



*a novel by*  
JoeAnn Hart



# float

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Ashland  
Creek  
Press

“To have faith is to trust yourself to the water. When you swim you don’t grab hold of the water, because if you do you will sink and drown. Instead you relax, and float.”

—Alan Watts

# one

*God Help Us.*

The words, writ large in the sand, appeared on the beach after Duncan Leland's attention had already drifted. It was in the pink of the afternoon, at the end of another trying day, when he should have been attempting something spectacularly proactive to save his sinking business, such as scrambling numbers on a screen or gathering somber consultants around him, but instead, as was his habit, he was looking for answers outside his office window. The sky

was clear and blue, the water calm. The serenity of the day mocked the economic storm raging around him. He was now, as Harvey Storer of Coastal Bank & Trust had so coldly pointed out to him that morning, officially underwater. He owed more on Seacrest's Ocean Products of Maine, Ltd., than the business was worth.

"True that," Duncan had agreed, "but only at this very moment."

"What else is there?" asked Storer.

A leveling silence washed over Duncan as his mind slowly emptied of words. He was opening and shutting his mouth like a fish when Storer, sitting across from him at the loan desk, leaned in closer.

"Duncan? What else do you have that might secure this loan?"

Duncan shook himself out of his trance, realizing that Storer's was a fiscal rather than a philosophical challenge. "It's all here," he said, half-standing as he slapped pages of the loan application down on the mahogany like tarot cards. "Look, in the spring, our new line of fertilizer hits the market, opening a revenue stream so robust it'll be like drinking water from a fire hose!" He displayed a spreadsheet thick with projections, but this banker, like the ones who came before him, remained unmoved. Duncan's vision of rosy profits in the future failed to overcome the devalued assets of the present, and in that moment he saw his business begin to slide away.

He'd left Storer's sterile cubicle in a funk and gone back to his office, back to the warm embrace of his chair and the tranquilizing effect of the harbor view. He fixed his gaze on the beach, a patch of rust-streaked sand so inhospitable it did not even exist at high tide, and let his mind fix on a plastic bag caught on a submerged stick. He watched the bag, alive with water, wash gently from side to side until his own currents of thought slowed to a listless tempo. After an empty space of time, the retreating tide abandoned both stick and bag to the land, and his hypnotic amusement was over. Looking

back, he was sure of one thing: There had been no one on the beach, and there had been no mysterious message written in the sand. That was two things, but still.

He wondered if he might have been a witness to the event if the music hadn't ended. He liked to keep an iPod playing on the factory floor, on the theory that if he was asking his employees to spend their days cooking fish skeletons down to a fine powder, then he had better give them some background music to divert their senses. If nothing else, managing the sound system was one of the few enjoyable duties left to him, so when a cycle of early Beatles ended, he turned his back on the water view to deliberate at length between PLAYLIST #8 (Miles, Coltrane, and Rufus Harley) and PLAYLIST #22 (Dylan, Joni, and Steve Earle) before abandoning hope of coming to any decision at all. He clicked SHUFFLE in defeat and returned to his chair. When he looked back down at the beach, there, scratched into the sand, were the three-foot-high wobbly letters spelling out *God Help Us*. The surface was still reflective from its recent brush with water. The message faced the harbor, not him, so it didn't appear to be a personal accusation, more like a random act of prayer. Or not. Worst case scenario, it was written by an employee petitioning God on behalf of Seacrest's. But no matter who wrote it or what the intention was, it was a desperate message and a bad one for potential investors, should he ever have any. It had to go.

Down, down to the sea he climbed, taking the two iron flights of the fire escape to avoid his factory workers, who seemed to want so much from him these days, most of all an optimistic face on Seacrest's future. Gone, gone, gone. It was low tide now, and his heels sank into the wet sand as he trudged toward the words, his footprints filling with water behind him. With the tip of his black rubber boot, he proceeded to rub out the message, erasing the *d* first, changing *God Help Us* to *Go Help Us*.

