

Rosie's Beach



Kathy Sampson

CHAPTER FOUR The Lookout

1

Although Paul thought it inadvisable, Rosie insisted he escort her back to the jetty. "My reputation?" she queried with a sneer of bitterness. "It will be whatever the town makes of it. Right now I don't care."

"Later you might," he suggested.

They were approaching a set of stone steps at the end of the beach. Hearing the engines of a power boat accelerating, she hesitated and looked out to sea. The police launch was heading in. Perhaps it meant nothing; perhaps everything as far as she was concerned and it caused a knot to tighten in her stomach. Attempting a smile, she said: "When later comes, I'll worry about it then."

On reaching the esplanade, it was decided that they should go their separate ways. Rosie remained for a minute or so, leaning on the rail gazing at Paul as he trudged through the sand to his beached dingy. Pushing it into the water, he climbed in and started the outboard. His head came up to look back at the distant figure of Rosie on the esplanade. She was unable to make out his expression and it was impossible to know whether he was glad to be going, or regretted it. Her hand came up, the start of a tentative wave; but being very aware that people were likely to be watching she let it drop. Then he was cruising slowly out to Copernicus, a sign that he was trading one woman for another. Her pleasant episode of distraction over, the emptiness returned.

The engines of the police launch could be heard powering down, attracting her attention. It was almost at the jetty and Sergeant Jackson could be seen looming in the stern. Rosie was in half a mind to meet him and ask if they had found Wayne; but there were too many people around; and, whatever the news, she was almost guaranteed to burst into tears. Grief was a private emotion she would prefer not to express in public.

There were tears on the way home, spasmodic outbursts prompted by thoughts of past and present, with glimpses of a future that might or might not be. As she had said to Paul, nothing could be decided now, no plans made, no wishes granted: all would have to wait until later. Arriving home, she was passing the mail box and opened it out of habit to find it empty. That was a blessing – no windowed envelopes demanding money she didn't have; but it did, however, remind her of her first encounter with Paul. It seemed long ago; yet, on reflection, it was just a matter of hours. Life was racing at a speed that was hard to keep up with, confusing certainly. Her thoughts scattered at the sound of movement in the shed.

The door was ajar and she entered to see Robert perched on an upturned box scrubbing rust from a spear gun with a wire brush. "Robert?" It was a stupid question, like one of those Irish greetings: is it yourself, then? She frowned: "What are you doing with that?" Another stupid question. "You're not planning on using it, are you? You never liked spear-fishing."

Robert's head barely came up; just enough to send his mother a scowl of resentment. "It's not for me – it's for Dad. He asked me to clean it for him."

Rosie's heart missed a beat. "Dad asked you? When was that?"

"I don't know. Some time back."

"So why do it now...?"

The boy ceased his brushing and glared at her. "Why not *now*? You may have written him off, but I haven't!"

"Your Dad," Rosie began, then had to swallow to clear the lump that had suddenly formed in her throat. "You have to face it, Robert: it's unlikely he'll be coming back..."

"You don't know that!" he exclaimed and began blinking fast to cover the tears that were starting to well. "Nobody does!"

Following a deep breath she said: "Paul saw it, Robert. He said..."

"Paul?"

"The man who came to the house – remember?"

Robert grated sneeringly: "So, your new friend has a name."

The insinuation made her bristle, but she overcame a need to defend her relationship with Paul. "He was out there when your Dad's boat blew up. He didn't believe anyone could have survived the explosion."

"*He* didn't believe," the boy repeated resentfully, "*Paul* didn't! *YOU* don't!" Resuming his wire-brushing with a will, he snarled: "Well, I *DO*!"

She stayed for a long minute, hoping for her son to look up, see the pain in her eyes and know that she would have given anything for his wish to come true; but he continued to ignore her, perhaps knowing that she was wishing quite the opposite for herself. Feeling there was no more to be said, she eventually turned away; and as she left the shed, she heard Robert whispering tearfully to himself: "You're coming back, Dad; I know you are..."

2

Rosie was making a cake, something she often did after a period of strife and confrontation. Not that she particularly liked eating them: it was just the calming effect of following a practiced routine she could perform without thinking. When Wayne had been around she had baked many cakes; now that he wasn't, she was making yet another. Hearing a knock on the fly door, she snatched a tea towel and headed along the hallway, wiping flour from her hands as she went. Les Jackson was on the porch wearing the sympathetic face Rosie recalled seeing before when he had told her that Wayne was missing at sea. Presumably he was there to deliver more sad news; sad, at least, in his opinion. As for Rosie, much depended on his latest offering. The Sergeant's mouth barely opened to speak words which were, for him, unusually quiet, sorrowful: "We've found him." Then, seemingly as an afterthought he droned: "Sorry, Rosie."

What happened next was like a dream, a nightmare, really. She was back in the kitchen, although she couldn't recall going there. Presumably she had asked Les if he'd like a cup of tea; at least presumably, because the kettle was on the stove and, despite her mother's teachings, she was now spooning tea leaves into a cold pot. The policeman was seated at the table on a chair

that was entirely unsuited to his bulk. Despite his discomfort, he was managing to remain focused as he continued: "I can take you now, if you're up to it."

