

Hearts in the Storm By Elmer Seward

Chapter 1

He dragged out of the seaside door onto the long wooden deck. Standing for a moment, he looked out at the ocean. The waves were crashing and churning, whipping up foam as they battered the beleaguered sand. Shells, rocks, and other debris were dragged out as quickly as they were deposited. The water was in constant motion. There was a storm off shore, and the beach was catching the brunt of its fury.

He took a long draught of his coffee, hoping to clear the cluttered remnants of last night's bender. Shirtless and wearing a tattered pair of shorts, he stood watching the eastern sky. It was gray and ominous, but the gray-filtered daylight still hurt and he watched the waves through squinted eyes at first.

He laid his cup on the deck railing and leaned forward, straining to glimpse the pelicans riding the rolling waves just beyond the break. They would appear as they crested the top of the roller coaster waves and then disappear as they glided down into the valleys between the waves. Occasionally, one would take flight, circle for a moment and then dive, disappearing beneath the water for a brief moment.

The beach was deserted – only him and the pelicans. As he watched, something odd caught his attention. Just beyond the birds, another dark object in the water appeared and disappeared. At first he thought it was one of the pelicans, but there was something odd about the shape. Maybe it was a fin. It was common to see dolphins just off the shore. It could be a shark fin. They prowled just off shore more often than the local tourist rental companies or local city officials wanted to announce. It crested into view again. No, it was too far out and in the sunless water, too dark to identify . . . but not a fin. It disappeared again. He watched closely, waiting for it to crest again. There it was, but it was taller. It was moving. It was . . . an arm. A head and a waving arm being tossed in the tumultuous water.

The sound of the waves roaring and crashing was all consuming, but faintly he could hear another sound almost imperceptible. He strained and was sure he heard a voice in the intermittent roar and crash, a voice crying for help.

He searched frantically up and down the beach. There was no one. He had to act quickly. He grabbed an old cork safety ring that hung as a decorative prop on the deck of the cottage, jumped down the steps into the deep sand. As he ran, his feet sank into the loose, shifting sand. It felt like he was lifting leaden legs as he struggled forward. Finally reaching the firmer wet sand, he sped up only to hit the water. Again, each step was like moving an anvil. He moved into the waves, diving into each one to avoid being knocked backward. As he wrestled with the waves, he tried desperately to find the person who would rise and then vanish with the action of the waves.

Swimming now, fighting against the current determined to rush him back to shore, he was becoming exhausted. The water was battering and pulling on him, but he pressed on trailing the safety ring in his wake.

He was close now. He could see the figure. It was a girl, maybe in her mid teens. She was flailing her arms desperately trying to keep her head above water. She wasn't being successful. Alternately, choking, gasping, and screaming as her head broke the water. Then she would be sucked down again.

As he swam to within feet of the struggling figure, the girl disappeared and did not reappear. He looked frantically for her. He dove hoping to find her. The dark, churning water was murky and obscured his vision. Then he saw her hand just below him. He swam deeper, his lungs burning. She saw him and was reaching toward him. Her eyes were wide with panic. He extended his arm as far as he could. His fingers were inches away. In the next instant, she was swept away in the shifting current. He peered through the darkness, his lungs about to burst. She was gone.

End of Excerpt

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