“Better,” he mumbled. More ecumenical, more in keeping with his Unitarian ancestry. Then he contemplated *Us*, that sweet plural pronoun of marriage. He rubbed it out. It had been the middle of August when Cora had asked for a little air, and here it was after Labor Day and he still hadn’t heard back from her whether she’d caught her breath. He stood very still, trying to quell the sour tide in his gut. How had the solid continent of *Us* become the scattered islands of *him* and *her*? They had just wanted what everyone else seemed to have. “Is a baby really too much to ask for?” as Cora would say. “They’re everywhere!”

He should have known that to have expectations was to court disappointment. Two years ago they’d decided it was time to add to their fund of general happiness, but nature had not taken its usual course in the bedroom. Was it her? Was it him? Or were they just a bad combination? But Cora, even-keeled as she was, wouldn’t let them go there. “No finger-pointing,” she’d said. “Let’s just get the problem solved.” And in July they began to take deliberate steps toward *in vitro*. At the very first appointment, he was asked for a sperm sample to test for volatility. He found the staff oddly humorless about the situation, and his jokes fell flat, but he got the job done. Afterward, it was he who fell flat. He froze in the hallway with the filled specimen cup in hand, locked in terror as if staring into a milky abyss. A nurse had to wrest the container from him, and from then on his marriage began to spiral down the drain.

The problem was this: Fertility treatment had led him to think about the dangers of replicating his family’s genes, and those worries began to bloom like algae in a stagnant pond. The next thing he knew, he was debating whether it was right to bring children into the world at all, a world so overcrowded and polluted it sat on the brink of ecological extinction. This, in turn, led to questions about the meaning of life itself. “When we give them life, we give them

death,” he said. “What’s the point?”

That had been it for Cora. “Enough thinking,” she’d said through her tears. “It’s time to act.” Off to counseling they went, but they could not reach the line of salvage in that desolate terrain, with its boxes of tissues and anatomically correct dolls stored in a milk crate in the corner. Cora was particularly teary because she’d been getting estrogen shots in preparation for the egg harvest. Marriage counseling ended when he failed to follow through on scheduling an appointment, a chore the therapist insisted they take turns doing, a tactic that seemed like some kind of a test. He remembered the moment he stalled out. He had been, as was his habit, gazing out of his office window, watching the Hood Dairy blimp hover in the air above a distant beach. ENJOY HOOD ICE CREAM was printed on the rounded sides, sending him into a smiling reverie of dripping vanilla cones, sand buckets, and other childhood joys. “Enjoy it *all*,” he’d said out loud. He continued to watch until the blimp turned inland, but instead of majestically disappearing over the horizon as usual, it slowly—ever, ever so slowly—dipped too close to the treetops. The navigation bucket got stuck in the branches, and it could not move. Engine trouble, he’d found out later. No one was hurt, but how could he make an appointment after that?

“What kind of a world is this where a zeppelin can just fall out of the sky?” he said to Cora. It was the day he’d gone to Portland to produce the specimen for the first attempt at implantation later that week, so he was particularly shaken up. “How can we bring a child into a world that hasn’t even mastered nineteenth-century technology?”

Cora was as unmoved as the zeppelin. “Fuck the blimp,” she said. She was a family therapist herself, and as far as she was concerned, his inability to make the appointment demonstrated not just his lack of commitment to the process but a lack of commitment

to her and their future baby. Like a cruise ship, Cora was not easy to turn around once she was set on a particular heading. She started throwing ballast overboard. She sent Duncan away that very night. “Go to Slocum’s for a few days to get your head on straight. You’re too anxious to be around right now.”