"What?" She frowned. "Take me where?" She'd seen the TV show Doctor Who once and it was as if the weird musical theme was echoing around her at that moment, interfering with her thoughts, driving any semblance of understanding or reason from them. When Sergeant Jackson reiterated the word she apparently hadn't heard: "The mortuary," Rosie fainted.

The short drive was time enough for recovery, after a fashion; too long really, though. She was struggling with emotions: from guilt to hopes and a jumble of associations; flitting from one to another and making little sense of them. All she knew for certain was that she would have preferred not to be subjected to the forthcoming experience. It was, however, a legal requirement, and there was no-one else on hand other than Robert who was qualified to shoulder the responsibility. Ignorant of what to expect, she could only imagine what she was about to face and was determined to be strong.

Following Les Jackson along the hospital corridor, nerves were causing her to feel nauseous. This was not helped by the all-pervading smell of antiseptic expected of such places; but as they continued she was convinced another odour had infiltrated her environment, a decidedly unpleasant one. She'd heard tell that the dead exude a particular smell like no other, and she shivered at the thought that it was coming from Wayne's body. Even in death, it seemed, he had a way of making her uncomfortable.

The room they entered was not as she had imagined. There were no tables of instruments, no strong lights to illuminate corpses about to be cut into by a medical examiner; and the large glass viewing window so often seen in the movies was conspicuous by its absence. This fact was, perhaps, the most significant because, in order to identify Wayne's body, Rosie had to be in the same cramped room with it.

As well as Les and herself, there was one other: a bespectacled man wearing green hospital garb. "When you're ready," said the Sergeant softly.

Rosie closed her eyes and nodded, then took a deep breath as the green man stepped close to the trolley in the centre of the room and reached for the edge of the sheet. She waited to be stunned when the cover was drawn back, maybe even horrified – it depended on the condition of the body. All she knew for certain was that she would cope, just as long as it was Wayne under the sheet. As the cover came down, there was no way to tell who it was because there was a smaller square of material draped over the head. A little further and the chest was visible – still no confirmation: it could have been anyone. Then she was stifling a gasp as a distinctive tattoo on the upper arm was revealed.

Turning away, her thoughts raced. It was Wayne, it *must* be: she'd recognise the tattoo anywhere. He was lying there, dead. She was free at last. Or was she? "It could be Wayne," she said almost in a whisper, "But I need to be certain. Let me see the face."

"It's your right, Rosie," droned Jackson cautiously, "But I'd advise against it. What with the explosion and time in the water it's not pretty."

Rosie glared at the attendant and demanded stonily: "Remove the cover, please." She was as unprepared for what she saw as she was for her reaction to it. Spinning away, she slapped a hand to her mouth and gagged. Head swimming, she could feel a faint coming on and opened eyes wide, determined to stay on her feet this time. Forcing herself to look at the gory head one last time she hunted for features, but there were none remaining that could help with her identification. Staring at the tattoo again, she said: "I think it's Wayne, but I can't say for sure."

3

Les dropped her off at the gate. He had offered to be with her when she broke the news to Robert; but anticipating a repeat of her earlier antagonistic exchange with her son, she declined and said she'd rather speak to him alone. Once Les had driven off, however, she was beginning to regret her decision, reasoning that a third party might protect her from the furore of Robert's accusations which she expected to be the recipient of.

Although the door to the shed was open, there was no sign of Robert. She was relieved to begin with, more so because the spear gun was still there – she'd had visions of him doing something drastic to vent his anger and emotions. The house too seemed empty; then she heard movement in his room. A moment later, Robert appeared in the hallway and stood facing her. Saying nothing, he simply waited, his eyes boring into hers. They were red from crying. Rosie made a move to pass by, saying: "Shall we go into the kitchen?"

The boy stayed put. "Here will do. Was it Dad?"

The next few minutes were punishing for both of them. Rosie tried to avoid relating the identification process, hoping to spare him the gruesome details; but he kept pushing, wanting to know, claiming she was hiding something from him. When she eventually explained that his father's face was mutilated beyond the point of recognition, he spat angrily: "What about the rest of him? Surely there was something; or was it that you couldn't stand the sight of him and forgot what he looked like?" His mother's mouth opened to reply, but he had the bit between his teeth and pressed on: "I bet you wouldn't even have slept with him if we'd had a spare room. That might have forced him into leaving because you didn't have the guts to go yourself!"

"No, Robert, that's not how it was..."

Refusing to listen, the boy continued to pile on accusations, very aware that he had his mother on the back foot: "You knew what he was like, getting drunk all the time. You did nothing to stop him drinking. Maybe you even encouraged it knowing this would happen. You wanted him dead...!"

In an instant, Rosie became a different person. Rushing at her son, she rained blows on him, forcing him towards his room. In complete disbelief, he stumbled backwards making no attempt to defend himself. As he retreated through the doorway, Rosie suddenly came to her senses. Horrified at what she had done, she tried to speak, only the words wouldn't come. Taking with her the bewilderment and pain on her son's face, she reeled and sped towards the front door.

