

AFLOAT

By Erin Healy

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The wetsuit and the water are black, and after the man slips into both, he seems to vanish from the world. He has come on a starless night to avoid being seen, to hide a few containers where they won't be found. He will be underpaid for this task by his anonymous employer, but times are hard so he takes what he can get.

He has gone into the water between his bobbing boat and twelve shadowy structures that float. They are gathered under the weak moon in a semicircle like disciples awaiting their teacher. But he is not the one they wish for. As instructed he will secure his packages under the second unit, which is squat and unfinished. Which will never be finished.

The silky surface between him and building 2 reflects the sky's silver stars. For a moment, before he lowers the diving mask, he is distracted by the glittering scene. The understanding gives him a jolt: because it *is* a starless night, and these are not reflections. They are sardine-sized creatures flashing with their own energy, flickering randomly, tricking his eyes.

He lets go of the boat and reaches out to touch one, expecting it to dart away. It flares instead, flaming like a struck match though fully submerged, and sends a tingling shock through the palm of his hand. He jerks back. The flame dies. With the thumb of his other hand he tries to rub the sting away.

The pain won't die. Nor will his sudden certainty that more secrets than his are hidden in this place.

He would turn back, if not for the money.

He dives into darkness to do his work, avoiding contact with the silver things, and as he swims they fade away. Fear hurries him along. He needs to be gone before the sun rises, before everything concealed comes to light.

2

If he had been looking at the day from a different point of view, Vance Nolan might have figured out the problem while there was still time to act. But when he first sensed that something was wrong, his instinct told him to search for the usual suspects: Equipment that might malfunction. Procedures that might be short-cut. Materials that might be shoddy.

So it was nearly noon before Vance realized that the thing bothering him was not any of these. Instead it was an absence, a noise stripped away from the world, something like not being able to hear the sound of his own breathing.

He couldn't hear the birds.

Vance stood at the tip of Eagle's Talon, a long peninsula that hooked the wide Rondeau River like a bird snatching a fish. Feathery black willows spread shade across the land and housed plenty of feathered creatures, as did the tall grasslike

leaves of the flowering river bulrushes. Most days, Vance could hear the calls of terns and gulls and other waterbirds over the clattering human noises that rose from his construction site. But hammers, drills, nail guns, air compressors, trucks, and jocular workers had never drowned out the world as they did on this brilliant July day.

On the inside of the clawlike strip of land was a cove almost half a mile across, sparkling with summer sun. On the outside of the land's curve, the river was a swift highway that promised to transport a man to utopia if only he had a boat. Apparently the birds had set off for paradise already.

Vance removed his white hard hat so the light breeze could cool his head, then brushed shore dust off his short beard with his other hand. From this vantage, facing north, he could see the entire construction project going on inside the crescent of the cove. Before the first day of fall, the neighborhood that had been translated from his mind onto paper and then into a model would finally become a full-scale reality—though not exactly as he'd originally envisioned.

He looked north toward the top of the cove, where the long, skinny boom of a truck-mounted pump formed a towering arc nearly forty feet over the water. It scraped the sky's belly and then turned downward to deliver wet concrete to the surface of an unusual foundation. Constructed of sealed foam blocks, the platform was designed to float.

Here at Eagle's Talon, Vance built homes on water.

Technically, they were condominiums. Elite living spaces for wealthy owners, eight units in each of the twelve buildings, ninety-six units total. To Vance,

though, they were the first step toward his real goal, which was to build beautiful amphibious homes for the poor. Until Tony Dean had scuttled Vance's plans, that's what these unusual units were supposed to be.

In spite of this, every day Vance stood here at the tip of the peninsula and reminded himself that all work was worth doing well.

On the day the birds fell silent, Vance's construction crew was assembling prefabricated aluminum walls on the cured foundations of buildings 1 through 6. A subcontracted pump company had spent the week pouring the foundations of buildings 7 through 11. Building 11, the final pour, would be finished within a few hours. It would cure within a few days. Building 12, the model, had been completed in the spring and already had residents in four of its eight units.

On the shoreline behind 11, the rough-terrain concrete-pump truck was braced on extended outriggers between the water and the earth. Behind the truck, a concrete mixer continuously fed wet concrete into the pump via a chute. And on the floating platform, the pump operator guided the boom with a remote control while a laborer pointed the hose where he wanted the concrete to go. The truck's rack-and-pinion slewing system made a whirring sound as the operator directed it to shift.

The only detail out of the ordinary that day was the presence of a fifteen-year-old kid, the pump operator's son, who was permitted to sit in the truck's cab while his father worked down on the foundation. Vance wouldn't have allowed the kid on the site at all, and he had questioned his presence in the truck, but the operator assured him it wasn't against company policy.

Vance didn't really care. Too many things could go wrong at a work site like this, and all of it was his responsibility—especially the things that went wrong. So he had asked the subcontractor's foreman, Drew Baxter, to send the kid home. As this would have sidetracked the operator and delayed the day's work, Baxter refused and blew him off with a grin that made Vance feel uneasy.

