

Rosie's Beach



Kathy Sampson

CHAPTER THREE Rosie's Beach

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Although there was a fully-equipped office just along the hallway, Martha Longstreet preferred her sitting room. Perhaps it was a mite opulent, but as such it was a reminder that she had served her time managing the family business and could finally reap the rewards of retirement. Not that she had detached herself entirely: as the controlling shareholder it was necessary for her to stay in touch. She employed a gaggle of executives who handled day-to-day affairs quite adequately, but they were ambitious and more inclined towards their own agenda than they were dedicated to the companies in their charge. Ensuring they didn't stray too far off the mark needed a watchful eye, and at the ripe old age of 76 Martha still possessed a pair of very sharp ones. So, when her primary concern was less about profits than the politics of making them, decisions came easier being surrounded by the home-comforts money could buy.

There was also more space to roam, to ponder on the wander. It usually helped her separate the wheat from the chaff and focus on important details, but on this occasion she still had no idea what they might be. Paul had called yesterday in a flap, presumably seeking advice on a legal matter; then had talked around in circles and finally hung up without saying exactly what it was. Today, he was on the phone again, trying to sound blase as if nothing was wrong which clearly was not the case. The marine radio would have been better, and hopefully would be later once it had been repaired. Martha held her frustration at bay as she listened to the tinny echo from the phone speakers. Something should be done about that - surely, in this day and age there was a system available that sounded better than a person shouting into a baked-bean can? She would put her secretary onto it - hopefully Julia could source one before her grandson called again: he was bad enough in person, worse on the phone. "Paul," she said, then gathered he had failed to hear and repeated it a little louder: "Paul, you are gabbling, dear, and making no sense as usual. If, as you claim, you aren't in trouble, why would you need a lawyer? Before you answer, please remember that I am fluent in only three languages and whatever you are speaking isn't one of them." There was a long period of silence. "Paul, are you still there?"

"Yes, Martha. Sorry about that. It's a bit noisy in here - I'm using a phone in the pub."

"You won't do anything silly like driving under the influence, will you?"

"Not very likely, seeing as I don't have a car."

"But you do have a boat, a very expensive one that I paid for," she reminded him. "You haven't run into something have you? Is that why you need the lawyer?" Silence again. "Paul?"

Eventually, he said: "Still here, and no, it's nothing like that." After another hesitation, he added: "Look, I'm certain I can handle this myself; well, pretty sure; not that there's anything much to handle; and, anyway, you are probably very busy. Well, of course you are - stupid of me - you always are..."

"You are jabbering again."

"Sorry, sorry. I'll - er, I'll sort it out and let you know how it goes."

Martha sighed. "Very well, dear. Whatever you think. I have every confidence in you, even if you have none in yourself."

"I'll get back to you soon. Love you," he added, then a final: "Sorry."

There was a click as he hung up followed by the familiar dial tone. Martha listened to it for a few seconds - they could get that right; why not people's voices? Sweeping to the desk, she flicked the off-switch. Just as she was doing so, Julia entered waving some papers. "Was that Paul? This is from Cheyl's solicitor about the divorce settlement." Martha took them from her - snatched would have been a better description - and began flicking through. "Their demands are really quite outrageous," commented the secretary, falling silent as she watched Martha scowl her way through the pages. Finally, the old lady looked up, an expression on her face that would have had Shylock quaking in his boots. Julia suggested uncertainly: "Perhaps you ought to call him back?"

"Paul?" said Martha in disbelief. "Definitely not! I can just imagine him babbling his way through the legal ramifications with some self-opinionated solicitor - he'll be eaten alive! I'll handle it. These jackals won't find me as accommodating, nor anything close."

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What an idiot! Mentioning the lawyer in the first place was a huge mistake. He had only meant the follow-up conversation to be on a par with holiday postcards - lovely weather, wish you were here - but trying as he was now to repair the damage caused by yesterday's call had turned a bit of a hash into an unrecognisable slurry. Not that Martha would be over-concerned: she thrived on intrigue; whereas Paul, despite being born of the same stock, had inherited none of his grandmother's wile or fortitude. Had he possessed one tenth of her cunning, he wouldn't have spent all morning hanging around the pub. Someone - he couldn't remember who - had mentioned Rosie worked there, and he was hoping he might be able to run into her again. The original idea was to put into effect the final touches which would make his departure from this town and the situation as painless as possible. That had been his resolution, the pragmatic conclusion to a restless night, commonsense really - attend to official business, then exit stage right as soon as expedient.

