

Rosie's Beach



Kathy Sampson

ROSIE'S BEACH by Kathy Sampson

CHAPTER ONE The Whale Watchers

1999

The surroundings were bright and pleasantly functional, contrary to the statue of a man tense and brooding, head bowed over the bench at which he sat. The tableau could have been a photograph, a moment frozen in time except for the betrayal of movement seen through windows on the port side. They told of life yet, of rolling swell and salt spray. A dip to the left drove the horizon up past the top of the anodized metal frames. Following a slight hesitation, the motion reversed until only sky was visible. The alternating pitch of marine engines hummed along as the animations continued to re-play: the same sky above an unchanging sea, rising and falling again and again. It was repetition of a kind that might have continued forever, but patterns of life are rarely more than convenient, seldom predictable.

Shoulders straightened and heaved as the man released a prolonged sigh of resignation. He sat upright to stare unseeing at a collection of lights and switches on the radio before him. What Paul needed now was a lull, no complications or eventualities; just time to accept, regroup. Then the volume of the engines was rising and a surge of acceleration forced him back in his seat. His gaze swung to the windows. Just ocean remained within the frames and he was leaning in that direction as the craft powered onto its new course. The radio added to his confusion, hissing and crackling at him. A woman's voice broke through the static: "Paul? Are you still there?"

He turned back, slowly, reluctantly, closing his eyes and squeezing the lids tightly, creating fresh pain to ease one less physical yet far more debilitating. "Paul?" the voice repeated, growing pedantic. His hand drifted to the panel and a finger hovered beneath a switch. An upward flick would cut the transmission. Here and now required it – there were things which needed his full attention. What were they, though? He couldn't remember, was unable to see them clearly through the mental fog. That was why they had regressed to become mere things, not the specific tasks and important responsibilities they surely were before he had been called to the radio.

"Damn it, Paul!" insisted the speakers, "I know you're there."

The outer door burst inwards. The sudden action was probably accentuated by the pitch of the vessel, but the look of concern and urgency on the newcomer's face added credence to his dramatic interruption. "They turned for the shore." The disappointment in Darren's tone bordered on despair. "I thought it might be us, so I gave them space. Didn't make any difference." He rubbed the salt-encrusted tangle of a greying beard as he waited for a response and seemed irritated when one wasn't forthcoming. Paul was gazing blankly at him, seemingly incapable of making any sense of this latest information because his mind was elsewhere. Darren flicked an accusatory glare at the radio. "What do you want to do?"

What indeed? Paul's deputy was older, probably wiser. Was he thinking what most of the others

hadn't had the courage to say – that the man seated at the desk was too young and inexperienced to head a project of this nature? When Darren glanced backwards to the deck outside it was something of a wake-up call. At least, Paul took it as such, an impatient reminder that someone, he in particular, ought to be out there and handling the problem.

“I need an answer, Paul,” the woman's voice grated testily over the radio.

The mist in Paul's eyes cleared, the trance faded. His hand moved to the button on the microphone base and depressed it. “I can't give you one, Cheryl.” The intention had been to sound regretful yet business-like, mainly for Darren's benefit – Cheryl could take it whichever way suited, she always did - but an uncontrollable hint of angry frustration had managed to leach through. Following a brief pause to re-invent a level of composure that was totally alien to his current mood, he droned unconvincingly: “Not right now.” A curt nod to Darren was a sign he would follow shortly, now that he was back on the ball. The deputy's eyes narrowed slightly, mistrusting; then the man was drifting out onto the deck. Paul waited until the door had begun to close before adding to his message: “I've got a bit of an emergency.” He released the button, heard only static and depressed it again. “Cheryl?” The static continued. Paul's shoulders slumped momentarily. Finally, he shut down the radio. It took a few seconds to review the conversation, the relationship, the entire unfortunate episode, then he was pushing all of it back under the carpet with a soft: “Shit!” and heading for the door.

Once outside, the contrast was quite remarkable. The air on deck stung his nostrils and took his breath away. It was a shock to the system, instant freedom from the claustrophobia of his personal life. The ocean had become and, for the present, continued to be his only world. As an entity, it was self-sufficient, a universe unto itself, one providing the safety and comfort of inviolability. The euphoria began to dwindle as certain exceptions were extrapolated: the immediate environment was less than comfortable in consideration of what had occurred; any decision he made in that regard would affect both; and each would impact the other, whether satisfactorily resolved or not; and so on, and so on. In a matter of seconds he was back to the butterfly principle, the reality that whatever he did would have far-reaching consequences. The way events had been unfolding lately, it would be sheer luck if something didn't come back to bite him.

A wave slapped the bow, interrupting the rhythm of the rolling deck. Paul tottered drunkenly and grabbed the doorknob to steady himself. Jemma was sweeping by and sent him a grin. It probably meant nothing. She was the youngest of the team, an undergraduate on work study who seemed to have adopted him as something of a role model. At least, he preferred to regard it as that, rather than believe the gut feeling that she fancied him. At the moment, however, she was just another critic, another complication, one more witness to whatever screw-up everyone seemed to be expecting him to make.

Righting himself, he walked casually to the rail, reading the pitch of the vessel, making sure he didn't stumble again. He would now be in full view and it was time to prove to anyone with doubts, and to himself perhaps, that at the tender age of twenty-seven, he could be not only a leader, but a damned good one. To achieve this meant a careful assessment of the situation and a workable

plan to resolve it which was not born of paranoia or knee-jerk reactions. His gaze swept the ocean ahead, locked onto a dark mound which broke the surface, then disappeared. Two more rose and sank, then others. The pod of whales was three hundred metres off the port beam, cruising gracefully. But it was no longer following the coast as it had been. Now it was heading in, seemingly oblivious to the awaiting danger.

The long, narrow beach stretched between small promontories of rocks. Beyond these, turbulence extended well out to sea indicating shallows, possibly more rocks. A further hazard to the safe navigation of both whales and craft was the wide expanse of discoloration between, where a continuous procession of breaking waves rolled in to churn the sand on the shelf below. How deep was that? Darren would have read the charts. He would know.

