

Rosie's Beach



Kathy Sampson

CHAPTER FIVE Dismissed

1

They didn't notice the wind picking up, or the sudden accompanying drop in temperature. Rosie was too warm and safe within his arms, while Paul's euphoria over being her protector had his head spinning, precluding anything beyond the moment. Had they been anywhere else, there was no knowing what might have transpired: love in its infancy is boundless. An overseeing Mother Nature, however, was older and wiser, reasoning that this was neither the time nor the place. So, she opened up her heavens and brought them to their senses.

Rosie was first to stir, raising her head from his chest and pulling away, just gently. "If we stay out here we're going to get drowned."

Paul shrugged and drew her back to him. "I don't care." A few seconds later something dawned on him. "Oh, I'm sorry. Not thinking." Breaking contact, he began stripping off his parka which he draped over Rosie's shoulders.

She tugged the front of the jacket closed to keep out the rain, then was feeling guilty. "What about you?"

Paul beamed. "It's only water. I'm used to being wet."

He was certainly that by the time they had trudged through pouring rain and arrived at Rosie's place. Even the yard was a swamp. The fly door performed as expected and sat open, the broken frame jammed on the veranda boards. Rosie left it and entered the house, calling out: "Robert, are you there?" The intention had been to ask her son to light a fire, but there was no reply. Turning, she saw Paul was still outside, just standing there dripping and shivering. "Come in before you catch your death." Pointing to a door along the hallway, she added: "The bathroom's there. You need a hot shower. I'll find you some dry clothes."

It took only a few minutes for Rosie to strip off and throw on a dressing gown, then a couple more to pick out some of Wayne's clothes that might fit. About to leave the bedroom, she hesitated at the door, a sudden thought occurring: how to give Paul the clothes without embarrassing him. Considering their closeness at the lookout and the feelings it had stirred, a natural progression was in the making; an exciting prospect for her, quite a sensual one really. Deciding to leave eventualities to fate, Rosie smiled to herself, gave a small shrug and went into the hallway.

Judging by the water on the floorboards, Paul had entered; then had decided better of it and had retreated onto the veranda where he was waiting. Rosie frowned. "What are you doing out there still?" She hurried towards him. "You're shivering." A reply was almost forthcoming. His mouth opened and closed a couple of times, but he said nothing. "Paul?"

"Um..." His emotions were in turmoil. The woman he hoped to spend the rest of his life with was standing right before him wearing only a dressing gown – well, he presumed so – and taking their relationship to the next stage just needed the right words. Needless to say, the hesitant lover in him was pushed to one side by the overbearing coward who was looking for a way out. Glancing

nervously behind to the yard, then back to Rosie, he stammered through chattering teeth: "Er...um... I think I should be going. If Robert comes back it wouldn't look good."

An exasperated Rosie took a moment to compose herself before saying: "Let him think what he likes."

"I can't do that, Rosie. He's upset enough already."

"And I'm not!?"

He mumbled a despondent: "Sorry," then started out across the yard. She said nothing, but he knew she was still on the veranda staring at him, disappointed; maybe even heartbroken...? Nearing the gate, he paused and turned to call: "I'll grab a shower and change on the boat, then I'll be back. Shouldn't be too long." He waited.

Rosie's heartbeat kicked. "Promise?"

Paul nodded. "Promise."

Although the rain had eased somewhat, the wind had a bite to it; a reminder of seasonal discomfort; plus the fact that he'd left his parka at Rosie's and he was soaked to the skin. Increasing his walking pace should have helped, but it didn't. He was also hunched over and frowning against the cold breeze which made his head and eyes hurt. All in all it was a painful exercise that could have been avoided. The reason for that was approaching fast, but he didn't see him until he happened to glimpse movement ahead. Robert was heading towards him at speed. Paul halted; as did the boy, just long enough to stare at the man further along the footpath and recognise someone he definitely did not want to meet. Spinning about face, he began running back the way he had come. On reaching an intersection, he veered off into the side street. It took Paul only seconds; but by the time he had made it to the street it was empty and Robert had disappeared.

