering scent of poppies left behind by the god of Slumber and Dreams. Why would he visit her to tell her of her husband's death if Ceyx were still alive out there somewhere in the ocean?

She couldn't believe he was dead. To believe Ceyx was lost to her would mean she would have to accept life without him. The unbearable thought tore into her chest, paralyzing her with dread and she almost fell to her knees. Somehow she managed to steady herself and continue walking toward the sea.

The breaking waves and a sea gull's shrill cry triggered the memory of the day Ceyx told her he had to leave her, that he had to go to sea. Anger welled up inside her and she shook her fist at the heavens. "Why did you leave me," she shouted. She had warned him of the dangers of the sea, of the treacherous winds that could toss the ocean into a churning mass of waves that could turn a ship into splinters of wood. She had grown up with the winds and knew just how dangerous they could be.

Ceyx wouldn't listen to her, even when she had begged him to let her go with him. "We would be together now if you had listened to me," she cried. "I hate you!" This time her knees buckled and she allowed her body to sink to the sand. She beat the sand with her fists, sobbing so hard that she gasped for breath. She beat the sand and cried until she couldn't do either anymore. Exhausted, she lay in the sand, lulled by the sounds of the ocean and the cries of sea birds.

Sometime later, she became aware of longer shadows and cooler air. She glanced up at the sun where it hovered in the west, a dying ball of light.

She wiped her tearstained cheeks and sat up. Tremors wracked her body and the feeling of emptiness in her chest overwhelmed her. Somehow she had more tears to spare, but this time, her tears slipped silently down her cheeks. "Ceyx, how will I live without you?" She spoke to the dying sun as if he were there in the weakening rays of the doorway to the land of the dead.

The sea called to her, lulling her with its promise of release from all the pain.

She stood and walked into the ocean. The cold water surrounded her legs in a dark, soothing grip.

“I am coming to join you,” she said, walking deeper into the sea. The waves lapped around her waist. She was about to take another step into deeper water when something caught her attention. Twilight turned the ocean into a rippling mass of shadows. She peered into the shadows, trying to see what was floating toward her. The pale glow of what looked like a hand attached to a body bobbed on the dark waves.

She looked on with horrified interest as the body moved closer. And then she fought down the revulsion when she recognized the body as Ceyx. The grim realization paralyzed her. She gradually became aware that the water had moved up to her chest. She couldn't move. She didn't want to move. All she could do was stare at her dead husband and pray that her torment would come to a quick end. The water rose and closed over her head.

As night descended like a flutter of black wings, Alcyone felt the waves moving around her, then realized the waves were moving beneath her.

I am floating on the waves.

She glanced to her right and a sea bird floated on the waves next to her.

“It is I, my love.”

Ceyx's deep, reassuring voice echoed inside her head. The bird met her shocked gaze with an oddly familiar, affectionate look. *Ceyx*. Alcyone trembled, overcome with joy. She looked down at her own body. Her human body had somehow changed into a bird's small, feathery body. Just like Ceyx, she floated on top of the waves.

Moonlight spread a cool, white glow across the dark waves.

She floated next to Ceyx and snuggled underneath his outstretched wing, reveling in the warmth and comfort that his embrace gave her. All the emptiness that his death had brought her dissipated into a sense of contentment. And then she knew no more as the human Alcyone.

Present Day

Michelle awoke to a rolling sensation and the piercing cries of a sea bird. Her head throbbed with a splitting headache strengthened by the bird's shrill cries. Pressing her hands to her head, she let out a moan. The bird grew silent. The throbbing in her head eased.

She remained on her back and listened to the sound of waves lapping against the rubber raft. Her memory gradually returned, crawling through the fog that clouded her mind. Dread tightened her chest. She wanted to curl up into a fetal position and forget that she was lost at sea.

The sea bird made a sudden dive toward the raft, barely missing her head.

She sat up and glared at the bird, then recalled that birds usually stayed close to land. Nothing but open sea surrounded her small inflatable boat. The clear blue skies and tranquil water looked just like the enticing pictures on the brochure of the Greek Islands, no trace of the sudden, violent storm lingered. The bird landed on the edge of the raft. "Crazy bird," she muttered and slumped down inside the life raft.