His instantaneous infatuation for Rosie was surely and simply erstwhile, wasn't it? Just a schoolboy crush on a new teacher? Unfortunately, somewhere between his morning shower and beaching the dinghy, she had drifted back into his thoughts and although he'd tried dismissing it as a passing recollection, the memory of her began to intensify. It caused him to bypass the street phone in favour of the one in the tavern, and had filled his thoughts to the point of confusion while he was attempting to soft-soap Martha. Despite every reason not to, Paul was following the siren call of Rosie and couldn't seem to help himself.

Initially on arrival, a disappointed glance around the tavern told him what he suspected: there was no sign of her. The only reason he had stayed was because she had confessed that she needed to keep busy, which had prompted the vain hope that she might return to her bar-work at

the pub; but even if she didn't seem the type who subscribed to small-town mentality, Rosie would have the sense not to break the unspoken rules pertaining to grieving widows. Once they found her husband's body, if they ever did - strong currents and sharks would make that very difficult - she would be expected to observe a respectable period of mourning before the local populace gave the nod of approval to move on.

He imagined there would be more than a few willing to help her with this, and he could picture a line of suitors baying at her door. This worried him for very personal reasons. From what he knew of the town, most of the eligible males would likely be drunken chauvinists, and Wayne's replacement was unlikely to be an improvement. Admittedly, this was an assumption based merely on the odd passing comment testifying to her late husband's apparent disregard for Rosie's feelings; and hers for him, he supposed; but if she was remotely interested in any kind of relationship, despite the inadvisability, Paul was determined not only to be at the head of the queue, but to already have his foot in the door before the mob even arrived. Stupid, he knew. He should have been disgusted with himself for having these thoughts; but he had never met anyone like Rosie before. Somehow he had to see her again, be with her, find out if the magic of their first encounter was more than just a flash of light in the gloom of recent times. How he was to achieve this near-miracle would have been bread-and-butter to Martha; unfortunately, he was only her grandson, and a pretty useless one at that!

Turning away from the phone, he headed for the exit and into the street. Although the weather was far from 'lovely', it had cleared marginally. There was still rain in the air, however, and the wind ahead of it packed a chill. Zipping up his jacket, he dipped his head and stuffed hands in his pockets. An object in one reminded him of another reason for coming ashore - he had to give the audio tape to the police. It wasn't the original as requested. He had toyed with the idea of presenting that to Jackson - a large spool from a reel-to-reel recorder which it was doubtful the policeman would have the equipment to play. Then he'd decided that the one-upmanship might backfire if the sergeant took it anyway and sent it off to headquarters, or wherever. So, Paul had brought a cassette copy which he would offer to Jackson with the sincere hope that it might aid and speed his investigation, at the same time preserving the misconception that he was not the slave of a system that had him touching his forelock whenever it commanded. With luck, the policeman wouldn't invite himself on board Copernicus to verify that the copy hadn't been selectively edited.

Paul was on his way to deliver the tape when he noticed a police vehicle parked at the end of the esplanade. Jackson was on the jetty talking with someone and it seemed the ideal opportunity to save himself a long, unnecessary walk. It was not to be. Official protocol dictated that a receipt had to be issued and the Sergeant wasn't in the habit of carrying the book around with him. "See Judy at the station," said the policeman irritably before turning away to resume his former conversation. The man he was talking to was standing in a ski boat tied up alongside the jetty, and despite the fact that they had never met, he sent Paul an unfriendly glare. Small-town mentality came to mind again, and he added natural hostility to a growing list of reasons not to hang around. Severance was a good name for a place he would be glad to leave behind. Heading off the jetty, a

sour look on his face, the rebuff instantly drove amorous thoughts from his mind and Rosie became merely collateral damage. In a matter of a few sultry paces, however, she was returned to his most-wanted list.

It was the result of another chance meeting with the old man who had given him her address. He was sitting on an upturned crate splicing a loop on a rope's end. Although his actions were very slow and deliberate, they were clearly well-practised because his fingers continued to work even though he wasn't looking at what he was doing, rather watching Paul's advance. His cheeks spread and wrinkles appeared beside his eyes so presumably he was smiling somewhere under the grey beard. Paul didn't feel much like returning the greeting, but tried anyway and proposed hurrying on to avoid speaking with him. Then a rasping drawl said: "Hello again. Paul, isn't it?" Hearing his own name from a relative stranger stopped him dead in his tracks. The old man anticipated the question before it was asked and explained: "Rosie told me, said you had a thing about names."

