



GAIL PALLOTTA

THERE'S NO BETTER TIME TO START FRESH THAN
WHEN YOU'RE DROWNING IN DOUBT...

Barely Above
Water

"YOU'LL THOROUGHLY ENJOY
THIS STORY..."

LOREE LOUGH, AWARD-WINNING,
BEST-SELLING AUTHOR

Barely Above

Water

Gail Pallotta

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DEDICATION

Dedicated to David G. Lee, D.C., Ph.D., C.Ad.

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INTRODUCTION

This is a book about a young woman hanging on to her faith and finding help and hope where there was none. It explores a little-understood disease and how alternative medicine can help people who have it. I'd like to preface the story by saying though this book's dedicated to alternative treatment, I'm eternally grateful for the wonderful dedicated traditional medical doctors, laboratory technicians and researchers who save lives every day. I'm thankful for the M.D.s in my life who have cared for me. They've seen me through quite a few illnesses, broken bones and surgeries. In some instances, they've precluded certain pain and suffering by solving a problem before it wreaked devastation upon me. When a person's sick, the significance of a good doctor, medical or alternative, is invaluable and cannot be overestimated.

CHAPTER ONE

Suzie shivered at Carson Snotte's words, not the March air with its hint of lingering winter.

"Under the circumstances, I don't think we should see each other." He threw their relationship to the wind whipping around the Bradford pear tree in her small, grassy yard. Everything spun out of control. Suzie struggled to stand upright on the cement drive in front of her brick condo.

An image of her and Carson entering Blue Mountain, North Carolina's largest charity event as the King and Queen begged her to hold on to her destiny. The grandeur of his black and white tuxedo, the promise of being seen as the ideal couple, hovered over them as she had floated next to him in her long purple gown. "Don't say that. I promise I'm going to get to the bottom of this. I'll fix it."

Carson's thin lips snarled, ruining his fine features, his blue eyes staring at Suzie like pieces of stone. "You've made a mess of our lives. Who introduced you to drugs? Are you seeing some hood on the side?"

"No, I told you the doctor said I have a foreign substance in my system." She didn't add that the physician had said he couldn't treat her because the labs couldn't identify it. Carson was already upset.

He guffawed. "Right, can't they figure out cocaine, or is it heroin?"

Suzie's heart broke in a million pieces. "I've never taken illegal drugs in my life. I don't even take prescription medicine, and no, I haven't seen anyone

but you in three years.”

Carson waved his long, thin hand then blew air from his mouth. “Seriously, our relationship has deteriorated beyond repair. I’m not sure if you’re actually hooked on something, or if you’re a hypochondriac. Let’s say hypochondriac, and we’ll both be lots happier.”

The fair-haired, athletic guy with broad shoulders pivoted and walked away. Suzie stood with tears rolling down her cheeks. Maybe he was right. There was nothing wrong with her. The ailment was all in her head. Why look even more foolish trying to find someone to cure a disease that didn’t exist? She plunked down on her front stoop and wiped her eyes. The azalea bush beside her blurred with her tears and morphed into an Impressionist painting.

See Dr. Granger. Was she losing it? See Dr. Granger. Who was Dr. Granger? She’d heard the name but couldn’t recall him. See Dr. Granger. You need to see Dr. Granger. The words persisted as though they resounded from a stuck CD player.

Day and night, the message repeated in her head for a week. She sat in the rocking chair with the gold flowered cushion in her bedroom when the revelation hit her like a bullet. She shot straight up. Dr. Granger was the chiropractor who treated Madelyn Demms, Mom’s friend, ten years ago. “What do I want with a chiropractor?” Oh, Madelyn saw him for an internal health issue, not a back problem, and he cured her. Madelyn had raved about him. She slapped her forehead then stood and called Madelyn.

* * *

Three months later in Destin, Florida, a door shut

and Suzie jumped. The man hadn't even slammed it. She pulled back her shoulders, trying to appear confident and calm. She had to steady her right hand. He'd probably offer to shake it.

He traipsed over to her, his broad shoulders taking over the room. "Matt Combs. Sorry I'm late. I hope you weren't too bored sitting here." He offered a handshake.