Their relationship had been sitting in dead air ever since. But that was not today’s problem. His marriage would have to wait in a long line of tomorrow’s problems because today he had to save his business. Seacrest’s was letting in water at every seam, and it was all his fault. He had aimed too high. He should have opted for the cheapest solution he could get away with a few years ago when the EPA mandated the installation of pollution controls, but no—in the spirit of the careless prosperity of the times, he’d gone trolloping to where the woodbine twineth and borrowed too much money for a complete modernization of the plant, making it as clean and tight as a toolbox. The banks were crazy to loan him so much money. How much profit, really, could be had from fish waste? Seacrest’s, whose business was to process marine waste into feed and fertilizer, used to be known, along with all the other gurry or dehydration plants on the coast, as the smelly stepchild of Maine’s fishing world. Now the renovated plant was almost odorless. The industry had come a long way since his great-great-grandfather Lucius Leland’s time, when gurry—the finny bones and entrails left over from cleaning the day’s catch—was unceremoniously dumped into the harbor, only to wash up on shore later in the day. Lucius was originally from bustling New Bedford, but he’d dropped anchor in Port Ellery in the name of love for a local lass and soon saw wealth where others saw garbage. Using the money he’d raised touring the Midwest with a sawdust-stuffed whale in a boxcar, he built a factory to dry and grind up the fish scraps for livestock feed. The first thing he processed was his whale. The pet food industry soon became a major buyer as well, and

business boomed for more than a century, but in the last few decades they'd had to branch out just to keep up. Duncan's father developed their unique fish fertilizer, and more recently Duncan had added kelp to the recipe after watching Cora gather seaweed from the beach for her garden.

Kelp. He looked at *Go Help* in the sand, then changed the *H* in *Help* to a *K* and added an exclamation point.

"*Go Kelp!*" he shouted, then looked around, but there was no one to hear. Not even the gang of seagulls patrolling the water's edge had paused to consider his outburst. As was too often the case these days, his words made sense only to him. *Go Kelp!* could be the name of his new retail line of soil amendments, if there was a future for them at all. Before the expensive renovations to the building, he'd always sold his fertilizer in barrels to companies that resold the powder in small bags under their own pricey labels, but as the bills came flooding in, some daft accountant said that the only way to recoup his capital expenditure was to leave the safe harbor of wholesale and set out into the deep waters of retail. Which meant more money out the door. His marketing investment had been huge, and the product was still not launched. Worse, competition was darkening the sky. A dehyde down in Massachusetts had contracted with key fish processors for their waste and was already selling eco-sludge directly to the planting public. Another company in northern Maine was peddling lobster-shell dust and getting as much play in the gardening magazines as a dazzling new rose. He hadn't acted fast enough in making the transition. The words he'd overheard in a bar ten years ago, soon after he took his father's place at Seacrest's, came back to him now: "Duncan Leland run a business? He couldn't run a bath."

One of the seagulls bounced closer with an eye toward a blue shell near his foot. Duncan kicked the mussel to the bird so it could see for itself that it was empty; then, with a start, he realized that

there were no footprints on the beach other than his. How was that possible? Someone had written the words without walking on the sand? He looked around, then up. He was lost in troubled thought when a ship's horn sounded, frightening the seagulls into the air with hysterical shrieks and a slow flapping of wings.

All but one. There was always one.

The large black-backed gull had a loop of a six-pack holder stuck in its beak and around its neck, so that the sharp plastic dug into the sides of its face. The rest of the holder was bunched up around its head, and two of the loops formed glasses through which the bird stared at him with red, burning eyes. One wing hung limply by its side, dragging in the sand. The poor bastard could hardly move without making things worse, and Duncan knew that feeling all too well. The kindest thing to do was to let nature take its course, but when the bird opened its beak in mute appeal, Duncan realized he was screwed. He'd have to give it a fighting chance or never face his friend Josefa Gould again. Josefa ran Seagull Rescue out of her backyard, a cramped space where the birds went to linger in pain before dying. He looked up at the factory. He couldn't see anyone at the windows because of the harsh reflection of the sun. But even though he couldn't see his employees, he could feel their eyes upon him, and in his mind he heard them laughing.

Let them. Wounded animals had to stick together.