2

Considering the inclement weather, the jetty and surrounding area were surprisingly busy. A group of youngsters was laughing and joking on the esplanade, apparently oblivious to the wintry conditions. Tied up at the far end of the jetty was a fishing boat from which Old Ben and a couple of deckhands were transferring plastic crates to a waiting truck. A man Paul only vaguely recognised was standing to one side talking to a boy. The world, it seemed, continued to turn in a normal, inconsequential manner. Subsequent events, however, were soon to change that.

About to descend the steps to the beach, he paused to frown – something was not quite right: his dingy was not where he had left it, and the anchor wasn't hooked into the sand. Next, he heard his name being called. The closest person was the boy who had been talking to the man and was now sauntering past, giving Paul just a fleeting glance. Or was it a sneer? His name rang out again; not from the boy, though, because he had carried on to join his friends on the esplanade. Old Ben was approaching, effecting a stumbling rush and waving. He ground to a halt in front of Paul, stooping to cough and wheeze for almost a minute before regaining sufficient breath to gasp:

“Something you should know, Paul...” This brought on another bout of coughing. The old salt pointed out to sea, specifically at Copernicus. “Young Robert went on board. Don’t know what he was up to, but he was there a while.”

Paul considered the news, glanced at the beached dingy then offered: “It’s alright – I gave him permission.”

Ben saw straight through the obvious lie, glad of the whiskers that hid his doubt. “Something must have upset him – once he’d beached the dingy, he took off like a Spanish mackerel.”

Closing his eyes, Paul nodded. “Thanks, Ben. I’ll check out the boat first, then I’ll go back to Rosie’s and see if Robert’s gone home. If he’s there, maybe I can talk to him.” He was thinking: *‘if he’ll listen, which is very unlikely’*; but he didn’t say it. About to resume his trek down to the beach, Ben stopped him again.

“There’s something else,” the old man said in what was tantamount to a conspiratorial whisper. “I overheard Steve Malloy talking to his kid.”

“Malloy?”

Ben shucked his head in the direction of the activity at the far end of the jetty. “He’s trouble, Paul; so’s Kevin.” Before Paul could ask, Ben added: “That’s his son. He’s a bully like his old man. I couldn’t hear everything, but Steve did mention Robert. Keep an eye out for him, Paul. He definitely needs a friend.”

Ten minutes ago everything had been simple – shower, change and hurry back to Rosie; now his head was buzzing with too much information, and he didn’t know what to do with it. Bad enough he was caught up in all this; now he had been landed with the responsibility of being minder to a boy who hated him. After a long pause, he said: “Okay, Ben,” hoping to sound perfectly on top of whatever situation the old man imagined might transpire. “Thanks for the heads-up. See you later.”

Ben coughed and nodded. “Just watch your back, eh?” He waited to ensure the warning registered before turning to trudge along the jetty.

Plagued by trepidation, Paul cruised out to Copernicus not knowing what he might find. Having tied off the dingy, he was climbing the ladder and suddenly remembered that the key to the cabin was still in his parka at Rosie’s. The thought then was to take a quick look around the deck before returning, once again... This continual back and forth was tedious to say the least. At that moment, what he wouldn’t have given to up anchor and sail away; which, of course, was impossible without the key to enter the cabin.

The broken door lock solved one dilemma and replaced it with another. Following a brief investigation of the interior, his worst fears were allayed: the equipment had not been trashed. Why he thought it might have been was really unfair on Robert who, although clearly a troubled boy, he hadn’t struck Paul as a vandal. What he had been doing there, however, was a mystery; then he spotted the portable recorder on the desk with the cassette drawer open. Someone, presumably Robert, had played it through and left it running until it had switched itself off. Paul could only imagine the torture the boy must have suffered, hearing the sounds of his father’s final

moments. He would have been devastated. This explained why he had been in such a rush and had avoided Paul like the plague.