So too the whales. Generations of them had probably been up and down this coastline for millennia, were familiar with its vagaries. They'd be aware of the dangers posed by the shallow water, the incoming tide. There was no reason for them to swim that close and risk stranding. Then again, other strandings had seemed senseless. Everyone had a theory, but no-one really knew why. That was why Paul and his team were out there: to acquire much-needed knowledge through scientific observation. After months at sea they'd managed to fill up a hard-drive with information that was probably similar to that already previously documented; and none of it told him what he really needed to know.

He shot a glance along the deck looking for Darren and couldn't see him. A fleeting twinge of panic left a small knot in his stomach. It tightened as he hurried in search of the iconic personality he feared most in terms of criticism, yet who made him feel less alone simply because he was older and usually sympathetic. A movement above attracted his attention. Craig was leaning out over the rail of the bridge focusing binoculars, presumably on the pod. Paul called up to him: "How's the calf looking?"

Craig turned his head to reply. The binoculars remained in position as if his hands and arms had frozen. "Not good – slower now. The others are staying back, just following." Craig broke off to check on the whales. He began speaking again as he looked, but his voice was lost to the wind.

Paul wouldn't have heard – he was already on his way to the stern. Darren saw him coming and met him half way. The grim expression was not the comfort Paul had been seeking. If anything, it was a challenge, not necessarily to his authority, but to his right to retain it. Even if it was in his imagination, he had to meet it and asked: "Can't we head them off, try turning them?" What had been intended as the positive decision of a confident commander came out like a desperate plea for approval.

None was forthcoming. "That window's closed, Paul." Darren looked past him in the direction of the beach. "Ten minutes ago, maybe." His gaze returned, not exuding blame this time, merely stating an opportunity lost. "We have one chance, as I see it. And if we wait much longer, we'll lose that as well."

They'd already discussed the alternative. It was awful then, more so now and Paul was still reluctant. "Get us up near the leaders," he grated, "Then we'll decide." Why hadn't he said: *I'll*

decide? He took Darren's hesitation to be some internal battle between further argument and expediency. If that was the case, an almost imperceptible shudder of his grey eyes decided the contest. Then he was wheeling, hurrying to the bridge ladder, leaving Paul only slightly relieved.

His brisk walk to the cabin for his binoculars was another exercise in leading by example. He hoped his gait reflected a sense of urgency tempered by optimism – everything will be okay as long as we do our jobs efficiently and without fuss. Maybe the gritted teeth gave him away. Whatever the case, when Jemma caught up with him, she was apparently not fooled by his performance. "Are we going to lose them?"

He hated to think 'yes' because it was not only an admission of defeat, but would invite a mindset that almost guaranteed it. To consider voicing the opposite, however, would leave himself wide open if he failed to deliver. "We can only do our best," was all he really had to offer. Jemma's pained expression demanded more. The last thing he needed at his elbow now was a young, pretty devil's advocate continually undermining his self-confidence. Rather than telling her to simply get out of his hair, he added: "We can't afford any delays. Grab a two-way and meet me at the bow."

By the time he was leaning on the rail, the speed of the vessel had picked up and the new course was taking them out to sea. Although necessary to clear the submerged rocks, it was still frustrating because the clock was running down. Ignoring the jolting and spray as they ploughed through the swell, Paul tried to keep his glasses focused on the pod. The view would have been better from the bridge, but he valued his own space; and Darren was quite capable of handling this part without a back-seat driver.

Though the next five minutes passed agonisingly slowly, they delivered a blessing of sorts. Continuing on course towards shore, the pod had now slowed considerably. Perhaps the approaching boat was a random element worthy of deliberation. The fact that they didn't form into a huddle as humans might was only indicative of their powers of communication over great distances, not necessarily complacency. But if they had not yet had a change of heart, they did seem less determined to strand and more open to an acceptable alternative. Paul liked to think such was the case and rasped into the two-way: "Slow down. Start your turn towards them. Head for the calf, but don't get too close."

He waited for his orders to be executed. Jemma was at his shoulder, asking what their chances were. At another time, the nasal quality of her voice would simply have been a tolerable peculiarity; now it came across as sneering. He instantly regretted the sideways jerk of his head and the defensive glare he gave her. He blinked, then tried a reassuring paternal smile. "We should know soon. A lot depends on the calf. They're unlikely to desert it, even to save themselves. So if we can guide it back out to sea, the others should follow."

This best-case scenario was what he was hoping for and it was beginning to look as though declaring the prediction out loud had somehow encouraged fate to smile kindly just this once. With the vessel less than a hundred metres and closing, the calf was faltering, perhaps confused by the sound of the engines. Closer still and it was turning parallel to the coast, hopefully with the

intention of re-entering the bosom of its family. Paul jammed the radio against his mouth. "Slow ahead – just enough power to hold your course. Try to keep the deceleration smooth – we don't want to startle them."

The plan might have worked, had they been dealing with a herd of cattle, but whales possessed far more than simple intelligence and basic instinct: they were motivated, perhaps to a greater degree, by emotion, passion and loyalty - very human and often unfathomable. For anxious seconds which stretched into minutes they watched and waited; so too the enigmatic whales. The calf appeared unable to make up its mind. Paul urged it on with a whisper, begging it to make the move and take them all out to sea. But the telepathic message was either misread, or not received at all, and the infant renewed its course towards the beach. "Stay ahead of it," was the command Paul sent and he expected to hear the engines pick up, but they didn't. "What's the matter? Go after it!" When there was no reply, he barked: "Darren? What the hell are you playing at?"

The tinny voice that answered over the two-way was Craig's. "Darren's on his way to you, Paul. He said to forget the calf and concentrate on the pod."

"Damn it!" Paul was about to repeat his orders in no uncertain terms when he felt another presence at the bow rail. He knew who it was without looking and was ready for the confrontation; but as he turned, his annoyance switched instantly to shock and his focus was not on Darren, but the rifle in the man's hands.

"It has to be done, Paul," said Darren somberly, "Before they start after it again."

Suddenly, Paul's head was filled with noise. His gaze leapt from the calf to the other whales, then back to the calf. Jemma's voice was begging through the pandemonium: "It's going to die anyway, Paul. Give the order! Shoot the calf, or risk losing them all!"