She peered at his squared, strong-looking extremity. Her heart sank. "I'm fine, thank you. It's nice to meet you." Had he detected the trembling?

A plaque for Outstanding Manager as head of the Okaloosa County Parks and Recreation Department hung on the wall alongside pictures of kids in bathing suits and soccer players in blue uniforms. A full trophy case sat next to his bookcase. She could get him another victory in spite of the illness, if he'd give her a chance.

The rollers on his black chair clicked as he pulled it to his metal desk. He pushed a pile of folders to one side then looked up with a sheepish grin. "I haven't had a chance to clean. Harold Gubb, my assistant and the county bookkeeper, was out sick last week. I'm a little backed up."

Suzie clenched a pencil in three fingers and released it, then repeated the action in her lap. She started the habit to check her strength after she'd lost twenty-five pounds. Now she did it when she was nervous. "You have a nice office."

Matt's shoulders relaxed. "I suppose, as county cubicles at community centers go, it's okay." He waved his hand toward a desk in front of his. "Barely room for Harold when we're both here, but I'm in the field quite a bit. We manage." He retrieved a folder from the

pile he'd just moved and studied it. "Ahh, I see you coached a swim team and won your division every year except your first. That's quite an accomplishment." He gazed at her with admiration in his eyes, and hope that he might hire her flickered over her skin.

"You were in high school and college then. Now, you're..." He glanced at her application. "Twenty-five. Most recently, you've worked as an editor of a community magazine in Blue Mountain, North Carolina. It says here you quit your job to move? Could I ask why?"

The suspicion in his voice grated on Suzie's already raw nerves. Carson would say she had to move because she was a druggie. Sad that his ridiculous opinion still upset her. She glanced at the three-quarter-length sleeve of her blouse. He'd suggested she wear sufficient clothing to cover her skinny body. Dwelling on him wasn't worth the hurt and ire that rose from recalling his degrading remarks.

She swallowed hard. *Play the game.* "One day at work, I realized now was the time to reach for my dream of living at the beach. I loved coaching kids, so here I am."

Matt thumped his pencil on the desk. "Editing a magazine sounds like a glamorous job that would be hard to give up, but I'm not here to question your decision. How did you know of this position?"

"I visited Destin and read about it in a flyer." Usually summer swim team coaches came from within the league, but Suzie wasn't about to ask why this one didn't. She wanted to know whether or not her answers pleased him so badly she could hardly keep from squirming.

“Right. We circulated the literature several months ago. Most of the applicants are accomplished swimmers, but none of them have ever coached. I couldn’t help but notice you swam a butterfly on a relay that finished with a Top Ten time. Explain that to me.”

Did he not understand swimming? “It means the medley relay I swam on had one of the ten fastest times in the United States in my age group that year.”

“That’s...” He drew out the word as though he digested the information then quickly added, “Not too shabby.” He patted the folder. “You do realize this position is temporary. It’s unlikely we’ll have full-time work similar to your recent employment anytime soon. The coaching position with the Okaloosa Dolphins is the only job I can offer.”

Was he hiring her? Every muscle in her body ached from the effort it had taken to uproot her life and move here to take advantage of Dr. Granger’s upcoming treatments. At least she’d have the opportunity to see if the doctor could help. A bird tweeted outside. Had the little creature been warbling all along, or was he singing for her? Either way, his song echoed in her heart. She’d cleared the first hurdle, landing a job that allowed her to work only a few hours five days a week, plus the swim meets, of course. That gave her time to rest and deal with the illness.

Praise God Matt chose her. He had lots of authority for someone, say, early thirties at most. Did he need to verify his decision with his boss?

He stood. “It’s yours, if you want it. You have the best record of anyone who’s applied, and you’re the last interview.” He spoke in a matter-of-fact tone while fireworks of joy went off inside Suzie.

But then Matt didn't realize he might be helping save Suzie's life. She blinked, pushing back tears of relief and gratitude. Maybe God had a plan for her, after all. "Thank you."

"We'll be proud to have a swimmer of your caliber coaching." His tone switched from business-like to friendly.