He held his arms out, fluttering his hands, and as he edged slowly toward the injured gull he felt himself to be the ridiculous figure his employees thought he was. He could hear Cora telling him in the measured cadence of her profession that he was being paranoid, that he had the love and respect of all his employees. But this was not paranoia; how he wished it were. Ever since his father died, forcing Duncan to move back from New York to take over Seacrest's helm—his older brother, Nod, having laughed it off—he felt he was not

meeting the employees' expectations of a Leland boss. Duncan had arrived at the tail end of a long line of rugged, blond male specimens who were athletic, competent, and self-assured on land and sea. He was none of those things. Baby pictures showed him as a happy towhead, but the years had darkened his hair along with his mood, until both were mud-colored. Behind his back, he imagined that his workers made fun of his coordination (faulty) and glasses (eyes too dry for contacts). He was tall, yes, but tall in a gangly, loose-limbed sort of way. His image was not helped by the fact that at the moment he wore a business suit tucked into calf-high muck boots. After he'd returned from the bank with an empty begging bowl, he was too tired to change into his work clothes of jeans and a sweatshirt. He'd removed his tie and tossed it up and over the ceiling fan like a noose, then slipped off his leather shoes and put on the wellies he kept in his office for slogging around the factory floor, but he'd done nothing to protect his navy Brooks Brothers outfit. What did it matter? He saw no future that included a three-piece suit.

Taking care not to slip on the amber blobs of jellyfish that had been stranded by the tide, Duncan feigned left and the bird bobbed right. Back and forth they went, tangoing their way slowly to the crumbling seawall where the gull could be cornered among the debris. If the harbor of Port Ellery, Maine, was anatomical, they now stood firmly in the appendix. The town, all red brick and shadows, was neatly centered in the groin between two intertwining estuaries that flowed into the harbor like crossed legs. Protected coves formed armpits, and piney islands spread across the skin of water like raised hives. Seacrest's sat off the harbor's irregular belly, in a small un-navigable loop prone to collecting trash. Blue rubber gloves and pieces of yellow rope were dashed twice daily against the seawall, then fell behind the dark, wet rocks. Twisted metal shrines of lobster traps had dug into the beach to become part of the natural landscape, but

plastic water bottles and featherweight polystyrene coffee cups were the transient and windblown accessories. Some days the tide took it all away; other days it left it all behind.

The gull's options narrowed, and it turned its back to the wall, preparing to hold its ground. Duncan removed his jacket and held it aside like a toreador. The air blowing in off the harbor was cool, but the warmth of the sun on his back reminded him it was still technically summer. "It's not over yet," he said to the bird and moved carefully toward it, attempting a graceful drop of the jacket, but that required him to get so close that the gull was able to slash the tender part of his palm with the curved tip of its beak before trundling away.

"Damn!" Duncan squeezed his hand and looked up at the factory. He was sure he saw people move away. Would no one come to help him? Worse, would someone come to help and expose him as a leader who could not even catch an injured gull? It was equally unthinkable that they should see him walk away from a bad situation. He had to hurry. He took hold of his jacket and, with what he considered to be a superb show of agility, pounced on the bird. There ensued a whirl of elbows and wings, and for a moment Duncan thought he'd lost him, but finally, kneeling in the wet sand with sea water seeping through the wool blend of his trousers, he managed to wrap the jacket over the bird's head. Darkness calmed it down while Duncan restrained its wings with the sleeves. He was breathing hard by the time he collapsed against a barnacled rock with the neat package of gull under his arm. "For a dying bird, you've got a lot of fight left in you," he said. He readjusted his glasses, then dug around in his pants pocket for his cell phone.

"Josefa, I'm on Seacrest's beach with a gull for you—bring a cage and a Band-Aid."