The panic he had been holding at bay found a way through his defences and snared him. "There has to be another way!" He was pleading – with whom, he had no idea. His grip tightened on the rail as he scanned the bay for possibilities, for any small hope which would delay this terrible decision. But there was nothing. During the long minutes of waiting, the tide had brought them closer to shore. The distance between the deeper water and the start of the sandy shelf had narrowed considerably - the final window was closing. The sound of the rifle bolt being rammed home banished his confusion, but not in the way he needed. The emptiness it left behind was absolute. He was devoid of reason and emotion, unable to think because there was no consciousness to draw on. He couldn't move because his mind was stunned and refusing to tell his muscles how.

The next few moments were even more bizarre. Darren's lips were moving, and Jemma's, but the voices were not theirs. They came and went in whispers, odd phrases pertinent to now, yet recalled from the past – other times of indecision. When the rifle came up to Darren's shoulder, Paul stared at it, along it, stopping short of tracing the sights to the target. He even fancied he could see the bullet leaving the barrel, spinning on its dreadful way. Finally, he was watching it coming towards him, waiting for it to strike. He was with the calf. He was the calf. Then he was diving, sinking into a dark, timeless blue.

Three years later

Paul was within it again as if he had never left. The moment of recall, however, was erstwhile. The enigmatic intensity which had captivated him so totally all those nightmares ago had been different. This time there was a light, a bright yet fuzzy beam which speared into the depths wherever he looked, changing the tone of blue to one more familiar, far less welcoming. This was all-encompassing, certainly, but it no longer harboured that feeling of peace and comfort. Neither was it as pure or ethereal. This blue was murky, tactile, its cold fingers tangibly and undeniably encircling his body, restricting movement and breathing. Worst of all was his eventual rationalisation of the experience, a fear-filled conviction that this could be the reckoning for that fateful day of indecision three years ago. He had been expecting it, had resigned from the team and his job at the Institute, had done everything humanly possible to ensure that he never had to face an ordeal like that again. But the dreadful memory of it continued to invade the here and now.

Panic increased and his head jerked from side to side as he searched for clarification of his current situation. The light beam stayed with him, slashing ineffectually at the surrounding gloom, moving as if affixed to his gaze. He was aware of pain in his chest and the spasmodic convulsions of his diaphragm. His eyes were popping fit to burst. When the agony was all too much, he gasped. Bubbles exploded. Cold, salty water flooded his open mouth. Then the presence of mind which had deserted him just seconds before suddenly returned and his hand was scrambling for the convoluted air hose, returning the mouthpiece to his lips from which it had escaped in his moment of *déjà vu*.

Able to breathe once more, he waited for his head to clear before taking stock of the surroundings. Now he remembered the chill of the water as he had entered it, and his reason for doing so. The strange beam was merely from the lamp attached to his head by an elastic strap and he dipped it now to illuminate the reef just below, expecting something more but seeing only a ridge of craggy limestone. He must have drifted. Swimming into the current, he followed the reef until a dark shape loomed. Closer, the mesh of a fishing net became visible, trailing up from the rocks on which it was snagged. Further up, tangled in the folds was his anchor. Then, and more importantly, he was able to see the final vestige of hope and freedom. Attached to the anchor was the taut chain stretching towards his boat on the surface, beyond his present field of vision admittedly, but there, nevertheless. He was almost sure of it.

Unable to recall whether he had actually started on the net when he'd been overcome by his panic attack, Paul moved closer and found the thin line extending up to his marker buoy, the one he had tied on so that the exact spot could be found later should he have to leave the area unexpectedly before completing the job. It had been a simple, routine precaution. At least he had been thinking straight then. Next, he slid a hand down his leg to feel for the knife. It was still sheathed, so he hadn't dropped it – that was a bonus. Taking a minute to collect his thoughts, he withdrew the knife and set to cutting the anchor free.

His return to the surface was deliberate and slow. Decompression was never an issue in the

relatively shallow water, but there was a need to convince himself that he was back in control because he would have to go down again for the net. That would be after he'd reset the anchor and disproved the sneaking suspicion that, once back on board, his personal survival itinerary would preclude anything remotely wet or blue. The sense of relief experienced on seeing his boat rocking gently did nothing to help. It shone as a sanctuary he might never want to desert. Did the net really matter? Was it worth risking his sanity to retrieve it? There was no-one to take advice from this time, no crusty, self-assured deputy to shoulder responsibility on his behalf – just him alone with his boat. He'd named it well, almost as if anticipating current circumstances – Copernicus, an advocate of knowledge based on observation, not hallucination. But if boats could ever listen, he declined to ask this boon of it.

He took only fifteen minutes to disentangle the net, a near-miracle considering he was also struggling with a very tenuous courage. So pleasing was the accomplishment that he was hyperventilating for a moment. The icing on the cake was being able to record the event and the outcome on tape, just for the log, all the time listening to the tone of his voice, trying not to betray his exuberance at being high and dry and, presumably, still sane. Self-control fell apart as he was voicing his frustration over the lack of consideration by commercial fishermen who obviously cared more about profits than the creatures they put in mortal danger by their apathetic practices. In a way, he was just as bad. The result of his misgivings was the annihilation of his composure which could only be restored by some desperate, outlandish display of reckless abandon.

The best he could come up with was to weigh anchor and power out to sea at full throttle. As a spectacle, it was a non-event: the few seagulls around took no apparent notice; at midday, there was no sunset to ride off into; and it had begun to rain. But, as far as Paul was concerned, it was exactly what he needed. If no-one else cared, it was their loss and he could forgive himself for not caring about them either.