It wasn't long afterward, while Vance watched this operation from the peninsula's southern point, that he noticed a small brown bird performing aerial stunts around the highest point of the concrete pump's boom. The silent bird made one, two, three loops and then plummeted toward the surface of the river, pulled out of its dive at the last possible second, and shot away, scratching the glassy water with the tips of its feathers.

That was the moment when the birds' silence commanded Vance's attention.

Vance reseated his hard hat, then peeled off his outer work shirt and left the tip of the peninsula. The summer heat had crept up on him. It caused the skin at the nape of his neck and under his beard to itch.

He began to walk back toward the pump-truck operation. At building 2, a young apprentice named Andy was bent over a drill, securing the wall to a floor joist. Andy was just out of high school but demonstrated the reliability and skill of someone who'd been doing this kind of work for much longer. Vance planned to keep tabs on him. The crucifix he wore around his neck dangled away from his body as he worked, then slapped his chest when Andy straightened up to wave a greeting.

Vance passed buildings 3 and 4, scanning the riverside bank for the gulls

that usually insisted on being heard even when they hid. The lush vegetation looked just as it had yesterday. There was no sign of damage to the reedy nesting areas. But neither was there any sign of waterfowl.

Somewhere near building 7, Vance wondered if he should take the birds' silence as a clue to call it quits early. Sometimes the wildlife were prophets of disaster. There was another reason why the layer of silence sounded eerie to him, a troubling reason from an obscure corner of his memory that he didn't want to examine too closely.

When he reached building 8 the ground at Vance's feet vibrated as if someone had dropped a heavy load just yards away.

A mechanical groan raised shouts from the concrete crew at building 11. Vance dropped his overshirt in the dust and started running before his mind had completely registered the problem, though his eyes spotted it right away: one of the pump truck's forward outriggers was sinking into the water, and already the rear axles had given up their share of the vehicle's weight. The truck tipped at a catawampus angle, pulled over by the weight of its long, arcing boom.

“Clear out!”

His command was unnecessary. The men on the foundation were already scabbling off the floating platform and onto solid ground. Others backed off the area like ripples of water fleeing a tossed stone. The rubber hose thrashing at the end of the pump hit a man in the head and spit wet concrete into the cove as the boom swung away. And at the back of the pump truck, the concrete mixer's chute groaned and twisted and then snapped off.

On the sloping bank, the foreman Baxter seemed to have no head for crisis. Lips parted, eyes frowning, he was watching the truck fall as if it were an illusion and he was trying to sort out how the trick was done.

Someone was shouting and waving his arms as if to indicate the operator should swing the boom in the opposite direction. The operator seemed to have forgotten the boom entirely and was shouting about his kid in the tilting cab. Wet concrete sucked at his work boots and held him back from his son.

Within seconds Vance reached the truck. It was tipping swiftly, but he jumped onto the stainless step before it was too far off the ground, then transferred his weight to the wheel guard so he had space to open the door. The boy had been tossed off his seat toward the starboard side of the windshield. He dangled by the steering wheel with one arm and scrabbled to get his feet under him. A clipboard slid along the dash, clattered against a bracketed fire extinguisher, and then tumbled out the open window on the other side.

Vance yanked the door open. He braced himself, one boot on the driver's seat and one on the truck's frame, and leaned back against the heavy door as he extended his hand to the boy. They clapped a strong grip on each other's wrists.

The pair remained on the listing thirty-ton truck for no more than three seconds.

In the first instant, Vance looked past the kid's shoulder and out through the open window, which was almost touching the water. He saw the white paper of the clipboard fluttering like a fishtail as it sank to depths that hadn't existed when the truck was stabilized such a short time ago. A massive hole gaped under the

forward right outrigger where solid ground had been just hours earlier. Beneath the surface of the water, mud was falling away from the bank like an avalanche. The paper was swallowed by swirling sediment.

In the next second, as he heaved the boy out of the cab, Vance lifted his eyes and realized that the plummeting boom would shear the bedroom balconies clean off the face of building 12.

In the third second they leaped. Vance turned in the air. And as they dropped behind the falling truck, he saw a person step out onto the nearest third-floor balcony.

The long blond hair belonged to Danielle Clement. Danielle, the young single mom of five-year-old Simeon. Danielle, who had caught Vance's eye and occupied a bright room in his mind since the day he'd met her at Tony Dean's office two years ago.

Danielle, who should have been at work.

She turned her back to the looming catastrophe as she reached for her sliding glass door.

Little Simeon was at her side.

Vance forced every remaining bit of breath out of his taxed lungs.

“Danielle!” he shouted.

He saw her turn toward his warning, and then the hard ground struck the bottom of his feet and punished every bone in his legs and back, and the upended heavy equipment blocked his view of the worst tragedy ever to occur on his watch.