## two

Josefa arrived lugging a dog crate with both hands while trying to keep a canvas tote from slipping off her shoulders. She was somewhere well over sixty, with thinning black hair and a complexion so pale it was as if her skin had been bleached colorless by the sun. Her eyes had long ago disappeared in folds of wrinkles, and she had a chin like a fried clam. In spite of this, she had the youthful, tubular body of a preteen and wore the Disney clothing of a toddler, making her seem helpless, which she was not. But even if he wanted to help her with the crate, Duncan couldn't stand up without losing the gull, who had worked its head out from under the fabric and was eyeing Duncan

with evil intent. The bird had a noble head with a long patrician beak, and its neck feathers were ruffed up around its face from the ordeal. It was the first seagull Duncan ever saw that looked like a bald eagle.

“Blood on your shirt,” Josefa said as she put the crate down.

Duncan raised his cut hand. “I was trying to help him, and he attacked me.”

She smiled. “Good ... knows how to protect himself.” She removed a pair of scissors from her bag and carefully cut the plastic loops off the gull’s head while Duncan held it still. His own head was very close to the bird’s back, and he could smell its musty linen scent.

“You’re going to cut my lapel,” said Duncan.

Josefa kept snipping. “He looks more ... comfortable in that suit than you,” she said, using words with difficulty. She was easier around animals than people and had a hard time translating human talk into thought and back again. The widow of an employee who had died in a freak accident at the plant, Josefa had since patched together a meager living with life insurance, social security, and the occasional donation, all of which gave her the freedom to save seagulls full time. She patrolled the beaches every day, combing the wash and rocks for sick gulls, then monitored the streets for ones injured by cars when they dawdled too long over roadkill. She’d load them into her rusty van and bring them to her yard, where they stood staring at the fence, depressed and dirty, often dying just hours after being saved. Most people consigned her to the category of someone too strange to know, but Duncan had an exceptionally high tolerance for strange, so they had developed a loafing kind of friendship. She had, from what he could make out, half a dozen adult children and a small herd of grandchildren, but they had all moved to distant pockets of the country for year-round jobs and placid weather. She missed them. She missed her husband. So here she was, funneling her affection onto seagulls instead. “Love is an energy ... has to go

somewhere,” she’d once told him. “Bottle it up, nothing but trouble.”

“The bird can keep the jacket,” said Duncan. “I won’t be needing a suit again until my funeral.”

She looked up at the brick building, which had SEACREST’S OCEAN PRODUCTS OF MAINE newly repainted in glossy white on its side. “Old dehyde looks smart enough. Things that bad ... on the inside?”

He twisted his upper torso around to admire the building. “It had better look good for all the money I poured into it. I’m in over my head in debt, and the banks have thrown up a headwind to any more credit until I pay off the renovation loan. They want their principal back. Now. I didn’t even know they could do that.”

“You didn’t read the loans?” Josefa carefully eased the plastic off the gull, and it jerked its bruised head back in response.

“Loan agreements are as easy to decipher as the small print on a plane ticket. I guess I knew they had the right—I just never thought they’d do it. I don’t know how I’m going to stay afloat. I don’t even have enough money to make payroll on Friday.”

“There’s always Beaky,” she said, struggling with the catch on the crate.

Duncan shook his head as if he were getting rid of water in his ears. “I’m over-extended as it is. I’d never get out from under a debt like that.” In the local lending world, Beaky Harrow was known as a hagfish, an eel-like creature who burrowed into the flesh of dead and dying fish caught on lines.

Josefa shrugged. “Here ... slide your friend in.” She held the door of the crate open, and, with some bending of neck and compression of wing, Duncan managed to get the bird safely inside as he released his jacket. Josefa reached in and stroked the traumatized bird, murmuring gull-like noises. To Duncan’s ears she sounded as if she were gasping for air, but the bird relaxed under her touch. He held out his jacket and inspected it for gull poop. Satisfied, he shook it out and

put it back on, only a little worse for wear.

“You think someone did this on purpose?” he asked, picking up the six-pack holder.