2

From the dunes, rain could be seen as a distant haze, masking the horizon and moving parallel to the coast. That was unfortunate because a sudden downpour was just what Robert needed to save him from himself. The wise, they being mainly adults who would probably know if they weren't too old to remember, maintained he was at a difficult age. Fifteen was a time of change when hormones were running riot and commonsense took second place to spontaneous acts of passion which were over in a flash and regretted forever after. The warning bells had resounded the instant Simone had grabbed his hand and hauled him off to the beach, but they had been drowned out by the lewd gibes and encouragement of his so-called friends. Thanks to small-town gossip everyone knew he was still a virgin, and it was common knowledge that girls matured quicker than boys. So, when a seriously sexy sixteen-year-old offered to show him the ropes, even if she hadn't actually said as much, he figured his standing within his peer group would plunge to an all-time low if he declined. His contingency plan to shake her once they were out of sight of the

others hadn't eventuated – Simone was an accomplished temptress; and together they were, still.

Choosing the right spot was a delaying tactic that gave him a few extra minutes. Simone knew all the usual ones, but Robert insisted they find their own – somewhere special. That was his second mistake. Until then, he had avoided any reference to sex, trying to keep this particular liaison platonic. Now, with a single careless insinuation he'd given her the green light. In an attempt to defuse the situation, he'd settled on a shallow, sandy crater clearly visible from the lookout car park in the hopes that exposure to the public eye wasn't on her agenda. Not only didn't Simone care, but she was excited by the prospect of an audience, albeit sparse and somewhat distant.

Unsure how to guard against what he expected to come next, he'd let Simone sit first so that he could leave a respectable gap between them. That, and his apparent reluctance to look at her, drew a wry smile and a sensuous, purring reassurance: "It's okay, Robbie. I didn't know what to do my first time, either." She turned, placed a hand across his chest and pushed him back onto the sand. "Just let it happen."

Strange things did – feelings of a kind Robert had not experienced before. The only woman he could recall ever kissing him was his mother, never passionately and always with tenderness. And even if he was finding this particular expression of motherly love embarrassing of late, he accepted that it was necessary for her and tried not to break contact too soon in case he upset her. But he would willingly have exchanged that kiss and more for what he was being subjected to now.

Simone was all-consuming. Her lips were devouring his face, tongue snaking and intrusive. As one hand clawed and fumbled at the button on his jeans, the other was pressing his to her breast, coaxing it to knead and caress. Both of them were gasping, but while hers was an expression of sensual anticipation, his was the result of sheer panic. Fighting desperately to free himself, he rolled from beneath her and began scrambling away. The soft sand hampered his flight and left him on his knees barely two metres away, panting and nauseous. He waited for her words to reach him through the pounding in his head, expecting a derisive tirade; but all he heard was laughter.

She broke off and began to speak, amusement replaced by disgust: "We were all wondering and I needed to find out for myself. Now we know." She fumbled in a pocket, withdrew a small packet, regarded it for a moment, then chuckled. "I brought it along, just in case. Never imagined I'd use it. Guess I was right about that too." Tossing the condom on the sand between his feet, she began walking off. "Call it a parting gift. Where you're going, you'll definitely need it."

Her footsteps receding through the dunes were little more than whispers as if they too were disappointed with his cowardly performance. A glance in the direction of the lookout confirmed that the two people leaning on the rail were more interested in the distant rain than the destruction of a young boy's self-esteem. But that wasn't what really hurt. He didn't care about the lack of empathy, or even the intense loneliness he felt at that moment. His greatest fear was that, suddenly, he was seeing himself for what he was. The revelation he had been waiting for had finally arrived – and it was devastating.

Moisture welling in his eyes caused him to close them tightly. His clenched fist hammered a thigh. The blow punctuated the story of his life to that point, defined an end to the setup. It hadn't been exactly easy, but he'd been young and innocent enough to believe that something would come along to make him feel normal; or, if not that, then at least a level of understanding from others. Now, who would understand? His mother might, but could she really empathise? As for his father, he would hate him. But not as much as he hated himself.

3

Rosie Sherman lived in the coastal town of Severance. Her place was little more than a holiday house, the kind rented out, sight-unseen to folks from interstate who would be too tired after their long trip to complain overmuch about the condition. She tried her best to keep it presentable, but the only paint she could afford was neither weather-proof nor scrubbable and required constant retouching. Such had been her intention, in particular the splash-back behind the kitchen sink which had been washed so frequently that it was down to the bare fibro. Unfortunately, the oft-removed lid of the paint can was so distorted that it hadn't sealed the last time she'd used it, causing the remains of the lemon yellow acrylic to dry solid in the bottom.

Buying more paint wasn't in the budget and she supposed leaving it another month wouldn't be a problem, except for the fact that she would have to keep staring at the eyesore. And the more she did, the more it would serve as a reminder of her life in general – in definite need of TLC, perhaps a complete makeover.

Returning to the kitchen had been intended as aversion therapy – carry on regardless, look frequently at the splash-back and convince herself it didn't matter. Ten minutes was all she could suffer. Then she was heading for the dresser and taking down the old shortbread tin where she kept her rainy-day money. Had anyone told her to beware repainting the wall behind the sink because it would give her nothing but grief, Rosie would have laughed. She was, indeed, chuckling to herself as she prised the lid off the tin.

Mirth turned to puzzlement. There was no cash, not even a coin, only the small plastic storage box containing Robert's money. In the scheme of things it was a pittance, but when Rosie had had to scrape a bit here and a bit there from the housekeeping, it wasn't a bad effort. And it meant Robert didn't have to ask his father when he needed paper and charcoal and suchlike. Not that he ever would – Wayne refused to recognise his son's artistic talent and still wouldn't have approved if he had. Hearing the front door squeak open, she guessed the man in question had just entered and she called out to him: "Wayne. Have you been at the biscuit tin?"

From the sounds of his footsteps, he had intended to go somewhere else other than the kitchen and now had to back-track. Judging by the scowl on his weather-beaten face when he came in, the diversion hadn't pleased him; neither had his wife's insinuation, even if it was founded. "So what?" he grumbled with a sneer.

Rosie withheld her reply. She was in the process of taking the lid from the small box. At the end

of the previous week there had been over forty dollars in there. Now all that remained was a single five-dollar note and some loose change. Her head jerked up and her eyes burned across the room at her husband. “Robert’s money, too! How could you?”