Paul's heart-rate increased measurably. "You've seen her?"

"Half hour ago. She was down here looking out at Copernicus. Lovely lady, that."

"My boat, or Rosie?"

"Both," wheezed Ben. "I was fifty years at sea with a girl in every port. Not one could hold a candle to Rosie. You're a lucky man - just do right by her."

"I'm not sure what you mean," said Paul with a puzzled frown.

Ben's shoulders heaved in a shrug. "It's obvious to me that you and Rosie are meant. If you can't see that, you need glasses. Stop trying to swim against the tide, son."

Who was this person? He seemed to know exactly what Paul was thinking, perhaps even before he thought it, and Rosie was apparently trusting enough to value his confidence. Or was he simply guessing? "What is she to you - Rosie, I mean."

The old salt paused to consider. Eventually, he said: "Maybe she's the daughter I wished I had. Dare say there are some around, somewhere. Can't help them, don't even know them, but Rosie...? When she first came, she seemed a bit lost, like she needed a pilot. Guess I signed on. Now you're here - time for me to jump ship."

Although it was still cold and windy, Paul was heating up under his jacket. "You're intimating that there's something between us, but I hardly know Rosie. I've only met her the once under very awkward circumstances."

Ben held Paul's gaze for a moment, then returned his attention to the rope in his gnarled hands. "I've told you what you need to know. You choose to ignore it, that's your funeral." Then he looked up. "Just remember it could be Rosie's too." His head dipped again. After another pause, he said quite casually: "She's on the beach." Paul's head jerked up and he was scanning the shore of the bay for a sign of her. "Not here," added the old man. "Next one north, Rosie's beach."

"They named a beach after her?"

"Not them - me. She needed something of her own. I gave it to her. Small reward for what she gave me."

This old man was a strange one, a quiet gatherer of hopes and dreams which he contemplated, then handed back in a workable form; but, Paul suspected, only to those he deemed worthy. Was he a likely candidate of such a precious a gift? It seemed so. "And what *did* she give you, er...?"

The falter at the end of the question caused another smile to spread beneath the whiskers. "She was right about the name thing - it's Ben. I answer to Old Ben too, not the ruder versions." He started a chuckle which became a gurgling cough. Once he'd recovered, he added: "Rosie gave me something I haven't felt since I was a child - the feeling that she was glad I was around, that I made a difference to her - a kind of love, I suppose. Not many would understand that, but I don't care. I'll take it with me when I go, and maybe die happy."

Ben's eyes appeared misty and he seemed on the verge of tears. Paul was stumped for words. None he could think of were a match for the heart-felt confession, so he simply nodded his understanding. A strange old man, he thought as he was walking away, and he turned to glance back, expecting to see Ben working on his rope; instead of which he was on his feet, waving something around in the air, bringing it down to look at it before holding it aloft and waving it again. A mobile phone...? Surely not – a tech-savvy ancient sea dog was almost an oxymoron. Obviously it didn't pay to assume anything about a person he hardly knew. Paul would have to remember that when he met Rosie again, *if* he did.

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Rosie had been standing for a while looking seaward past the skeletal stumps of what had once been a jetty. Somewhere out there Wayne had met his fate; and perhaps the tragedy had unwittingly sealed hers; or if not sealed, the future from here on in might provide alternative choices that had not been available before. Sinking to a crouch close to the water's edge, she gazed vacantly along the dark line of weed defining both the high-tide mark and the time of year. It was indicative of rough weather at sea. Following a severe storm, the beach would be piled high. On this occasion, however, the deposit was light, easy to sift through for shells and the odd bit of coral, some of which she'd already found; but it was merely occupational therapy for her hands while her thoughts were elsewhere. She was picturing herself being in the helicopter as it stuttered to and fro over its current search pattern. Then the sound of boat engines would have her standing at the bow rail, eyes raking the water ahead. The prospect of actually doing either of these was abhorrent because she had a dread of flying and had never shared Wayne's obsession with the sea, being content to keep feet on dry land and merely accept its modest bounty; but she would have overcome both fears if either could lend her peace.