Robert's head was spinning; not as a result of his mother's attack, but from a rush of conflicting emotions. The words he had said to her kept echoing, spiteful accusations which he realised now were unfounded. They had driven her away leaving him alone in his sorrow. Turning slowly, he scanned his drawings on the walls of his room. They were all of whales, most cruising effortlessly through the sea, except for one in particular that held his attention. It was a sketch of a mass stranding, unfinished because, although a fact of life, he had found it too distressing to complete. Walking to stand before it, he stared as if trying to change the scene to something more pleasant. It remained the same, exactly how he had drawn it. Reaching out, he dragged the sketch from the wall, his intention to rip it up; but his trembling hands refused to obey. Why was no mystery: it was his creation, an honest depiction of an unpleasant reality that he had witnessed and had needed to accept. Destroying the image would not change the sad event that had inspired it. The damage he had done to his relationship with his mother, however, might not be beyond repair. He could only hope; although hope, as his father had often said, doesn't get the job done.

He was in two minds where he might find his mother. The beach was her favourite place, except that would have meant her going through town; and considering how upset she was, and not wanting anyone to see her that way, it was an unlikely choice. The whale lookout was closer and she might reason, if she was able to reason at all, that it would probably be deserted.

Rosie was indeed there, leaning on the safety rail gazing out over the ocean, a hand resting on a wooden post which had particular significance for her. Rows of marks were scratched into it recording previous whale sightings. She had spent many an afternoon on the promontory spotting with Robert, one or other scratching the count. The memory of those precious moments reignited the pain she was suffering. Why had she reacted the way she did? Was it a result of seeing Wayne's mutilated body in the mortuary; or did she believe there was truth in the accusation that she wanted her husband dead? There was little doubt that she was relieved he was; but she would never have wished it on him, let alone encouraged his drinking to make it happen. In that respect her son had been totally unfair.

Robert watched her from the edge of the clearing, he too re-running their confrontation and the words of anger that had driven her away. Of course he had wanted her gone; but only for that moment, not forever. The loss of his father had filled him with a hollow ache, and the shock of this impossible truth had instigated a need to be alone; perhaps to mourn privately, or come to terms with the fact that he and his dad had never been really close. Robert felt guilty about that. Maybe he should have tried harder to be a better son instead of a constant disappointment. Why couldn't his father have accepted his sensitive nature, that he was different from other boys? His mother had, did; and he had no doubt still would; if he let her back in; *if* she could ever forgive him for what he had said.

Tears were welling, trickling down his cheeks, and his nose was beginning to run. He sniffed, sighed. The sounds were barely audible; nevertheless, Rosie was suddenly aware of another presence. She turned in time to see him leaving and called out his name. He halted, but remained facing away from her, shoulders heaving rhythmically in time with his sobbing. She advanced

across the clearing a few steps, intending to embrace and comfort him as she had always done in the past. Then she stopped. Would he want contact of any kind, now or ever again?

Robert turned at last. He remained where he was, leaving a space between them indicative of compromises yet to be resolved. If anyone should make the effort to repair the damage, it ought to be him; but he was still overwhelmed by the loss of his father and all he could offer by way of an apology was a plaintive: "I loved him, Mum..." Unmoving, Rosie bowed her head and wept.

4

It had been Paul's intention to get into some work. Not that there was anything important or pending, but he needed to take his mind off Rosie. Once on board Copernicus, however, she was all he could think of. Trying to convince himself it was a no-win situation didn't help. Even a reminder that he was still married to Cheryl made matters worse because he hadn't told Rosie he was already spoken for. Not that this was likely to continue for much longer if Cheryl had anything to do with it. He should explain this circumstance to Rosie, except that meeting up with her again so soon would appear contrived. Then, of course, there was his penchant for not being able to string three words together without making a mess of it; so a delayed, rambling confession now would sound like a come-on supported by half-truths. Leaving it until a more appropriate time was best – wasn't it? Not entirely convinced, he looked around for something to do that would take his mind off Rosie.

There were a few papers on the desk and some blank cassette tapes still unwrapped. What were they for? Then he remembered: Sergeant Jackson had asked for the recording of the fateful night; so he'd made a cassette copy of the original; and that, as it happened, was still in his pocket. Following Jackson's refusal to take it, and Paul's subsequent meeting with Rosie on the beach, dropping it off at the police station had completely slipped his mind. Wandering to the parka hanging on the hook by the door, he fished out the plastic case and took it over to the recording equipment, opened it, removed the cassette and popped it into the loading drawer – the methodical, step-by-step actions of a man whose thoughts were elsewhere. He stood for a moment staring at the tape deck, wondering what his intentions might have been; why he needed to play Jackson's tape again? He knew what was on it, had replayed it a number of times earlier; so why did he need to listen to it again? Ignoring the absence of logic, he hit the play button.

As the playback began filling the cabin with sounds of that terrible night, it suddenly came to him. He'd been concerned that he might not have copied enough of the original; plus something else. All Jackson would hear was the underwater recording. Paul's voice and his reactions to the situation at the time were being picked up by a second recorder – his log. Without that, there was just whale song, engine noise and the final explosion; nothing to corroborate his assurance that he had done everything humanly possible to at least try helping a sailor in distress.