Suzie couldn't have stopped her lips from turning up on the corners if she'd wanted to. She hadn't swum in a long time, but Matt didn't know that. Earlier, he appeared to appreciate the Top Ten time she'd earned when she swam competitively. "I'm looking forward to it."

"Can you report tomorrow? Practice started on Monday, May fourteenth. Patricia Wilkins, who usually handles employment and everything else for summer league swimming, has been out with an emergency. I've taken too long to fill this position. Yours truly had to coach the Okaloosa Dolphins for two days, and I've never been on a swim team, let alone been in charge of one. I led them in dry land exercises." He glanced at the team trophies. "Football's my game."

That explained his lack of knowledge about a Top Ten time. He probably approved Ms. Wilkins's program and requests but never handled swimming himself. She'd suspected he was a jock, though. One with high cheekbones, a Roman nose, dark eyes, and a friendly smile. A cinder of the old Suzie smoldering inside popped up, and she flirted the way she used to around a handsome guy. "Let me see. I bet you were the star quarterback."

He chuckled. "I did play that position." He glanced at her application. "So, you're new in town?"

Do you have any questions about our little community?"

"I can't think of any right now."

He handed her a card. "Well, if you do, give me a call. I'll be glad to answer them."

"Thank you." Suzie stood and strolled out of Matt's office with lighter steps than she'd taken in months.

Next up, help from Dr. Granger.

* * *

Matt glanced at the picture of his mother and him on his black metal desk. The wind had swept her navy dress to the side the day it was taken. He still had on his football uniform, stained with grass and dirt, when the guy from the newspaper snapped it. He had been the most valuable player on the team, and Mom was dying of cancer. A lump formed in his throat. Mom had been his biggest cheerleader. He set the photo down. Time to move forward today. That's what Mom had always told him to do.

He leaned back in his leather office chair, put his arms behind him, and cradled his head in his hands like a football.

What was a hot chick like Suzie doing looking for summer employment as a coach in Destin, especially considering her qualifications? Lots of people dreamed of living at the beach. He stared at her application. His instincts told him there were some facts missing, but apparently nothing that would affect her work. He'd screened her references. What really puzzled him was how she pegged him as a quarterback. He held out his hands. They seemed useless not throwing a pigskin. How he missed the touch of it. A sudden emptiness

filled him, and he slumped in his chair.

The door slammed.

Matt sat up with a start as Harold Gubb entered, adjusting his gold-rimmed glasses. Harold stressed too much over his career, but he was a new county employee. He had a nice wife with long, dark hair and the cutest little girl Matt ever had seen. No wonder he wanted to advance to give them a good life. "Hey buddy, how's it going?"

Harold threw up his thin arms. "Same as always. I'm supposed to work miracles with the county's money."

"And you do, my man. You truly do."

Harold let out a nervous laugh as he rolled his chair across the floor and pulled it up to his desk. "I do the best I can. Hey man, don't get me wrong. I like my work. How about our latest problem, is that girl going to take on the new team?"

"Yep."

"Whew. That's a relief. No adult I know would take a low-paying job just for the summer. Most of the teens or college students coach in their own subdivisions. It appeared no one was available for this odd-ball position with team members who live in different areas. I have to tell you. I had my doubts."

"Yeah, but it was worth the effort. A program offering summer childcare for parents who work in Destin's service industries is a great idea." Matt sat back in his seat.

"The swim team has been the most difficult part of the new venture, probably because Patricia had to leave, but you seem to have that covered." Harold had a way of going on and on about something.

But maybe he'd hit on the question bugging Matt.

Why did Suzie really want this job? It was hard to believe she couldn't do better given a little time. Maybe she didn't have the time. Then again, if she wanted to enjoy the beach in northern Florida, summer would be a great season to arrive. Lots of young adults did things on a whim nowadays then let the pieces fall where they may, or figured out something later.

Harold's voice snapped Matt to the moment. "With Patricia up and flying off to California to see about her mother before she finished the job description, we don't even have decent guidelines for the Okaloosa Dolphins Swim Team. I guess this woman's qualified enough to figure out what we don't know."