She had come that morning, hoping to rekindle a sense of normality, perhaps step back in time to when life was predictable, boring some might say. Two days ago the beach had been a sanctuary, her saviour really, a place to escape the verbal and psychological pain; but the instrument of her suffering had changed. It was no longer an abusive husband: it was now the void he had once filled; and whereas she had no tender feelings for the man, she found herself mourning the loss of motivation his odious presence had forced on her. With Wayne gone, she

could walk the house without fear of doing something that might incur his displeasure; she could create her little ornaments and not be ridiculed, and gather the items to make them without being accused of wasting time on irrelevancies. His evening meal no longer had to be steaming on the table the instant he walked in the door; and it wouldn't matter if she hadn't managed to remove the oil stains from his shirt, or that it had even been washed. These were the tribulations that had made Rosie's life a misery; but now they had ceased to be a part of it, there seemed no purpose to anything.

She felt there might have been. For a few minutes she had spent time with a man, one so at odds with her husband that she had been transported. To where, she was unsure, but it was a better place than she had ever been, and she had wished to see more. In truth, she still did, but there was a discomfort churning away inside, a feeling of disloyalty. Wanting to see this man again was like cheating. To soften the guilt, she'd tried substituting a stranger, anyone she might meet by accident. Would she feel the same way? Each time she tried to picture a scenario, there was a need for more than just a vague silhouette, some physical features that would make the test-subject a real person. And each time the ghostly shape took on form, it was always the same - the man she knew only as Paul.

It was a simple enough name and suited him well - Biblical, she supposed, gentle too, although she didn't know why. Then again, he was interested in whales which were the epitome of family and caring, so perhaps his affinity stretched beyond research. He wasn't her idea of a scientist, certainly not stuffy. From the little he had told her, he was well-travelled; but he didn't strike her as world-wise. In fact, he had a certain child-like naivety about him and practically no people skills. With respect to relationships and the fostering of them, he appeared bumbling and incapable. Was this why she couldn't get him out of her mind: because she truly was a protector of wimps and inanimate objects as Wayne had often said? Although Paul was neither, she couldn't help but think that he needed protecting. From what or whom she didn't know, only that she could do it; and that she wanted to.

Gently placing the skeleton of a sea urchin into her basket, she stood with the intention of continuing along the beach when a sound caught her attention. The helicopter was coming closer, heading inland. Had the search finally been called off? Maybe it was just going to refuel. Rosie turned on the spot, watching as it passed overhead. When she finally looked down, she was facing in the opposite direction and caught sight of a figure approaching from the town end of the beach. The immediate response was a jolt of apprehension, an association of ideas prompted by the helicopter leaving - was someone coming to tell her that they'd found Wayne's body? She went rigid, steeling herself. Although the new arrival was too far away to recognise, it was obviously a man, and there was something about him, his gait, perhaps: he was hesitant, stumbling occasionally, and tentative, almost as if he was having second thoughts about being there. A few paces closer and she was able to positively identify Paul.

A sudden conflict of emotions had her on edge. The mere sight of him was a boost to her flagging spirits, and she was eager to renew their earlier conversation which had been a welcome

diversion from her troubles. A second thought placed him in an opposing role, a reminder of past and current problems which he was adding to by his presence. The sensible thing to do was run. Rosie stayed.

Although Old Ben had implied she would like to see him again, it didn't seem that way to Paul. Her body language reflected disappointment, certainly unease. Close enough to glimpse her expression, he felt even less welcome. There was something about proximity that defined future action, a line drawn between free choice and none at all; at least, this had been Paul's experience. Had he anticipated the cool reception when he was a reasonable distance away he could have changed his mind and left, just another walker on the beach, a nobody; but he had crossed the line and there was no retreat without an exchange of some kind. A nervous wave accompanied by a pathetic smile was the best he could offer as he continued walking towards her. She remained silent, waiting. Finally, he paused to hover awkwardly in front of her and said: "Hello again. Ben said you might be here. I hope you don't mind me coming. He, Ben that is, gave me the impression you wanted to see me. Well, maybe 'wanted' is a bit strong. Actually, I might have got the wrong end of the stick altogether and..." He groaned and tried to re-align his thoughts. All that did was have him scrabbling for a way out. "Look, I'm sorry about this. It was a mistake. I think I'd better go."