Six-pack holders were part of the plastic armada that floated in the sea, but they looked like slow-moving snacks to the gulls, who bit at them and ended up getting caught by their own prey. Those were accidents, although his plant manager, Annuncia, would call them flagrant murder by irresponsible trashing. What was not so accidental was the lunchtime game that downtown workers played by holding the plastic six-pack rings out of their office windows to let gulls snatch them out of their hands. Humans were so cruel, the way they knew how to play on natural greed. Didn't the birds ever learn? Didn't they ever notice the fate of every other seagull that succumbed to the temptation? He'd seen gulls compete over a single holder, fighting over the very thing that would choke them to death.

Josefa secured the crate. “Don't matter how it starts,” she said, removing a box of Band-Aids from her canvas bag. “It's the same bad end.”

Duncan tucked the plastic in his pocket before settling himself back down against the rock, in no hurry to return to the office. Josefa retrieved a paper cup from her bag and walked down to the tide line. She splashed some water on her hands, wiping them clean on her pink-hooded Ariel the Mermaid sweatshirt before filling the cup. When she returned, she stood for a moment and scanned the beach.

“Speaking of bad ends ... I found a knee. On Colrain Beach.”

“Is this the beginning of a joke?” Duncan held his hand out and braced himself as Josefa poured salt water over his wound. “Ouch.”

“Called the police. Weren't laughing like it were a joke. They guess it's Marsilio flotsam.”

“Poor bastard,” said Duncan. Marsilio was Slocum's brother-in-law, who went down in his lobster boat in the storm.

Josefa snorted as she dried his hand with the hem of her sweat-shirt. After she applied the bandage, she took a bottle of Gritty's Beer out of her bag and handed it to him. "For being brave."

"I wasn't brave," he said, twisting the top with a spritz. "I'm just saving my voice for Friday when my employees rise up against me."

She sat down with a grunt and opened a beer of her own. They both watched the foam rise from the top and spill onto the sand. "Dunc, the future's never what we think ... no use getting yourself wrapped around the propeller about it."

True that. Josefa's future could not have been predicted by anyone. Her husband, George, had been on Seacrest's loading dock directing gurry from a truck into the chute when he got dive-bombed by a gull. The new system had just been installed, and waste was no longer exposed as it went from truck to holding tank—hence, no vapors of rotting bones and entrails in the air. This made the EPA and the citizens of Port Ellery happy, but a frustrated gull, used to feeding on spillage, went into battle fury. George stepped back to wave him off and fell ten feet to the ground, onto his head, which did not in itself kill him. If every worker who fell on his head died, Duncan would have no employees left at all. But the truck driver panicked when he saw what happened, put his vehicle in the wrong gear to get out of the way, and crushed George against the factory wall. It was an extraordinary act of grace that Josefa continued to save seagulls, but she said the gull was just being a gull—it was the human who had the gift of conscious choice who'd fucked it up.

They drank in silence, gazing out on the water, which was calm, for water. Its surface undulated in pink and teal as it slurped under the docks of the industrial marina next door. But no matter how calm the water seemed, he knew. A storm could rise out of nowhere, especially as they moved into the fall. He slapped at a mosquito on his neck. The days were getting shorter. Complete dark was still a couple of hours

away, but the sun was already hugging the horizon, creating a hazy, watery light. In a month's time, the end of the day would seem to take place underwater, but for now the sun's luster stirred up murky sediments in his brain. He'd always considered himself content, but ever since that day at the fertility clinic, everything—even an injured gull—had become an opportunity for questioning life.

“Why do you try to save the birds?” Duncan asked. “Why bother when your success rate is so low?”

She twirled her bottle close to her ear and listened to the suds inside. “‘Cause there's always the one, the one who gets better and flies away.”

“How many of those in your lifetime?” he asked.

“Dozen?” she said, without taking her eyes off the harbor. “Last success was Fathom, attacked by a dog and lost half a foot. He adjusted. Learned to fly and land. Time for him to go, I made a big thing of it, rowing out to the lighthouse ... tossing him in the air. But I found him a week later with fishing line around his neck. I helped him again ... no use.” She tightened her sweatshirt around her and took a sip. “I like to think of the ones I've saved, up there. I like to think they think of me.”