Hudding inside the small boat, she tried to remember how she ended up in the life raft. What she couldn't forget was the image of her husband being swallowed by the churning waves. That image would be imprinted in her memory forever or for as long as she lived floating out to sea without food or water.

She touched her left hand in an unconscious gesture and her third finger was bare. *My wedding ring!* Then she realized that she had taken the ring off a month ago. She squinted up at the blazing sun and licked her dry, cracked lips.

"Michelle."

She jerked her head up at the sound of her husband's voice. Empty space greeted her inside the raft. *I will never see Rick again, ever.* The dreadful thought brought a lingering ache to her chest. She couldn't breathe for a moment. Again, she saw him taken by the sea in the sudden storm that sank the boat. He was gone. Forever.

She hunched over in the raft, weeping. She sensed the bird moving closer to her. The peculiar bird was a calming presence that helped ease her sorrow and loneliness.

"Michelle, let's go on this vacation and try to work things out."

"No. Get out of my head," she said, pressing her hands against the sides of her aching head. She couldn't bear to think about him, not now. Not after wanting to leave him after twenty years of marriage because she was bored and needed some excitement in her life.

"Well, I have some excitement now, don't I?" she shouted. The empty sea rolled all around her, seeming to mock her stupidity with gentle, chiding waves. The bird remained sitting next to her, unfazed by her sudden outburst.

"I love you, Michelle."

Rick had said those words to her the night before in their hotel room. *After he had made love to me.*

She recalled how he had held her in his arms, how he'd kissed her with tenderness and the way he looked at her with unabashed, honest affection. In his familiar, comforting arms, she had felt something again. His passionate, knowing kisses had rekindled the desire she thought she'd lost. That excitement she craved so much only needed to be nurtured with a change of scenery to blossom—not by leaving Rick.

Now she would never hear his voice, or his laughter, or feel his kisses and caresses again.

The sea called to her, lulling her with its promise of a quick release from all the unbearable pain. Rick was out there somewhere. The anguish of losing him drove her to the edge of the raft. "I'm coming to join you," she whispered. She struggled to push herself up over the edge and into the water's dark, soothing embrace, but she lacked the strength.

A wave of dizziness hit her. The sky appeared to spin above her, and she fainted.

A sharp jab woke her. The sea bird stood on her shoulder and stared at her, letting out a shrill cry. Startled by the bird's sudden cry, Michelle sat up. "Leave me alone," she said, waving the bird away. "I just want to sleep." *And never wake up.*

The bird had unusual coloring, slate blue, she decided, remembering the color from her paint palette. The brightly colored blue and white bird wouldn't move. It kept staring at her and making a loud, annoying squawk, its long black beak opening and closing, its shaggy crest bobbing with each head movement. The bird appeared to be flapping one wing as if pointing toward something.

She looked up and peered across the vast sea. A hill loomed before her. It took a moment for her to gain her senses enough to realize what she was seeing across the ocean. Land.

"Oh my God!" Seeing land filled her with motivation to try and survive. She positioned herself on her knees so that she could use the paddle to hopefully bring her raft closer to the land. After paddling until she couldn't move her arms anymore, she collapsed back into the inflatable boat, and retreated into her dark thoughts. The thought of living without Rick filled her with overwhelming grief and hopelessness. Tears blurred her vision. She closed her eyes. "I love you," she murmured.

The bird let out more loud cries and flew away.

Sometime later, Michelle felt the rush of wings. "Leave me alone," she muttered, opening her eyes. The bird sat on the edge of the raft, staring at her. She sensed the bird wanted her to look up. Something filled the space that before had been nothing but ocean. Something big. She had to blink a few times to clear her eyes.

A large boat filled the darkening horizon.

She waved her arms and shouted.

The boat turned toward her. She thought she saw two birds, but her vision dimmed, her eyes losing focus. Weak and exhausted, she collapsed into the raft and lost consciousness.

She woke up in a hospital bed surrounded by computer monitors. She moved her left arm and felt the tug of an I.V. line.