Rosie's pulsed quickened. "No, don't," she said, rather too hastily. "Please stay. Ben was right. I hoped you'd come." She watched him, was annoyed with herself for initially harbouring the same attitude that had prompted her hostile reception when they'd first met, glad now that she'd managed to sweep it behind her. At least, she thought she had. "How was Martha?"

The question caught him on the hop and he had to think for a moment. "Martha, yes. Okay, I imagine."

"I thought you were going to phone her." Before she could stop herself, she added: "Or was that just an excuse to get away?"

"Oh, er, I'm sorry if I gave you that impression. I did, truly - have to call her, that is. And I did - um, actually phone..." Paul's cheeks had begun to burn. "Sorry. I'm babbling, aren't I? Martha expects it, but you don't know me. I probably sound like a prize idiot."

Rosie's animosity melted as if it had never been and she was beginning to feel warm inside. "Not to me, and I'm glad you're still wearing the same hat." From the way a hand brushed over his hair coupled with a puzzled frown, he required an explanation. "People who change their approach to suit an agenda worry me. I'm never quite sure if they're being genuine. You don't strike me as one of them. Although..." She hesitated as if unsure whether to say what she did next: "I suspect you aren't as simple as you make out."

Unsure how to take the observation, Paul said: "My bumbling isn't an act, I can assure you. It comes quite naturally. I think it's why Martha takes such an interest - I'm her never-ending challenge."

Her glance back along the beach confirmed they were still alone and the discovery sent a tingle through her because of what she was about to do. It was nothing outrageous or improper, merely

a singular expression of friendship, a little more than a hand-shake, far less than intimacy, but intimate nevertheless. "Come on," she said, "You can confess your innermost secrets to me as we walk." Following a little giggle, she added: "Or not, if you'd prefer." Then she slipped her free hand under his arm and let the fingers rest lightly in the crook of his elbow. Presumably he had frozen to the spot, because she felt resistance as she tried to head off. A gentle tug started him moving.

They strolled in silence for a while, both savouring the closeness in their own ways. For Rosie, holding a man's arm was an important statement, a step up from hand-in-hand with a teenage boy. As she recalled, Wayne had been quick to discontinue the practice as unnecessary once a permanent relationship had been established. Paul, from what she knew of him, seemed on a totally different wave-length. He was unlikely to be irritated or embarrassed by a simple show of platonic affection. The fact that he hadn't broken contact was an indication that he was either too much of a gentleman to hurt her feelings, or he might have been enjoying it.

Paul was actually on cloud nine. Having a heart attack was a distinct possibility because his was bouncing all over his chest. Telling himself that it was nothing and that Rosie probably treated everyone the same way hadn't helped. Maybe it was her touch and the way the pressure of her hand increased each time he moved away, not purposely, but because of the unevenness of the soft sand. It was as if she didn't want to let go of him. Had he the courage, he would have told her that he didn't want her to. It was strange how something as innocent as walking arm-in-arm could transport one to a dream world where vain hopes became a warm reality. Ben had been right - they were meant - at least, it seemed so, and he could imagine a wonderful future if here and now could just continue forever. Then he was recalling it had been that way once with Cheryl - not quite, but something similar - and he was immediately on his guard. He must have stiffened and Rosie had felt the reaction because her grip tightened. She couldn't, of course, know what was in his thoughts, so there was no need to justify it; but the way his mind worked, he was feeling obliged to do just that. The remedy was simple, instinctive really - talk about something else. "The way you speak - you sound to be well-educated..." From the sudden relaxation of her touch, it was obvious she had taken offence and for the moment he couldn't imagine why.

Rosie had no hesitation enlightening him: "I gather that surprises you," she retorted irritably. "A fisherman's wife in a small town who can string words of more than one syllable together without an expletive or two!"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean..."

"What did you mean?" It was a harsh ultimatum, not the casual response she would have preferred, not what the situation and her true feelings demanded.