Matt thumped his pencil on his desk. An image of Suzie's resume showing her record of team wins and that Top Ten Medley Relay popped in his head. "Oh, yeah. A gift just landed in our laps."

CHAPTER TWO

Bright sunshine poured through the windshield of Suzie's gray two-door car which sat beside a palm tree in front of the tan stucco administrative offices at Destin Community Club. She slid on her sunglasses, backed out, and turned onto Highway 98 into light traffic.

Calmness sifted through her, the hand tremor she'd worried about in Matt's office gone. He seemed laid-back. Good-looking too, but guys were off limits until she got rid of this illness, especially guys who were going to be her boss. The flame of hope inside her barely burned over the upcoming appointment with Dr. Granger.

Yes, I can help. Dr. Granger's words rang like sweet music in Suzie's head. But could he? She scoffed silently at the way the medical doctors had refused to take on the ailment. They'd explained that they couldn't deal with something they couldn't diagnose, and left her to her own devices.

She parked in front of the apartment she'd rented, plodded inside, and walked up the beige carpeted steps to the bathroom. She grabbed a sponge from under the sink but stopped. She barely had the energy to slog into the bedroom.

She threw the scrubber on the floor and stomped it. If only she could stamp out this disease. She'd taken stamina for granted when she cared for her own apartment, held down a job, and spent her evenings in social engagements. Now if she wanted A, she couldn't have B. She trod to the bed and fell on the blue and

white comforter. The soft mattress on the white wicker bed caressed her body, and she dozed.

Abrupt swirling and weakness sweeping over her like a fever when she had the flu woke her. It struck again and again. Her insides vibrated then her entire body shook. She doubled up until it subsided. In this condition, only idiots would move to a strange place where they knew no one.

She chuckled. Laugh or cry. What choice did she have? Now that Mom had died, there was no one to help her make decisions. She hadn't seen her biological dad since she was two, and from what Mom had told her, it was for the best. No sisters or brothers. No one but Carson. Nausea crawled in her stomach. His screams for her to find help and stop embarrassing him resounded in her head.

Well, Carson, that's what I'm doing. Tears welled up in her eyes, but she blinked them back. If she went on with life as though all of the symptoms weren't happening, would they go away? She could dream, couldn't she?

She forced herself from the bed and traipsed back into the bathroom to the shower stall, turning the water to lukewarm. Hot water drained her. Once, any water refreshed her, especially when she swam. She puckered her mouth and made a fish motion as she stepped out. Then she dried off and wrapped up in a royal blue towel. Yep. She was part fish.

She walked to the closet, the coat hangers scraping across the rod as she pushed them back. A sinking sensation hit in the pit of her stomach. Her clothes never entered her mind when she'd moved to Destin in a flurry. Breaking her apartment lease, training a replacement for her job, finding a place to live, and

getting the coaching position had taken all the time and energy she'd had.

The trendy skirts, pants, and blouses that once gave her a stylish flair swallowed her. They no longer appeared fashionable, just baggy. Here, she'd forgotten about these. She tugged on the jeans and blue-flowered shirt she bought the same day she purchased the skirt and blouse for her interview with Matt. She trekked outside, slipped into her car, and backed out.

Zippering down Highway 98, she passed few vehicles. She tried to forget about Carson's cruel remarks and clothes that no longer fit as she turned off the main road into the pebble lot in front of The Wharf and parked. She slid out of the car and ambled to a white wooden building, resembling a home by the sea, a place where she could gaze at the horizon and let her mind wander far away from her problems. The smell of fried fish wafted through the doorway as she entered and her mouth watered. She loved fish.

She followed the hostess to the weathered wooden deck, a refreshing breeze hitting her in the face as they walked toward a tall table near a railing. She glanced at the ships docked in the calm lagoon beside it. Only one other person sat out here, and he was turned toward the harbor, probably admiring the peaceful scene. That's what she intended to do. Settle her nerves.

The man who practically leaned over the balustrade never flinched when she plunked into her seat. She pulled up her chair. It scraped and he turned, his brown eyes wide.