“Michelle?”

She thought she heard Rick’s voice, and then he was bending over the bed. “Rick?”

He smiled and touched her right hand. His large hand covered her hand in warmth and tender strength. She remembered that the first thing she’d noticed about him when they first met were his hands. He’d been playing guitar and his hands moved fluidly up and down, strumming, forming chords and playing notes on the fret board of his guitar. He had long fingers—musician’s hands, she had told him.

She couldn’t believe Rick stood over her, that he was alive. “I thought you drowned,” she said, feeling tears on her cheeks.

He gently wiped her tears. “I would have drowned, but the ocean suddenly calmed, and this bird kept bugging me so that I stayed conscious. I think the bird led me to a ship, then we found you.” He shook his head. “It was the strangest thing.”

“A bird?” She recalled the bird that wouldn’t leave her side. “You said a bird was with you?”

He nodded.

“What did it look like?”

“It was blue, I think, or more like blue-gray and white,” he paused as if recalling the bird, “and had this funny looking crest.”

Slate blue. Her skin prickled, causing a quick shudder. “There was a bird with me, too,” she said. “I was ready to give up and then this bird wouldn’t leave me alone.” She wondered if it was the same bird or were there two birds? She didn’t think one bird could have been in two places at once. Then she recalled how she thought she saw two birds right before she passed out.

His eyes widened. “The stories must be true then.”

“What stories?”

Brushing a strand of hair from her forehead, he said, “When I mentioned the bird to the ship captain, he said that there is an ancient Greek myth about kingfishers, that’s what he called the bird, and that other people have reported being saved by these birds.”

“That’s odd,” she said. Feeling a sudden rush of fatigue, she pressed her head back into the pillow.

“You need to rest,” he said, kissing her cheek. “I will be here when you wake up.”

The warmth of his lips and his familiar, pleasing scent filled her with overwhelming joy and she felt more tears building. One tear escaped. “Promise?” she mumbled, afraid that if she went to sleep, he would disappear.

He kissed her tear-stained cheek, drying the lone tear with his tender kisses. “I promise,” he said, tucking the blankets around her.

Reassured by his promise and his soothing kisses, she closed her eyes and fell into a deep slumber. She woke up sometime later to a dimly lit hospital room. Rick was asleep on the bed, facing her, his head resting against her shoulder. He stirred and a black velvet ring box slipped from his hand. She realized he must have planned on proposing to her again on this trip. Touched by his romantic gesture, tears filled her eyes. She pressed the ring box back into his hand and snuggled against her husband, comforted by his presence. She was content to watch him sleep, wondering how she could have been so stupid.

She hit something hard with her leg and discovered a book resting between them on the bed. Curious, she picked up the book, a collection of Greek myths. She opened the book to a page marked with a bookmark. *Ceyx and Alcyone, The Birds of Calm*. She read the story of two people that loved each other so much even death couldn’t break them apart. The gods were kind and turned them into sea birds, kingfishers.

She peered closely at the picture in the book of a pair of kingfishers. The brightly colored slate blue and white female bird had a long black beak and crested head just like the bird that wouldn’t leave her alone. Though the male’s coloring wasn’t as bright as the female’s plumage, they shared the same coloring and shaggy crest.

A slow shiver crept up her spine and she continued reading the last paragraph in a quiet, stunned whisper, “To make up for the violent storms that drowned Ceyx, each winter the sea is calm for seven days while the birds watch over their floating nests. The phenomenon is called Alcyon or Halcyon days. Some believe that the birds have the power to calm the seas.” She looked up, her gaze resting on her sleeping husband. Recalling how the two kingfishers had saved them, she wondered if the gods had also made the two birds immortal.

She closed the book, smiling faintly. “Thank you, Ceyx and Alcyone, for giving us another chance,” she whispered.

The end

Kelley writes historical romances with fantasy/paranormal elements. Her stories reflect her passion for ancient and medieval time periods, storytelling and the supernatural. Inspired by the ancient Celts, her tales are filled with fierce warriors, bold women, otherworldly creatures, magic and romance. She can be found online at <http://www.kelleyheckart.com/>

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