But how could he resolve that issue – give Jackson two tapes and hope he had the means and knowhow to play them simultaneously and in sync? Even if he did manage it, there was a strong

possibility that the policeman would suspect one or both tapes had been doctored. The only way was to have one recording superimposed over the other. Paul had actually discussed the need for equipment to achieve this with his grandmother, particularly for the benefit of the Foundation when he eventually submitted his research; if he ever did. Martha had quashed the idea: *"You know how confused you get, dear. Let's just keep it simple."* Thus, simple was all he had. The best he could come up with was unlikely to find favour with a doubting police sergeant; but it was worth a try.

It took some time and much juggling to synchronise the two cassette playbacks from separate decks; then his only option was to start them playing through the speakers and record the result via the inadequate microphone on a portable tape machine. It was a total disaster. Along with excessive tape hiss, a seagull decided to fly over and squawk; then there was the sound of a fishing boat passing nearby as it returned to the harbour; plus, to cap it all, in addition was the faint but undeniable stuttering of a helicopter's rotors as it presumably returned to base after the search. Paul rewound the cassette, played it again, listened intently; rewound it a second time and scowled at the portable unit for its inefficiency. He began muttering curses; then realised enough was enough. Hitting the rewind button one last time, he lurched up from the chair, and blundered out on deck taking his frustration and confusion with him.

An incoming tide had swung Copernicus so it was facing out to sea. Paul went to the bow rail. Hands gripping the cold steel, he peered at the distant horizon and was wishing he was out there free of complications; then he did something completely out of character. Releasing the rail, he leaned forward against it and spread arms in the air, emulating the classic scene from a Hollywood movie. Although there was no-one to see him, he was nevertheless embarrassed by the melodramatic display and an accompanying notion. What was he thinking: that he was here onboard with Rosie, sailing off into the wide blue yonder? As for the movie; what a tragic romance that had turned out to be. Perhaps the moment of fantasy, however, was not misplaced: it was a clear reminder of what transpires when emotions overrule commonsense. Any relationship with Rosie, should it be at all possible, was not going to be another Titanic; this was one promise he now made to himself which he was determined to keep.

Taking the thought back into the cabin, Paul felt exhausted. What he really needed was a whisky to help him relax. The problem was that he kept no alcohol on the boat and had to make do with a hot malted milk which would hopefully help him sleep.

Naturally, it didn't. He tossed and turned; got up and prowled the deck; then went back to his bunk. So it dragged on: a night of turbulent thoughts; and all centred on a woman he barely knew. If his play-acting at the bow rail wasn't bad enough, he continued going over and over the possibilities like a love-struck teenager pulling petals from a flower – she loves me, she loves me not; I go to her, I see her not. At some point he had even considered just hauling up the anchor and leaving. Unfortunately, this simple remedy was not an option: Sergeant Jackson had made that abundantly clear - until he was satisfied that his prime witness had fulfilled his legal obligations, Paul was to stay put.

Unlikely though it was, at some point he had dozed off and was awakened by seagulls

squabbling close by. His eyes flew wide. At first it didn't register why the cabin was bright, until he turned to see daylight beyond a window. For some reason the fact seemed important, shockingly so. Why was that? Staring at the ceiling above, he tried to gather his thoughts; in particular to remember what it was that he had, during his night of confusion, eventually decided. It suddenly came to him – the cassette tape, and dropping it off to the police at the earliest opportunity. Not the scrappy effort he'd run off last night, though: the original copy would have to suffice. His hand came up and he was frowning at his wrist watch. Ten fifteen it said: half the morning gone and he had slept through it!

On his way out, he paused to lock the cabin door; something he had forgotten to do when he had first arrived in the bay; a mistake which had given Jackson the opportunity to snoop. That wouldn't happen again. He was less than cautious, however, as he approached the shore in his dingy, merely running in at speed to beach the bow and relying on the sand anchor to hold it where it had stopped. Then he was hurrying towards the esplanade.

The police station was in the centre of town. A man on a mission, he strode past the souvenir shop and turned into the next street; head down, focusing only on a determination not to be intimidated or confused when he handed over the cassette to the desk officer. After few more paces he looked up and stuttered to a halt. Rosie was there just metres away, standing on the footpath outside the police station, gazing up into the sky, a grim expression on her face. Paul's instinctive glance behind declared, at least to himself, his intention to beat a hasty retreat before she saw him. Facing forward again he realised he was too late. Their eyes met. Rosie's former concern melted and she sent him a pleasant smile. What now – stroll casually along and extend her a pleasant 'good morning' in passing? How informally offhand would that seem? It would be like a brush-off, end of story and goodbye. Whatever the consequences, there was no way he could afford to alienate Rosie; at least so the butterflies rioting in his stomach told him.

On auto-pilot, he began walking again, frantically rehearsing platitudes in his head; then he was before her, a portrait of uncertainty blushing in silence. Rosie frowned. "Are you okay, Paul? You seem a bit frazzled."

Before he could reply, movement caught his attention as the front door of the police station opened and Jackson came out. A knot formed in his stomach when the Sergeant paused just long enough to send him a vindictive glare before continuing across the forecourt towards Rosie. Blinking to gather his thoughts, Paul started to address her question: "No, I'm er..." A hand dived into a pocket and withdrew the cassette. "I've got to drop this off."