The shower helped allay the shivering and should really have been longer for total comfort; but fresh water on the boat was too precious to waste. The pile of soggy clothes on the floor would normally have been attended to immediately. Performing his usual OCD bit at that time, however, was not an option so he left them there. Hurriedly throwing on some fresh clothes and slipping the cassette into a pocket of the waterproof jacket, Paul was eventually back in the dingy. He just sat there, staring out to sea, mulling over past events culminating with those of the present. Even simple decisions weren't his forte; and he was convinced that fate knew this. It certainly seemed to have him on a string, ensuring that his actions and reactions were as choreographed; not what he might have preferred.

3

Although quite long in terms of distance, for Paul the trek back to Rosie's was over too soon. By the time he was standing at the gate he still hadn't come up with a way to broach the subject of Robert breaking into his cabin without upsetting Rosie. She was bound to be defensive – mothers always are where their children are concerned. An ice-breaker would have been good, and with this in mind he glanced at the mail box; then recalled that, even if there was something in there, he had made a complete mess of his previous hand delivery. What he had to tell her was bad enough; he didn't need to fire her anger before he even started.

Unsure what to expect, his approach to the house was tentative. When he'd left as the drowned rat, Rosie was more than amenable; had, in fact, seemed eager for his return. He imagined she would have dressed appropriately for what was supposed to be a happy reunion; so when he knocked and she appeared at the door, hair untidy, wearing faded jeans and a sweater with a hole in the sleeve, Paul was immediately on the back foot. "Hi," he said in a nervous whisper. "Are you okay? You look a bit... um..."

Before he could blunder on, she said: "I'm really worried, Paul. Robert came home in a terrible state." She held the door open, stepping aside to let him enter, but Paul remained on the veranda, his expression grave. Rosie frowned. "What is it, Paul? Has something happened?"

Paul's hand went to his pocket, fingers closing on the cassette case. About to withdraw it, he hesitated. What could he say; how would she take it? She spoke his name again, a definite warning tone rising in her voice. His hand tightened on the plastic case. "Er... my boat was broken into."

Her eyes widened, nostrils flared; but her anger wasn't directed at him. "Bastards!" she grated, "It was those so-called mates of Wayne, wasn't it? Did they do much damage...?"

"It wasn't them, Rosie," he interrupted sheepishly and added softly, apologetically: "It was Robert."

The silence was instantaneous, electrified. Paul's stomach knotted. Had he delivered the news

with a sledgehammer, he couldn't have made matters worse. What to say now? Could anything be salvaged? It was doubtful; and that became clear when Rosie snapped: "Surely not Robert – he wouldn't do a thing like that. Did you see him, talk to him? Is that why he came home in tears?" She was bristling, challenging. "What did you say that upset him so much?"

Paul let out a deep sigh. "Nothing. I haven't spoken to him..."

"So you don't know it was Robert."

"He was seen, Rosie," stated Paul, realising after the fact that it was an accusation she was bound to refute. "But not by me." He continued in his usual stumbling manner: "Well, except in the street. He saw me and ran off."

Rosie turned her eyes from him to glare at the broken fly door. She was breathing heavily, anger boiling inside. Then her head snapped sideways and her eyes burned into his. "So, what are you going to do – report it to the police? You'll have to, you know; otherwise you won't be able to claim on insurance; and there's no way I can pay for the repairs..."

"I won't be reporting it," he said limply. "The damage is minimal. I just wanted to..."

"What, rub salt into the wounds?"

"No, Rosie..."

"What, then?"

Fishing the cassette from his pocket, he extended his hand and offered it to her. She stared down at it, then back to him. "What's that? And don't tell me it's a cassette tape. Why do I need it?"

"I think it will explain why Robert is so upset. If you listen to it..."

Face reddening, eyes blazing, she snarled: "I've heard all I want to from the horse's mouth." Her lips pursed and she almost spat: "I think you'd better go, Paul."

"I..." Her look was final. There was nothing to be achieved by staying, so he placed the cassette on the veranda rail and began walking away.

Rosie stared at it for a moment; then she was rushing to the rail. Snatching up the cassette, she hurled it at Paul's back. "Take your damned tape! We don't need it; we don't need you!" Her voice was breaking into a sob as she added: "I don't need you!"