Wayne’s anger seemed to petrify his body momentarily. He stood, arms by his sides, fists clenched, face puffed and reddening: a stocky, rather fearsome troll guarding the bridge to his failed integrity. The comedy of the situation was lost on Rosie. If anything, she was a little afraid. Wayne had often approached the line of physical violence, but had never stepped over it – yet. Despite her fear that he might be close to losing control, she stood her ground and continued to glare, soliciting an explanation in heavy silence.

Maybe he read the fear in her eyes, or merely decided it wasn’t worth losing his cool over a matter so petty. An apathetic calm replaced the aggression and the sneer became one of condescension as he trudged over to the old fridge and yanked the door open. “I needed spares for the boat – the motors are playing up again.”

Rosie had been watching a jar on the top of the fridge. Wayne’s rough treatment of the appliance had started it tottering. She’d put it there and it would be her fault if it fell and smashed on the floor – just the excuse he needed to counter her accusation with one of his own. To rush over and catch it, however, would draw attention to an accident which hadn’t, as yet, happened. So, she walked casually and took the jar as if it had been her intention all along. “There was almost seventy dollars,” she said, trying to hide her exasperation.

Wayne looked at her over the open fridge door and smirked. “Pity it wasn’t seven hundred.”

“Not funny, Wayne. The boat’s killing us.”

“For Christ’s sake!” He let out a huge theatrical sigh. “We’ve been through all this. It’s our livelihood. Without it, we’re finished!”

The truth was, it was over the day they’d signed the papers – a huge debt they’d never be likely to clear. Why she’d agreed to it, she couldn’t recall. Maybe it had something to do with love – or what she imagined was love at the time. Rosie frowned. “How come you’re paying cash all of a sudden? What about the account?”

His snarl was meant for his wife and the supplier, neither of whom seemed to realise how hard it was for a battler these days. “They stopped my credit.”

For a moment she was on his side and close to some kind of forgiveness. “They can’t do that! We paid the arrears two weeks ago.” Then she was studying his expression and saw what a fool she had been. “You didn’t pay it, did you?” His indifferent shrug fuelled her growing anger. “What, then? The TAB? Your boozy cronies?”

A hand came up and he was pointing a shaking finger at her. “You leave them out of it. They’re good mates.” He realised how ridiculous the statement was. They were only *his* mates because he needed them. But *they* didn’t give a shit about *him*, not some blow-in out-of-towner who was muscling in on their business, even if he did shout the bar regularly. Preferring to drop the issue, he stared back into the fridge. “Where the bloody hell’s the beer?”

“I forgot to get it.” Rosie’s admission was a deliberate challenge – *make a mountain out of that*

one, why don't you?

Wayne obliged: "How could you forget? You work at the flamin' pub!" Not waiting for a response, he bulldozed on: "And that's another thing – you know I don't like you doing that job. I thought you were going to quit."

Here we go again, thought Rosie – the old chestnut. Walking to the dresser she slid the jar she had saved onto a shelf. Unfortunately, this brought her face to face once more with the shortbread tin and the reason for this blow up. Which was as well – Wayne was obviously trying diversion tactics and she'd almost fallen for them. "We need the money. I don't think you realise how hard it is."

As he slammed the door shut, the fridge shuddered. Something inside fell over. "What do you take me for – an idiot? Of course I bloody know! I'm doing the best I can, but it's the off-season. When it warms up, the tourists will be back and we'll be quids in."

Rosie sighed. "You've been saying that every year since we came here and it never happens, Wayne. We just get deeper in debt."

"We'll manage," he grumbled sourly, "We always have."

"Maybe we will," she countered, desperately trying to get him to face reality, "But what about Robert?" Wayne's eyes rolled. His son's future wasn't his favourite topic. Whenever it came up, he usually found an excuse to retreat, so Rosie had to make the most of his erstwhile presence. "College won't be cheap. And then there'll be lodgings. His grant won't cover it all. What he needs ..."

"What he *needs*," interrupted Wayne forcefully, "Is to get his hands dirty for a change, do an apprenticeship – not bugger around with arty-farty crap at some poofy art school! You're turning him into a wooss, Rosie, and I won't have a bar of it!"

"He's going to art school," insisted Rosie.

"Not while I'm his father, he isn't!" Wayne narrowed his eyes at her and waited for her to say the words, pretty sure that she wouldn't. There was no way Rosie would take Robert and leave. Not that she'd ever threatened to, although he'd seen it in her eyes a few times. At that moment, she was stunned and silent, which probably meant she was thinking along those lines but was too afraid to take the plunge. He doubted she would now - if she was screwed up about many things, Rosie knew which side her bread was buttered. He let some more seconds tick by for effect, then turned towards the door. "I'm going down the pub." Pausing in mid-stride, he remained facing away when he spoke to her: "And when I get back I'd better find you obliging. It's time you started behaving like the wife you're supposed to be."

That should have been it. Their confrontations normally ended this way with her eventually running out of steam, beaten by his pig-headed arrogance which he wielded like a club. This time, however, it wasn't finished, couldn't be because she felt so strongly and her self-esteem demanded compensation, no matter how superficial. Snatching the five-dollar note from the tin, she flapped it at him. "I want it back, – every last cent!"

His anger flared briefly, then he was turning his back on her and leaving. "Screw you!"

Rosie followed him into the narrow hallway. “I mean it, Wayne. Robert needs that money. I need it!”

The man ceased his rolling swagger half way along the passage where a small table sat against the wall beneath a framed mirror. A glance at his reflection confirmed he was wearing the guilt he couldn't afford to show, necessitating a quick adjustment of expression. Back in character, he regarded the tabletop on which was displayed a small arrangement of ornaments hand-crafted from shells and coral. Rosie made them with materials gathered along the high-tide mark. He picked one up – a frog, quite clever, in a way, for anyone who liked that sort of thing. He turned to her, but kept his attention on the ornament in his hand. “If you're so desperate for money, maybe you should try selling some of these. Then again, you probably wouldn't want to part with them.”

Rosie knew exactly what he had in mind. Maybe she was actually willing him to vent his spite in a way that would underline both the moment and the stand she had resolved to take. It would be the bottom line of a declaration setting them worlds apart, something she had known forever, but that hadn't hurt enough for her to do anything about - until now. She watched his fingers part. The action could almost be taken as gentle, were it not for the malice it engendered. The shell-frog dropped quickly. In the movies it wouldn't have; but whereas slow-motion would have been a lingering, agonising pain, the speed of reality was a sharp, deadly stab to the heart. She could do nothing but stifle the gasp of dismay and bear the loss bravely.