Jackson hesitated in mid-stride to frown at the plastic case in Paul's hand. "I was expecting a reel of tape," he growled.

"I assure you," said Paul, trying to disguise the tremor in his voice, "This is a faithful copy. If you want, you can come on board and compare it with the original."

The Sergeant regarded him with a vindictive glare. "Why are you being so uncooperative?"

"I didn't think I was." Paul started towards the front door of the station, then paused. "After I've handed this in, will I be free to leave?"

A growl rumbled in Jackson's throat. "I'll let you know." Then he said something else that jarred Paul: "I'll take you home now, Rosie."

Murphy's law had struck. Even the chance meeting with Rosie had been cut short, thanks to a recalcitrant policeman who seemed to regard him as public enemy number one. Letting out a sigh, Paul nodded a reluctant acceptance of capitulation. Tending her a weak smile, he said: "Nice to see you again, Rosie."

He was on the point of resuming his trudge to find the duty officer when Rosie said hastily: "No, wait, Paul, please..." then: "Thanks for the offer, Les. Paul can walk me home." Following a brief hesitation, she added: "If that's okay with you, Paul. Sorry – I should have asked first."

The butterflies were back. He stammered out a breathless: "No, no... glad to." If fate was dealing kindly with him at last, a uniformed nemesis had every intention of souring the moment.

"Not a good idea, Rosie," droned Jackson in a forbidding tone. "You know what people around here are like."

Rosie stiffened and rasped: "What – Wayne not even in his grave and already she's found another man?"

"I didn't mean that," mumbled Jackson.

"You meant exactly that, Les. What you and the other people in this small-minded town think is your problem. My main concern now is Robert. He's taking this badly and I believe Paul can help ease some of his pain."

"A complete stranger?" queried Jackson in genuine surprise.

"A man with considerably more compassion than you, Les; and one who saw what happened to Wayne. Actually saw, Les; unlike you and the rest of the mountain-from-molehill brigade." Rosie was bristling, the volume of her voice rising, of which she was very aware. Calming herself, she declared quietly but adamantly: "You have my statement. If there's nothing more, I believe we're done." As an afterthought she concluded: "Take that whichever way you want." Turning her back on the policeman, she stepped closer to Paul, took his arm and said over-loudly: "Let's sort out your legal business, then you can take me home, Paul. This place is giving me the pip."

5

On their way back to Rosie's they passed a few people in the streets and Paul was very aware of the looks of disapproval speared in their direction. Rosie must have noticed too, but she made no comment except for parrying the animosity with a visual statement by hugging his arm a little closer. By the time they were approaching the house, Paul still hadn't managed to broach the complication of Cheryl. They had talked mainly about Robert and how deeply his feelings for his father apparently ran. "I didn't realise until now. It always seemed a strained relationship," she explained hesitatingly, "Their personalities were very different preventing them from getting really close."

It sounded like a parody of his failed marriage. "Did Wayne not spend some quality time with

him; maybe take him out on the boat, just the two of them?”

“On odd occasions.” The memory was obviously concerning. “I think they argued most of the time. Wayne as a particularly macho man refused to appreciate Robert’s sensitive nature...” She was focusing on the footpath as she said: “I think he’s gay, Paul.” In case he misunderstood, she added: “My son, I mean.”

“Does it matter?” He tried to sound genuinely casual, despite the subject reviving his own early childhood when the same label had been attached to him. “When I was Robert’s age I wondered about myself in that regard.” The admission clearly caught her off balance. She stuttered to a halt and stared at him. In a bid to set the record straight, he blushed and mumbled: “As it turned out I wasn’t... well, you know... *that*... Oh, God, I’m making a hash of this.” Taking a deep breath, he said quietly: “I’m married, Rosie,” then he hurried on before she could interrupt: “I know I should have told you, but it didn’t seem important because it’s only temporary.”

“That’s a new one,” she drawled sarcastically, knowingly.

They had stopped on the driveway just beside the mailbox. Paul glanced at it, glad that this time a letter wasn’t poking out. “It’s true,” he insisted. “Cheryl is in the throes of divorcing me. I don’t know how long it will take – Martha’s handling the sordid details for me; says I’m hopeless when it comes to legal matters; whereas she loves the challenge and is unrelenting...” Was that a smile creeping across her lips? “You don’t want to hear about Martha, do you?” The smile widened as Rosie shook her head. “Okay then.” They were already facing each other. Paul reached out and gently held her arms. “I never wished to hurt you, Rosie; and I promise not to keep anything from you in future.” He swallowed before continuing. With a tender squeeze of her arms, he said: “I would like more than anything to be a part of your life, Robert’s too; but I won’t come between you and your son.”

Unable to hear any of this, Robert watched them from the window in his room and had to assume. To him it seemed obvious – the closeness, the way he held her - so very obvious. Teeth clenched and shaking, he was living a daytime nightmare in which were only problems without resolution. This man with a fancy boat had watched his father die and was now moving in on his mother. Maybe he had purposely held off attempting a rescue just so that he could: to the victor the spoils. The fact that this blow-in could not have known his mother before they had met the other day became irrelevant when strong emotions overruled reason and commonsense. The consequences for a boy in crisis, however, were crystal clear: with his father gone and his mother captivated by her new lover, he was alone, cast aside, banished.