Paul had been frozen to the spot, standing rigid from her tirade. Following a few seconds of silence, the rattle of the front door slamming shut caused him to spin about. The house was as it had been the first time he'd visited: peaceful, unassuming; and even more unwelcoming now. The cassette case lay on a muddy island surrounded by puddles. If he left it there and it started raining again, it would probably be ruined, unplayable. His hand came up and stroked down his face from his forehead as if to wipe away the entire incident and the consequences. It was too late to make amends; the bridge between him and Rosie irreparable. As for the tape: he was wishing he had never made it. With a slow, heavy blink, a saddened, defeated man turned and headed for the gate.

Rosie was leaning with her back against the door, tears streaming, heart pounding; breath coming in snatched, sobbing gasps. Her short fuse would be the death of her; maybe already had been in terms of the life she had been wishing for; now dashed by a few hasty words. In truth, the only one to blame for all of this was Wayne; yet she had laid it on an innocent man who had bent over backwards to be her friend; and she had done it in such a cruel way that he was never likely to return.

Pushing off the door, a few steps brought her to the hall table. There were no little creations there now, had not been since that fateful episode. The thought popped up occasionally that she should begin making them again; but it had been dismissed to concentrate on a matter of the heart that had seemed more important and so promising. But as Wayne had ground her shell frog underfoot; so she had crushed her hopes and Paul's dignity with her own mindless fit of pique. Staring down at the bare table top she saw herself: empty and so painfully sad and lonesome. With the deepest of sighs, Rosie went to her room and closed the door behind her; to cry alone.

Still drowning in sorrow, Robert had only been vaguely aware that someone had called at the house; then he had heard Paul's name mentioned. His pulse rate quickened as he thought of consequences; and he needed to know what they might be; so he had listened more intently. At one point he had even crept along the hallway to witness the little he could see through the open front door. What he expected hadn't eventuated; and, considering the way his mother had been warming to her new friend, her sudden angry outburst had both surprised and shocked him. His heart missed a beat when she had mentioned the cassette tape, the memory of the recording still hard to bear; but less so than the guilt he now felt. There was no denying that he had broken into the cabin; but his mother refused to believe it. Paul had clearly tried to paint over the incident; had, in fact, been more concerned over her son's mental wellbeing. Again she wouldn't listen. Sending Paul away like that was something Robert had been wishing for: so dramatic, so final; but that was before, when the man had been a seemingly obvious threat. Now the boy wasn't so sure. If nothing else, he should explain a few things to his mother, help her to see the truth; but first he needed to retrieve the tape. He had seen his mother throw it; whether Paul had picked it up was unknown. Then again, if he hadn't it wasn't going anywhere; and attempting to alleviate his mother's pain was the priority at that moment.

He had gone to his room before she came back into the house. She would probably want to see him, so he waited. A few minutes passed, but there were no sounds of her approach. Maybe she was re-grouping, calming down, composing herself. If she could at all it seemed the wise thing to do; something he ought to be grateful for because he couldn't afford another slanging match. Eventually, when she still hadn't come he went into the hallway and listened. Silence greeted him. Padding to her bedroom door, he could hear the sounds of sobbing beyond and this caused him to wonder if now was indeed the right time. Biting the bullet, he raised a hand and knocked gently. When there was no response he turned the knob and peered around the open door into the room.

Rosie was on the edge of the bed, hands covering her face which was almost touching her knees. It seemed she hadn't even noticed his arrival. Opening the door wider, he took a step and said: "Mum," then once more because she may not have heard. "Can I come in?"

Rosie stirred to look up, faced drained and wet with tears. She sniffed and grated: "You already have. Now would you leave, please." She sniffed again and slashed away another emerging tear with the back of a hand. "I want to be alone."