Wayne leered down at the broken ornament. “Personally,” he began, adding to his former assassination of his wife's simple pleasure, “I think it's shit.” If dropping the frog had been over too fast to have any real impact, he was going to make sure the coup de grâce could be savoured. Placing a boot over his wife's damaged pride and joy, he applied pressure and ground it slowly, noisily underfoot. “But, then, I know bugger all about art.”

After that, he must have left. Rosie couldn't remember. Her focus remained on the crushed remains as she knelt beside them. She could make another, of course, but it wouldn't be the same. She had always considered her little creations to be unique, individuals with souls - like people; like most, anyway; but not all.

Outside, foliage moved on the straggly, overgrown Westringia by the shed as Robert pushed further in to wait. He'd caught some of the argument from the back door and had been momentarily glad of the raised voices, the sound of which had prevented him from making an untimely entrance. Then he was wishing he hadn't stayed to eavesdrop. What he'd heard had cut deeply, adding to his torment.

While his contretemps with Simone had left him bruised and embarrassed, it wasn't the end of the world; not as long as his home remained his sanctuary. Now, it seemed, he was alone and vulnerable. His father despised him, and his idea of confessing his dilemma to his mother would likely force her to take sides. If she did and decided to leave, a distinct possibility, then the onus would be back on Robert to make his own choice. Should he stay with a father who hadn't been much of one; or go with his mother who would be torn eternally between love for her son and her resentment of him for being different and the principal bone of contention?

The other options were unthinkable at that moment. Better to remain insignificant like the junk around the yard – unwanted for now, but not yet beyond reclamation. From his vantage point, he could see the front verandah, but was too far away to hear footsteps clumping along the hall. When the fly-door suddenly burst open and his father appeared, Robert winced in surprise and shrank deeper into the bush.

Wayne paused on the threshold, perhaps contemplating further psychological cruelty. The hesitation was unfortunate. The fly-screen swung back, hitting him on the arm. Anger flaring, he grabbed it, stepped clear and slammed the flimsy door shut with a loud crash and enough force to break the frame. The futile act of aggression did nothing to quell his frustration. It merely compounded the feeling of guilt which he would never admit to, or apologise for. What was worse, the destruction was relatively minor and could easily be repaired by Rosie who would gather it up gladly because it fitted well with her role as protector of wimps and inanimate objects. With a grunt, he spun on his heel and stormed off the verandah in the direction of his ute.

4

Wayne would normally have lost the remaining aggression somewhere between the house and the pub, but it continued to dog him, mainly because he'd been forced to lie about the money. This had little to do with conscience. He was not averse to bending the truth, but he preferred to do it as part of a strategy, rather than to cover his back when one failed. Had the horse won, he could have put back her lousy seventy bucks and she'd have been none the wiser. If he'd kept some of the money in reserve, there might have been sufficient left to buy a few odds and ends for the boat, enabling him to preserve a semblance of integrity, at least in his own mind. What he needed now was a boost, something to confirm luck hadn't deserted him entirely. Stopping the ute across from the hotel, he squeezed a hand into his jeans pocket and withdrew what was left of his indiscretion – maybe fifteen bucks, with coin. Not enough to get pissed, or for a decent bet, but it was a start. Decision made, he moved off again, swung across the road and headed for his usual spot in the car park behind the hotel.

The smell of hops and malt made him feel more at home, better still on finding the place nearly empty. A couple of tourists were talking in some foreign language at a table and Josh Ferguson was propping up the bar, gazing mistily into his beer. Now a practising alcoholic, he was a classic example of how not to succeed in the fishing industry. It was just a pity Wayne hadn't paid more heed to the town drunk's sad tale and less to the sales patter of the mongrel who'd sold him the boat. He could hear someone moving chairs in the lounge, probably Sid, the licensee. As yet, there was no sign of Wayne's mates - they wouldn't be in until Happy Hour which gave him a bit of leeway.

Deciding to leave the drink until later, he drifted to the TAB, a small partitioned section at the far end of the public bar. Sid's wife, Maureen, was behind the counter, attending to one personality not currently at the top of Wayne's Christmas-card list – Ryan Deverell, ex-strapper turned cab

driver. Both of them acknowledged Wayne's approach, Maureen tendering her usual cheery greeting, Ryan with a sheepish grin and a: "G'day, mate. Sorry about the other day."

Wayne had been tempted to tear him off a strip for the trouble he'd started with his outsider tip, but after he'd calmed down the reality dawned that Ryan wasn't generally that far off the mark. Anyway, he'd only suggested it was worth a twenty, not the entire bundle Wayne had lost on it. "No worries," lied Wayne. He glanced up at the monitors on the wall, then the clock. "Got anything in the 4.20?"

Ryan cocked an eyebrow and shuffled close. "You didn't get this from me, right?" he whispered conspiratorially, "But have a squiz at number 6. He's down on form, so you'll get a good price."

Wayne frowned. "What makes you think he'll come in?"

Ryan grinned and winked. "No-one's breaking your arm, mate." He started towards the main bar and added: "Your choice."

The form guide told Wayne nothing Ryan hadn't and the monitor confirmed the price was holding at \$23.00. He checked out the other runners and doubt set in. With only a fifteen dollar stake, even putting the lot on the favourite wouldn't net much. As for Ryan's tip, it looked like a donkey that only a fool would bet on. Maureen called out to him: "If you want the 4.20, better get your skates on, Wayne. Bets close in two." Another ultimatum, but from a different woman this time, and helpful rather than harassing. Waving a hand in reply, he reached for the betting slips.

The next few minutes were nerve-racking. A drink would have helped enormously, but there wasn't enough cash left to buy a soda. The rest was riding on Ryan's tip, to win, naturally. One cigarette followed another until the start of the race. He forced himself to show little emotion, but anyone who had seen his face would have been poised by the phone ready to dial 000. In fact, he was sure his heart stopped for a few very long seconds as the field was on the final straight with the favourite dropping back and his horse sauntering along in fifth. He was on the verge of planning his escape before his mates arrived when the miracle happened. The donkey found some extra legs and sprinted past the leaders to win by a head. It was amazing, incredible and *that* Ryan – what a legend!