Movement brought him out of himself. They were walking along the pathway towards the house. A sudden urge to flee saw him rushing to the door, yanking it open; then he was re-grouping. Running away was no escape. Standing on the threshold of his room, his one and only sanctuary, here was where he would confront the man, his mother and the situation. Boards creaked as they climbed the steps to the veranda. He waited. The fly-door rattled noisily. They were coming in.

“Robert,” called Rosie softly. “Are you here, Robert? There’s someone I’d like you to meet.”

Footsteps were approaching along the hallway; just his mother’s: he recognised her pace. What

about him, Paul the usurper of his father's crown? Was he being cautious, wary of intruding, fearful even? That was good, him believing he was at a disadvantage. Robert stayed within his sanctuary.

Rosie was passing and saw him. "Hello, darling. Are you alright?"

Stupid question – of course he wasn't; she knew he wasn't. Robert remained tight-lipped and merely stared at her. Aware his eyes were blazing with animosity, he tried to soften the look to no avail.

Rosie frowned momentarily, then tried to lighten the mood. "Shall we go into the kitchen? I'll make some tea." Turning to cast a glance back along the hallway, she said: "Come in, Paul. Say hello to Robert."

The fly-door rattled. Footsteps approached, heavy ones. Robert watched his mother's back as she disappeared into the kitchen. He heard a metallic clink followed by the tap running – she was filling the kettle. His eyes lowered to gaze at the floor. He was a pace inside his sanctuary. A single stride and he would be in the battle zone. Was he ready? He would have to be. Aside from the window there was no other way out. Anyway, retreat wouldn't serve his purpose. He fought the desire to get this over with and remained still. *Let the enemy make the first move.*

Paul reached the doorway to Robert's room. The boy was rigid, fists clenched by his side, a leer of disapproval set in a stone. "Hello, Robert. Good to meet you at last." He extended a hand.

Robert's eyes flicked to it before returning to glare at a face smiling pleasantly. He made no move to take Paul's hand. For a few tense seconds their eyes were locked. Robert shifted awkwardly, glanced towards the kitchen; then backed into his room and closed the door: no cowardly act this; merely a strategic withdrawal.

Rosie drifted into view to find Paul standing alone in the corridor looking decidedly uncomfortable. She sighed. "Sorry about that. I was hoping..."

"It's okay. I understand." The sound of whistling began to build as the kettle boiled. Rosie ignored it and continued to gaze at the door to her son's room. "Would you prefer I left?" he asked. "My being here just seems to be making matters worse." It was one of those tentative questions, passing the buck really: soliciting a positive answer that would keep him in Rosie's company while hoping for the opposite, a chance to escape with self-esteem almost intact. Whatever transpired next hinged on Rosie, so he waited; praying for the best, expecting the worst.

After a moment of indecision, she shook her head. "I'd like you to stay. I think it's better we let Robert have his space; for now, anyway. In the meantime, I need company. Let's have that tea. Milk and sugar...?"

Conversation across the kitchen table was, perhaps, too well-considered. Paul had kept his voice quiet, reasoning that whatever they said might be overheard by Robert, his room being just across the hallway. Rosie too was wary and tried for a while to make casual small talk; but the

walls seemed to be closing in on her, and the atmosphere was becoming increasingly uncomfortable. Her answer was simple: "Let's get some fresh air."

Before leaving she had paused by Robert's door to tell him they were going for a walk and to extend an offer for him to join them. He declined, grating through the closed door a surly: "You go; I'm working." Paul's eyebrows rose asking the question: on what? Rosie remained silent and shook her head, meaning that she either didn't know what her son was working on, or that she would explain later.

Trudging in silence across the yard, they were at the mailbox again before either of them spoke. Paul noticed there were now a couple of envelopes poking out of the slot and he drew Rosie's attention to them. Already tense, her nostrils flared. "They can wait. I don't need the agro right now," she snarled and sped on.

Her sour mood continued as they walked the streets. The fact that she made no attempt to take his arm might have been considered a snub, but Paul didn't imagine he was the reason for her preoccupation: she was merely smarting from recent events. Once they were away from the houses and starting along a bush track, the change in surroundings helped ease the tension. Hoping to rekindle a semblance of normality, Paul said: "I can smell hops. Is there a brewery here somewhere?"

Rosie chuckled, a faint sound, but a welcome one for Paul. "It's from a type of acacia I think," she commented. "Only happens at certain times. Does it bother you?"

"Not at all. I just needed to say something and it was the best I could come up with."

She pondered his comment briefly. "All this must be making you feel very awkward, my mood in particular. I'm sorry."

"There's nothing to apologise for." A shrub brushed his arm and he plucked off a leaf, crushed it between his fingers and took a sniff. It smelled nothing like hops, so presumably it wasn't the plant Rosie was talking about. "It was my decision to stay, to be with you. As for the situation, walking on eggshells has become a habit with me: I'm used to it."

Rosie extended a sardonic smile. "Liar."

"You know me too well."

"That's the trouble, Paul: I don't know you at all. I would like to, though. Maybe you'll be prepared to open up a little, when we get to where we are going."