“I'd like to think there was someone up there who thought of me, too,” said Duncan.

They watched a few day boats straggling in from the sea, chugging loudly and expelling clouds of diesel, heading for the fish auction. Seagulls followed them in, screaming in a dozen loud languages, demanding that the crew start cleaning fish and toss them the guts, as they had for hundreds of years. But the fish were already cleaned and in the hold, and the guts were in barrels ready to be delivered by truck to his plant. In the name of improving the environment, the gulls had lost another food source. It was funny how heavily regulated fish waste was, which got snapped up so eagerly

in the wild, and yet any boob could throw away plastic, which never disappeared.

“Why didn’t something eat the knee, do you think?” asked Duncan.

Josefa shrugged. “All bone. Reminds me. I’ve got bodies for the chute.”

“I wish you wouldn’t do that,” said Duncan. “I’m going to get in trouble one of these days.”

“Stop being a worrywart, Dunc. You’re within the law.”

It was true; a few gulls were allowed into the fertilizer mix because the regulators understood that a certain number of seabirds would end up in fish waste. The seaweed was riddled with gull body parts. Some days it seemed as if the birds molted wings as easily as feathers. He was allowed up to three percent “other” organic material in the dark powder, as long as it did not contain heavy metals or toxins. Josefa could not possibly dig enough graves for all her failed rescues, so she sometimes threw them down the waste chute into the grinder, the first step toward dehydration. When George was still alive, he used to bring the bodies to work with him in an insulated container, and Duncan still thought twice before opening a beer cooler at a picnic.

“That’s how I want to be buried,” said Duncan. “No commending to the sea, no ashes scattered in a daisy meadow, but here at the factory. Wrap me up in a sheet and drop me down the chute. In time, some gardener will spray me on a prize-winning pumpkin, and I’ll have made the world a better place.”

“Amen to that,” said Josefa, and she shook her beer bottle to make sure it was empty before putting it in her bag.

“Speaking of amen,” said Duncan. “I didn’t come here to save a seagull. I came down to erase a strange message someone wrote in the sand. It gave me the willies.”

Josefa looked over to where he was pointing with his bandaged hand. “You really trawl for things to fret about. What does it say?”

“It said *God Help Us*,” said Duncan. “But I’ve changed it to *Go Kelp!* What do you think of that as the name for the new fertilizer?”

“As a slogan, I like the first one better.” And then she stood up and wiped the sand off her pink sweatpants. “Come on, let’s take care of the bodies ... before Annuncia and Wade shut down the works for the day.”

Duncan pulled himself upright and steadied himself against the seawall. His hand hurt, and the air on the wet seat of his trousers chilled him to his core. His knee ached, too, but that was probably sympathetic pain for the lobsterman awash in fragments. He thought of his father, lost at sea, his body never recovered from a sailing accident. Cora often worried on Duncan’s behalf about this lack of closure over his father’s death, but he didn’t mind. It was better to have him gone altogether than to have to bury a single knee.

“Duncan,” said Josefa. “Wake up and help.”

He took the crate from her and felt the gull slide to one side, throwing him off balance for a moment. Josefa adjusted her rescue bag over her shoulder, and as they headed up to the parking lot they passed dark wreaths of sea grass left by the tide.

“It’s like stepping on graves,” Duncan said.

“Not particularly,” said Josefa. She gave him a sideways glance. “Might want to think about moving out of your mom’s house and getting back with your wife. Your brain is beginning to take on water.”

“Cora doesn’t want me back until ...” And then, as if a spigot was abruptly shut off, the leveling silence returned to his head, draining him of thought. Until *what?* As his skull emptied of thought, he felt a sharp pang of worry, way off in the distance, and wondered if this was the first sign of the family madness.

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