It wasn't long before Happy Hour had a new meaning for Wayne. It might have been better, had he not blown fifty bucks on the last race at Belmont, but all this meant was that Rosie would have to wait for her bloody money. He was pretty sure Ryan could help him with that, especially after he'd shouted his top tipper a couple of double scotches. For the moment, however, Wayne Sherman was the best bloke in the world, for an out-of-town loser.

It was usual for the joking to start that way. They would all run each other down, highlighting shortcomings and embarrassing moments, and for a while Wayne had laughed as heartily as anyone. But if the first few beers raised him to merry heights, continuing to drink began to uncover his true nature: that of the aggressive recalcitrant with a huge chip on his shoulder. Then, the jibes and criticisms were less amusing than they were personal. Okay, perhaps he didn't have the sea in his blood like them, but who was it who always managed to find the new spots so that his charters came in with more fish than the self-confessed experts could guarantee?

“You've got to remember, mate,” drawled the thick-set man opposite. He had been leaning forward, looking directly at Wayne. Now he sat back, and with a shuck of his head, offered the unnecessary wisdom to anyone in earshot: “Tourists are just the icing – the cake's what happens now, when the buggers don't come.” On the surface, Steve Malloy seemed one of those easy going, salt-of-the-earth characters who would give anyone the time of day, and gladly. A third-generation fisherman, he'd gained his sea-legs as soon as he could walk and had learned his trade in the family business up in the Gulf until something had happened that he never talked about. Twenty years later he was a world away, scraping a living like everyone else, hiding his skeletons and resentment behind a casual air and a dedicated work ethic. Very occasionally, he'd inadvertently drop his guard, revealing something of the man lurking inside. Those who had glimpsed the real Malloy only ever whispered about it, certainly not in front of the man himself; and the one person known to have tested his self-control had taken his bruises and left town the following day. Not that Malloy felt any particular animosity towards present company – he was simply offering friendly advice to a bloke struggling much like he had at the same age. “It's tough even for us, and we were born to it.”

The others agreed with grunts and less-than-sober nods. Rusty Baines figured it was time to stick his oar in. He'd never much liked Wayne anytime, less when the drongo was flashing his money around. The sooner he got the message and nicked off, the better. “Maybe you should cut your losses, get into something you know.”

The vindictive snipe was the last straw. His patience at an end, Wayne needed some spontaneous, equally acidic reply, but the beer was muddling his thoughts and all he could come up with was: “What d'you mean by that?” Baines stirred the tension by sending a knowing grin around the table, stopping at Wayne. The expression clouded to become a definite challenge. To what end, Wayne was unsure, but his self-esteem was running low and he couldn't leave it there. Lurching up from his chair, he tottered unsteadily as the altitude hit him, then began shuffling around the table towards Baines. How far he intended to take it once he got there was still in the planning stage, and as he struggled to find an appropriate response, it dawned on him that he couldn't even recall the exact words that had set him off.

This wasn't unfamiliar territory. Wayne had been there dozens of times with Rosie, but she knew better than to let him make a fool of himself; the mob at the table, however, being less understanding and apparently in need of entertainment, were waiting for him to do just that. He could, of course, make out he was off to buy another round and had temporarily lost his bearings, but that would mean digging into what remained of his winnings, leaving him with another cash-flow problem. A hand on his shoulder resolved the dilemma. He turned to see a tall man with a face he ought to have remembered, but found himself unable to distinguish enough of the bleary features in order to put a name to them. The voice sounded familiar, though: “Glad I found you, Wayne. I'd like a word.”

Feeling himself being guided away from the table, it was at least one problem solved. As per usual, it was immediately replaced by another. “It's about the boat.” There was an accent, English

maybe. The only pommie Wayne knew in the area who would know him by name was Don Gray, the fish-processing plant manager. “You said a couple of days,” the voice continued, “It’s been over a week.”

That clinched it – Don Gray, for sure. As well as the plant, he was also responsible for the jetty where Wayne’s boat had been tied up while he made repairs. Don had been pestering him to take the vessel back out to its mooring. Wayne didn’t need that kind of pressure right then. “A couple more days, Don.” In hindsight, the request could have been less insistent, but he was still smarting from the previous issue. “Three at most. I’ve almost got it fixed.”

“One’s all I can give you, Wayne.” Don was renowned for his tact and friendliness, especially in awkward situations, and he didn’t disappoint now. “I could let you have Ben for a few hours, if it would help.”

It was a kind gesture, albeit a token one: Ben Teagle was as ancient as the Marie Celeste and about as vacant. He’d be more of a hindrance than a help. “Thanks, Don, but I’ll manage.” Wayne glanced at the half-empty glass in his hand and imagined it would taste as lousy as he felt. He walked unsteadily to the bar, slid the glass onto the polished surface, then swept towards the door, sending Don a wounded smile in passing. “You can have your jetty back tonight.”

Once outside, the cool night air hit him like a brick and he almost lost it. A minute or so of deep breathing set him right, enabling him to stumble over to the ute. When he couldn’t find his keys, he began to think seriously about not driving because he was probably well over the limit; but although the jetty was only a short walk from the pub, he doubted he could stay vertical for the duration. Anyway, a brief scan of the area seemed to confirm there were no cops about, and he’d just noticed the key was in the ignition, so it was all too fateful to ignore.

His drive along the esplanade was slow and cautious, typical of a drunk trying to prove that he wasn’t. At least he managed to avoid hitting anything larger than the kerb which, to his uncertain knowledge, he mounted only once. Parking as close as he could, he sat for a while, gazing through the grubby windscreen at the jetty. With only a few lights, it had an eerie, yet romantic air about it. The same feeling had captivated him when he’d first come to view the boat, drinking in the atmosphere as he and Rosie had walked the uneven timbers, listening to the sea lapping and swishing below, drinking in the intoxicating aromas of brine, diesel and fish oil. Already primed by his boyish imagination, there was little more a dreamer required to enter an exciting world of adventure on the high seas. Nevertheless, it had been there – the Norse Raider. Even the name was perfect, fitting so well with his idea of a rags-to-riches future for himself and his son – no, *sons*: he’d be the founder of a dynasty, great sea-farers who’d...