"And that is...?"

Another five minutes of track led to the whale-watch lookout. "I thought this would be a good place to talk," said Rosie as she walked to the safety rail. Glancing at the pole, she placed a tentative hand on the scratched marks recording the sightings, a reminder of times with Robert that, if ever to be repeated were unlikely to be the same. "At least it's an interest we have in common."

Paul came to stand next to her, leaving a respectful gap between them. "I can't imagine it's the only one, surely."

"No, but we do seem to be from very different worlds." She gazed in silence for a few moments

at the ocean before continuing: “Yours is so vast and uncomplicated. I can only imagine what it would be like to experience freedom on that scale, to be surrounded by it and nothing else.”

“You never went out with Wayne?”

She snorted derisively. “Only when he was thinking about buying the boat. Once he had, I left him to it. While he played sailor, I was land-locked with my wifely duties, as he called them. I was naive enough to believe it was what I wanted, why I married him; until the reality hit home. I found myself spinning plates, just a few to start with; more as time went on; too many eventually.”

She had turned to face him; yet, blinded by the problems she faced, was looking right through him. Not realising the consequences, Paul said: “I don’t understand. What did you mean by spinning plates?”

Rosie let out a sigh of exasperation. “The responsibilities of life – keeping everything ticking over smoothly; only it was an impossible task. Wayne and his accursed boat soaked up every last cent, and some. If not for my job at the pub we’d have been bankrupt ages ago. Even with it, there is a mountain of bills I can’t pay...”

Now she was shaking and her eyes were brimming with tears. Paul offered what he hoped would be a solution: “But you will be able to, when the insurance company pays out for the boat...”

“Wayne was drunk! According to the small print there won’t be any payout; and to top it all I’m now stuck with loan repayments for a wreck that’s in pieces on the bottom of the ocean! I can’t win, Paul; I never will!” Her head drooped and she began to cry. “Oh, Paul... I don’t know how much more I can take...”

She was extremely vulnerable. He knew that and, despite the undeniable wisdom of remaining non-committal, he took a step forward, wrapped his arms around and drew her close. She heaved and sobbed against him. Although he had fantasised on their first embrace, this was not how he would have hoped it to be. The mere closeness, the scent of shampoo from her hair, however, made for a heady experience which set his thoughts racing. How long would it last; could he use it to advantage, should he even; and could he live with himself if he did?

7

The scene for Robert was at first blissful, then devastating. Unable to hear what they were saying, from where he was standing behind a bush at the far side of the clearing it seemed obvious what was happening: they were arguing and he was elated. *Send him packing, Mum. He’s no good for you, no good for us.* Adrenalin pumped as they faced off. A slap across Paul’s face would have been brilliant, a dramatic closure to this divisive liaison. Hopes for Robert plummeted as the two joined and held each other. Stifling an expletive, he hissed through gritted teeth. A wave of consuming anger flooded his mind, making it hard to see. Not that he wished to – not anymore. Spinning on his heel, he rushed back along the track.

The house was his first port of call, a bad decision as it turned out. There were too many memories of the way things used to be. The hall table was empty now, his mother having cleared

off her little creations for safety's sake after his Dad had trashed one in a fit of anger. This was the last time he had seen his father; not to share his company or speak with, but to watch secretly as he stormed off.

Emotional scenes continued to fester in his thoughts as he went to his room. Here lay therapy after a fashion. Whenever he was troubled or finding difficulty expressing himself in words, drawing was usually consoling. On this occasion, however, his mind was skipping from one event to another, each driving his anger deeper and offering no solutions to his torment. Scanning his gallery of images should have sparked inspiration, all were so calm and serene with the exception of the stranded whales; and this was the one that captivated his attention. The longer he gazed on it, the more he identified with the tragedy; seeing himself as a lone survivor witnessing his family dying and dead, his life torn apart by a whim of nature. Yet nature had nothing to do with his misery – a man was responsible for that. By simply being there to witness the death of his father; now to take his mother from him; this Paul character was the object of his hatred; him and his wretched boat.

Rushing from the house, he went to the shed. The spear gun stared at him, almost beckoning; but it was no answer, not his way. Next he was running; along streets, turning corners, driven by an obsession he was unable to clearly identify. It came to him as he was approaching the jetty. There at anchor in the bay was Copernicus and...

Whatever his intentions might have been were blown away by a sight that tugged at his heart strings. There was another vessel at what had been his father's mooring. Changing direction, he thumped angrily along the jetty to where Old Ben was sitting on his crate and demanded to know why, and who had the right. "It's usual practice," explained Ben, focusing on the rope in his hands to avoid the animosity radiating from the boy's face. "Moorings aren't easily come by, and Steve Malloy fancied it for his ski boat. There was nothing personal..." The last comment was wasted: Robert had taken off and was heading for the beach. Ben watched him stutter to a halt by Paul's dingy. Following a brief hesitation, he pulled up the sand anchor, tossed it into the craft which he pushed into the water and started the outboard motor. It seemed at first the boy was going to do something to Malloy's boat, perhaps untie it and let it drift; but within metres he changed course for Copernicus. Breathing a weary sigh, Ben went back to splicing his rope, glancing up occasionally to monitor the lad's actions just in case he did something overly rash.