Paul stopped walking and faced her. "I only meant that..." He could feel annoyance building, not towards Rosie, but because of his habit of trying to be diplomatic, knowing that he usually achieved the opposite. This was one occasion he could ill afford for that to happen. "Oh, Hell! I can't think properly, so I'm going to just say this. Please let me get it out first - you can slap my face after." He paused to take a deep breath, then continued: "When I first came to see you, it was not of my making. Well, it was... See, there I go again! Anyway, I felt I was being rail-roaded; by Ben, I

suppose, but also my conscience. That irritated me and I needed the motivation to do what was expected of me, then get out. So I formed a picture of this little town with its little ways and you were a part of that assumption. The widow I was going to see would be plain and simple, perhaps somewhat coarse, definitely blunt and to the point, a woman who was born to her lot. She would take one look at me, a hoity-toity university type with more money than sense and resent the fact that I had no idea of what it was like to live in the real world, never mind having to struggle doing it. But you weren't like that at all, you aren't. You are intelligent and have a way with words that puts me to shame. I could picture you as a business woman, you are so like Martha."

Rosie was stumped. Had she just been listening to the real man, the one inside a bumbling exterior, or a well-rehearsed version of some role model he would like to be, one that only materialised under extreme pressure? "I'll take that as a compliment. As for the rest, thank you for being truthful. I wouldn't expect less from you, and it certainly doesn't warrant a thump."

"A thump?"

"You've forgotten already." Rosie chuckled. "Back to the Paul I know - that's comforting." The phrase, the feeling that had instituted it, was almost second nature; and even though she knew nothing of this man, it was as if they had been lifetime friends. She held his gaze, perhaps longer than might have been considered appropriate, then tugged his arm as she started walking again.

They continued along a good stretch of the beach, neither saying a word. Rosie was enjoying that, and he didn't seem to mind. Perhaps he was the kind of man who preferred quiet moments; no talk, just contemplation as opposed to meditation which didn't seem to fit with her assumed profile of him. And here was the point - he had opened up to her, only a little, but that had given her a taste for more. Who was he? What did he truly like or dislike? These things were important for anyone contemplating a relationship. She was doing that, wasn't she - not officially confirmed a widow, yet lining up the next husband? No, she decided - not like that at all. She was simply picking up where she had left off so many years ago, before Wayne had come on the scene and blown her off course. Now, whether others liked it or not, here was an ideal opportunity to dust off the original plan, the one she had been working on in senior high and had intended taking with her to university, except that part hadn't materialised. To throw it away for a second time was, in her mind, stupid and self-destructive; as Paul might be, if he wasn't the person she thought. There was only one way to find out. "I was wondering about Martha," she said softly, trying to make the question sound by-the-way. "She's clearly a big part of your life, but what about your parents?" She flicked him a glance to see if her question was one she ought not have asked. If anything, he hadn't even heard it and seemed to be miles away. "Your Mum and Dad, are they still living?"

"Hmm?" Paul shook himself from his trance, noticed how cold it was and shivered unvoluntarily. "Oh, yes. At least, they were last Christmas - I received their cards, one from Toronto and another from some quaint-sounding village in England. We haven't been together since I started high school. They obviously decided I was old enough to cope and dropped me off at Martha's on their way to separate lives. I can't say I'm sorry - two people constantly yelling at each other hardly makes for happy families. What about yours, your parents, I mean?"

"Still alive, still together," she replied in a tone that suggested the subject annoyed her, which it did because she was only interested in hearing about his life, not in talking about her own. "I haven't seen much of them since I married Wayne. They didn't approve of him, especially as they considered he was instrumental in cutting short what should have been my promising career. They only showed up at the wedding for my benefit; then moved to live in New Zealand shortly after. I doubt they'll even bother coming back for the funeral, assuming there is one."

"Surely there will be...?" Rosie's hand on his arm tightened as if likelihood of the formality came as a shock, or the mere thought of it was odious to her. This was dangerous ground, thought Paul. The way her step had faltered briefly during her explanation, picking up again once she had delivered it; this seemed to declare the matter closed. Anyone with sense would avoid rubbing salt in a wound that was clearly painful. But the cue was there for the taking and the opportunity to find out if there was any future for him with Rosie was too convenient to pass up. He decided her hand on his arm would be his litmus test - if she withdrew it completely, in particular the way she did, would indicate her level of disapproval, even alienation; starting to take it away, then changing her mind ought to mean he had pushed the boundaries but not quite stepped over them yet; anything else of a more positive nature was the ideal reaction, one that would have his head spinning. Should he be that lucky, he would have to resort to babbling, because he definitely wouldn't be able to think straight. Crossing mental fingers, he said: "Do you think there's a possibility Wayne might be found alive?" He felt her stiffen, but the hand stayed put. "Sorry, that was insensitive. Forget I asked."