Matt! She let out a tiny gasp. What was he doing here? It was a public place. Suzie spun in her seat and directed her gaze at the sea to avoid eye contact with him. Now she couldn't see the menu, and her diet was

limited. She had to study it before she made a selection. She reached behind her and slapped around the table. Had it blown away? She faced forward for an instant and snatched it. Then she twirled to the side to read it. She couldn't eat in this position.

Matt lowered his head.

Thank you. He couldn't peer at his pants through an entire meal, could he?

His head moved up.

She stared at her lap. When the waitress came back, she'd ask to move, or she could sit on the other side of the table. And deliberately put her back in front of Matt. Would that be rude?

"Hi."

She jumped.

Matt stood across from her with his hand on the back of a chair.

Surely he wasn't going to join her.

"We seem to have chosen the same restaurant. There's no one out here yet but us. We might as well eat together rather than play peekaboo, if that's all right with you."

Suzie tried to chuckle in agreement, but it sounded nervous. She'd erase it if she could. Perhaps he hadn't noticed. "Sure. Have a seat." Her heart raced. Did she really have to dine with him? During the meal would he notice something wrong with her and not hire her? Shivers slithered up her spine, and her hands trembled. She thrust them in her lap as Matt sank into the chair across from her and pulled up to the table.

The sloshing of the emerald sea against the hulls of the boats which lulled her moments ago swooshed in her ears like a racket to escape. The bright golden-red sky turned to gray, twilight claiming the day as gloom

fell on her. Would this meal end the new job before she started?

Matt reached for a menu between the ketchup and mustard bottles at the end of the rustic wooden table and handed it to her.

"I've already seen this one." She patted the bill of fare in front of her. "Thank you."

He laid it down then smiled, exposing perfectly straight white teeth. An orthodontist would have been proud to have him in an ad for his dental practice. "It's so unusual for a professional to apply to coach summer league swimming and move here to do it. Do you want to remain in Destin permanently?"

Why was he prying? How could she know how long she'd be anywhere? *Get hold of yourself.*

Matt leaned back in his seat. "I suppose I'm nosey by nature. It's none of my business."

Suzie waved her hand in the air. What she wanted was to get well, but that wasn't the question. He'd been making friendly conversation. "As you know, I used to be a reporter. By their standards, you're not nosey. Becoming a full-time Destin resident would be nice."

"I respect you for following your desire to live by the sea no matter how long you're able to stay. I think some people wait until it's too late to do the things they dream of."

He respected her? Perhaps she wasn't as disgusting as Carson seemed to think.

Try as she might, she couldn't keep the days of his insults from haunting her. The first time he'd spewed his venom she'd attended his tennis match. For an unknown reason she suddenly shook uncontrollably and grew so weak she could hardly sit up. It frightened her so she almost burst into tears. He marched over

and ordered her to go home or go to a rehabilitation center but not to come to his competitions in such a state ever again.

She slumped in her chair like she'd done that day. Tears threatened to explode inside her as they had then, but she glanced up.

Matt gazed at her with admiration in his eyes. "I frequent this place, so I rarely look at the choices. If they changed up something on me, I'd be in trouble when I ordered. I'll shut up and give you a few minutes to make up your mind."

A few minutes to collect herself was more like it, but Matt hadn't let on if he'd noticed her near meltdown. His kind nature calmed her inner turmoil. She perused the menu. Sweet potatoes and two other food items would go down without intensifying her already bad indigestion. "Oh, I know what I want."

Matt's lips turned up on the corners. "You found something you enjoy?"

"I did. I've been eating quite a few sweet potatoes. I didn't know fish houses sold them. I assumed they'd have French fries and coleslaw, that sort of thing. They do, but all of these other selections are amazing." Had she sounded too excited about the available food?

Matt raised his dark eyebrows. "We have sophisticated taste in Destin."

Suzie chortled at his teasing voice. She hadn't laughed from deep inside in a long time.

The waitress moseyed over. "Hi, what can I bring you?"

Suzie motioned toward Matt.

"I'll have a fried grouper sandwich with French fries and mixed vegetables."

"And for you, ma'am?"