Robert boarded Copernicus and stood taking in his surroundings. Much larger than Norse Raider; and considering that it was, as far as he knew, crewed and captained by only one man; it was a flamboyant, obscene statement of wealth. Pushing aside rising anger, he tried to recall why he had come: surely not to inflame his animosity towards Paul? Any thought he may have fostered to trash what was probably the man's pride and joy now seemed unlikely to serve his purpose. He wanted the usurper gone; so wrecking his means of transport and escape was counter-productive. What, then?

Wandering the main deck provided no answer. With the exception of the capstan for the anchor cable, the equipment was nothing like that on his father's fishing boat and was presumably to do

with scientific research. His Mum had attempted to endear him to Paul by telling how his was a gentle occupation, a caring one. At the time, Robert had refused to be swayed; now, however, and with the evidence before him, it did seem that this stranger, an interloper though he might be, meant no harm to anyone. Robert ground his teeth, annoyed with himself for even considering that it was possibly true. His mother certainly believed so, and that didn't sit well with him either. In the blink of an eye, Robert was back to hating everyone and anything; and Paul was top of the list.

He ought to have left right then, but he was confused and not thinking straight. Moving to the cabin door he tried to open it and found it locked. Why he even wanted to go in there was a mystery; he knew only that he did. With trembling hands he unclipped a fire extinguisher from the wall beside the door. Three sharp blows with the metal base broke the lock and splintered wood. He stood for a few long seconds looking at the damage, a tight knot in his stomach warning of the consequences that might eventuate if he proceeded; but what was done was done, and in a way he felt elated. He had gained access to Paul's world; and by whatever means, he should make it count.

Pushing past the broken door, he found himself in room of technological wonders set against walls and on benches. Following a brief scan, he walked to an opening which led to the wheelhouse. Once again, it was very different to Norse Raider: far more complex. Standing in front of the wheel, he tried to imagine what the various controls were for and placed tentative hands on a few as if he was piloting the boat; but, in truth, even if the vague plan in the depths of his troubled mind was to take Paul's vessel far away, he had no idea how to even start the engine. Anyway, judging by the empty slot in a circular chrome plate, it obviously needed a key. Perhaps there was one in the cabin.

The two desk drawers were unlocked and contained mainly paperwork, but no key. Leaning back in the chair, he stared momentarily across the cabin, then down to the equipment sitting at the back of the desk in front of him. Here was more electronic gadgetry that he didn't have a clue about; but on one side was something he was familiar with – a portable cassette player. Noticing there was a tape already loaded, Robert sighed and pressed the play button, fully expecting to hear music of the highbrow kind. Instead he found himself listening to the dual recording Paul had made earlier.

Initially it was just the distant, eerie call of whales; but as the sound of boat engines filtered in, becoming louder by the second, the boy's eyes started to widen. In moments his heart was pounding and he had stopped breathing. Suddenly, Paul's voice was barking through the speakers: "Can't you see me? Change course, or cut your engines before you run me down, you maniac!" Then, following a short break, the other boat's engines had stopped and Paul was calling again in a calmer voice: "Ahoy, there. Are you alright?"

Robert's next few minutes were heartbreaking. What he could hear were Paul's vain attempts to communicate with his father; a man who, by all reports, was too drunk to accept that help was at hand. Then came the explosion. The boy gasped and jerked back in the chair. If anything more played on the tape, Robert was too shocked to assimilate it. All he knew was that he had just

listened to a recording of his father's death. Misadventure; a silly mistake; bad luck; or was it deliberate? Despite being a mere schoolboy, Robert had been very aware of his family's financial difficulties: and the strain it caused both of his parents was plain to see. But surely there would have been a way out? This was too drastic, too final. Almost convinced this was his father's terrible and ultimate solution, tears trickled as Robert appealed in a whisper: "I was always here for you, Dad. Why did you leave me?"

He stood and paced back and forth, wringing his hands in agitation; then began wandering the cabin in a daze; for how long was unknown. A sharp click resounded as the tape reached the end and the player automatically shut off. Robert awoke with a start from his morbid reveries, blinking a few times to clear his head. With awareness came an unpleasant sensation - nausea building. Rushing out on deck, he only managed to make it to the side before his stomach exploded a stream of vomit into the sea.

He hung there feeling totally drained, exhausted. Wiping his mouth with the back of a hand, he sucked in the fresh air for a few breaths as he took in the surroundings: open sea, cloudy skies and a fishing boat in the distance, but coming closer. Bad enough that he had broken into the cabin; but to be caught still onboard meant more trouble; and he'd had enough of that already. Noticing the dingy still bobbing lazily alongside it was a no-brainer. Hurrying to the ladder, he untied the painter and clambered down into the dingy.

Malloy had cut power to watch. He recognised the boy - Wayne Sherman's wimpy kid - but there was no sign of the bloke; the blow-in scientist, or whatever he was. That seemed strange. Steve had half a mind to go alongside to see what the boy had been up to; then decided against it: if any damage had been done and he was spotted loitering... Well, it didn't take a genius to figure he would get the blame. Throttling up, he turned and headed for the jetty.