That part of the dream died very quickly. Rosie hadn’t wanted any more kids until they were financially secure, which was not to be demonstrated; nor was ever likely to be the way things were going - bang went the dynasty! As for the flagship of his maritime empire, in the light of day it had turned out to be less elegant than it was in need of a coat of paint and other more expensive attention. The only bonus was that it came with the mooring – hard to come by according to the locals. Then he discovered that it was the furthest one out to sea and the least protected. Had he

bought a lemon, or what?

His trudge to the boat now proved gloomier than his deteriorating mood. The fresh air, however, cleared his head somewhat which, in turn, may have prevented him from tripping and ending up in the drink. Old Ben was sitting on a plastic crate beneath one of the lights, rolling a smoke. Wayne couldn't tell if there was a grin behind the tangle of grey whiskers, but he imagined there would be, so he answered the old salt's emphysemic greeting with an ungracious sneer and stomped on.

Once aboard, pride of ownership soothed his wounds to a degree. Norse Raider might not have been the youngest or neatest of crafts, but it was his, give or take a lifetime of repayments. Small print notwithstanding, at that point in time he was the skipper, in complete charge, law-maker, ruler absolute. In practice, of course, he wasn't even the legal owner, but there was no-one around to challenge his exaggeration; and had there been, he'd have punched them right in the mouth!

He struck his head entering the cabin and took it out on the door frame with a clenched fist, the pain of contact reminding him that he could do more damage to himself than a little if he failed to calm down. The solution to his unpredictable temper was in the forward locker – a part-bottle of cheap scotch. It had been his original intention to stock his bar with nothing but the best, providing quality of service for his customers and a very-civilised nightcap for himself while rocking on a deck bathed in the warm rays of a sun setting over the spangled ocean. And there ended the second lesson - now he was reduced to quaffing pub specials in secret, dingy places.

A quick swig helped some, a second provided a little of the incentive required to begin. Switching on the work-lights in passing, he trudged out to the stern, kicking and stumbling through a litter of tools on the deck surrounding the already-open engine cover. He glared down into the pit, wondering what had ever possessed him to buy a boat with in-board engines. The fact that they were diesel about which he knew very little should have told him something. Had he known that he was going to spend half his life groveling around in a poky, greasy hole trying to fix them could have saved him a world of grief. With a roll of the eyes and a grunt of resignation, Wayne took another sip from the bottle then sank to his knees and reached for a spanner.

A joint on the fuel pipe was his target, but after a minute of stabbing and cursing, he was unable to position the tool on the nut, thanks to his inebriation and the black grease which coated everything. Slamming the spanner down, he grabbed for a battered steel jerry can. The bent cap was difficult to open, a complication he didn't need. Brute force and a curse helped it see reason. A waft of petrol fumes hit him as he tilted the can and doused a rag. For a moment his head was spinning. He paused to clear it, glad that he had because he'd forgotten to close the lid on the can. An open-handed slap fixed the oversight, then he was leaning down into the well, wiping off the joint.

From his spot along the jetty, Old Ben could hear the sounds of labour coming from Norse Raider; or if not actual work, the effect it was having on a drunken landlubber trying to perform it, apparently without much success, judging by the frequent expletives. He fully expected Wayne to eventually accept defeat and head for the cabin where he could put the finishing touches to his binge, then pass out. That, at least, would ensure he didn't come asking for advice or help. When

he noticed a head and shoulders rise from the stern of the boat and turn in his direction, Ben sank lower onto his crate and tried to appear invisible.

Wayne peered back along the jetty as he wiped his hands on the petrol-soaked rag, but his sight was so blurred that it was hard to tell if the old bugger was still there. Not that it mattered, although he would have preferred there were no witnesses around when he tried to start the engines – just in case they refused to behave. Crossing metaphorical fingers in lieu of the physical version which was far too complex, he staggered to the wheelhouse.

As luck would have it, the motors fired up perfectly, but they didn't stay that way for long. In a few seconds the rough idle was back and had now been joined by an occasional cough. "Bitch!" He reeled out and lumbered purposefully astern, hissing through gritted teeth, saliva dribbling over his chin.

The light breeze was barely a whisper, but enough to carry fumes from Norse raider back along the jetty. Ben sniffed the air. The smell of petrol rather than diesel was strange; but the unique combination of fuel and ozone was comforting. It took him back to the good times, gone now, though well-remembered. And, as usual, the memories brought on melancholia, a result of being land-locked by age and infirmity. What he wouldn't have given to be twenty years younger.

A voice interrupted his reveries, harsh and demanding: "Ben! Cast me off!" The old sea dog turned slowly and ancient eyes gazed at the figure in the stern. Silhouetted by the work lights, any expression was indistinguishable, but the body language spoke of agitation and impatience. The figure stumbled and grabbed for support. As Ben rose, he released a sigh of dismay. Booze and boats didn't mix. It was just as well this idiot was only going out to his mooring.

He took his time untying Norse Raider, not in retaliation for the rudeness and lack of respect, but simply because age and arthritis dictated the pace of everything these days. Wayne was obviously unsympathetic and barked at him to hurry up. Ben waved a casual acknowledgement that he had indeed heard, then continued in his plodding way until the rope slipped off the bollard and splashed into the water. There was no word of thanks. None was expected.

Ben shuffled back to his crate, dipping into a pocket for the tobacco before he sat. The Raider's motors rose in pitch and coughed. He watched it heading across the bay, tutting at the sight of the rope still trailing behind in the water. Deciding it probably wouldn't matter, only being a short run to Wayne's mooring, he dropped his gaze to focus on rolling his cigarette. In a second he was looking up again. The engines were accelerating. The craft had changed course and was now powering out to sea. Ben's head shook. "Stupid," he muttered, then put the affair out of his mind to finish making his smoke.