Suddenly, Rosie's was the head that was muzzy. The truth had always been there, more so since Wayne's disappearance, one she had delayed facing, probably because it would paint her as cold-hearted in the eyes of others. She had lived in fear of what everyone else thought, never the way she herself wanted. She was the daughter who had disappointed her parents; the wife who feigned loyalty and continually found fault; the mother who had tried to be a good one, but not hard enough it would seem; and the member of a community which had taken her for granted, as they did any woman, and now waited to see if she was worthy of their respect. Until that moment, she had little reason to decide how she felt, what she would do, whom she would disappoint further. The conclusion she had come to was that none of it really mattered, and the world could go to Hell.

Yet, out of the blue, here was one who seemed to care, actually wanted to, and instinct told her that a wrong move, an incautious word could see him sailing away forever. For him, nothing but the real truth would do. She knew what that was, that it could put right all of those things that had gone wrong for her, but the saying of it would, she thought, be the hardest thing she had ever done and she had to do it with eyes closed. "I don't love Wayne. I'm not sure I ever did, not properly. And I don't want him back. I wouldn't say this to anyone else," She hesitated as her heart stopped momentarily. "I don't honestly know why I'm telling you, a relative stranger, but I think I can trust you, and I need to say this to someone." Rosie looked up, slowly, her eyes tired and filled with pain. "I hope he is dead. I honestly do. Does that make me a terrible person?"

It was the kind of question a priest or a psychiatrist might have a comforting answer for. Being

neither, Paul remained silent; although he was presumably about to say something because his mouth had dropped open. He slammed it shut and began shaking his head, a rag doll in the hands of an agitated child. As usual, words were hard to come by, and he spilled them exactly as they came to mind: "Oh, no, no - anything but. It's delayed shock, of course it is. You're just preparing yourself for the worst, in case they don't find him, or his body, or what's left of it... Oh, sorry, I didn't mean to..."

With that, the pair of them became a frozen tableau. Glancing seaward, Rosie watched a small boat heading north, running parallel to the coast. Anyone on board might have looked back to shore, seen the two of them and assumed them to be just any couple enjoying each other's company, exchanging pleasantries. The thought prompted a warm tingle because that was exactly how she wanted them to be seen - friends, or perhaps a little more than that. Then the feeling vanished: there was much to do before any kind of relationship would be acceptable, either by others, certainly by Rosie. But what about Paul - was he interested in her at all, except as a means of closure: a kind word from her to wash away his doubts, enabling him to leave the recent events and her behind, guilt-free? Maybe it was the wrong thing to do, but she did it anyway. As she turned to face him, she took both of his hands in hers and focused her eyes on his. They were wavering, embarrassed perhaps, frightened even and flickered side to side as if searching for an escape. Rosie waited until his momentary panic subsided and his eyes were still. "I need you to know why I said what I did."

It was obvious he was about to interrupt, probably with some platitude intended to comfort and exonerate her. She squeezed his hands gently, a sign that she preferred his silence. "Please, Paul. Just listen." Following a second or two to gather her thoughts, she continued: "I tried being a good wife to Wayne. Although he suspected it at times, I never cheated on him. I sometimes wondered if I didn't just to spite him, a kind-of holier-than-thou attitude; but I like to think it was because it wouldn't have been right. I made a vow when we married and I honoured that faithfully. I put up with the abuse, the denegration, his drunken behaviour and insults, and his..." She hesitated, her cheeks flushing red. "...his sexual demands. It wasn't easy, but I was to him what I thought a wife should be to a husband. I would never have left him, but now that it seems he has left me, I don't want him back. If, by some cruel twist of fate they find him alive, I think I would rather die than go through all of that again."

Paul was in a fog. He was vaguely aware that his face was rigid as if set in plaster, incapable of expressing any feelings. Momentarily, he had reverted to the scientist, sifting through the data, weighing the true value before deciding on its relevancy. Did he require more to reach a conclusion, or had she said too much already? He felt her release his hands and panicked at the thought that she was about to pull away. The scientist fled, replaced by the forlorn - dare he think it: lover? - and he tightened his grip, refusing to let her go. Her eyes flew wide as she gasped. "Oh, sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you."

"You didn't." Rosie's tender smile said what her lips were afraid to: that the only pain he could inflict would be his rejection of her. "I don't believe you ever could."