"No, Mum," stated the boy forcefully. "I have something to say and I'm not going until I have." He waited, not knowing what to expect – a sudden bitter outburst was likely, but all she did was stare at him, maybe through him. Following a long awkward silence, he said: "It was me, Mum. I broke into Paul's boat." Her eyes grew wide with disbelief. "I overheard what you said to him, and I felt bad about that because it was my fault for not telling you. I'm sorry. I know what he meant to you and I was jealous, I suppose; before, anyway. I was convinced he was moving in on you after Dad's death. I even thought he was responsible for it; but I was wrong about that. I heard the tape of the accident, and that's all it was. Paul didn't cause it, he just tried to help." It was apparent from her expression that she was having trouble absorbing the new information, or at least processing it. Coming to a decision, Robert turned and began to leave. "I'm going to get the tape. If you listen to it..."

Rosie failed to hear the rest. She was too stunned and merely sat staring at the open door, breathing heavily. What people said about sticks and stones was wrong – words *could* hurt, and she had been the one who had wielded them like a flail. As a consequence she had driven away the one man who might have made life bearable again, sentencing herself to an eternity of heartache in a dark and empty world.

Paul didn't know how to feel – disappointed, naturally; angry too, although not with Rosie or her admonishment. He was blaming himself, in particular his annoying habit of over-thinking situations and coming up with the worst of solutions. Perhaps it was really fate after all: orchestrating his words and actions to present a way of returning to normal; one he couldn't pluck up the courage to implement himself. In hindsight, the fascination with Rosie must have been a necessary distraction from past failures; a convenient healing fantasy that simply faded as dawn broke. The reality, however, was that whatever relationship Paul might have wished for with Rosie had disappeared in a flash. Seemingly it wasn't meant to be. He should never have listened to old Ben.

Presumably he hadn't manage to convince himself of this and paused occasionally to look back up the street, no doubt wondering if he should return to try and repair the damage. Given time on her own, Rosie might have calmed sufficiently to be more receptive. He was so deep in thought that the unexpected ring-tone of the mobile phone startled him. Fighting to remove it from the stiffness of the waterproof jacket took too long. By the time he had it in his hand, the ringing stopped. According to the readout, the caller was Martha; or had been. A quick check of the signal strength caused a groan: it was insufficient to return the call; but there might be enough to text her. He was in the process of doing this when an incoming message interrupted. It was Martha again, this time an SMS: "*We need to speak – urgently.*"

He turned with the intention of going into town, in particular to the tavern where he could phone his grandmother; but he was suddenly distracted. Maybe they had adopted the silent approach which seemed atypical for a bunch of teenagers; so, more likely he had been too preoccupied to hear them coming. The fact remained that when he looked up they were right in front of him. The hesitancy to take any action was his and he was rooted to the spot. The youngsters, however, had no such qualms and swept on, giggling and leering as they pushed past.

He thought he recognised them as the group at the jetty, was sure of it when one boy turned back and sent him a sneer. What had Ben said his name was – Malloy, wasn't it; Kevin Malloy? Another tit-bit of Ben's information – he was a bully like his father; and Paul should keep an eye on him, for Robert's sake. He watched their backs as they continued sauntering up the street heading towards Rosie's place – was that their destination; their agenda? Kevin looked back again. Although now too far to see it clearly, Paul was convinced the boy's expression was belligerent, challenging; a kind-of: 'you know where we're going; so what do you plan to do about it?'

Paul couldn't be certain of either. Maybe he was being paranoid, jumping to conclusions based purely on an old man's concerns. A number of possible scenarios flowed in and out of his imagination: confrontations, fist-fights; the stuff movies are made of, none of which Paul was any good at. He must have been staring at the ground lost in his thoughts, because when he looked up the youngsters were nowhere to be seen. Then his mobile phone signalled another text message. It was Martha again, becoming very impatient apparently. With a heavy sigh, he pocketed the phone, turned and stormed off towards town.

5

Robert was on his way out of the house at the moment that the group of teenagers was crossing the yard. "Hello, what's this?" jeered Kevin Malloy as he spotted the cassette tape sitting in the dirt. "Poofter music, is it?" he added, stooping to pick it up. Robert was horrified and dashed over intent on retrieving the tape. Kevin retreated, his expression of fear mocking and insincere; waving the case as bait to draw Robert into the body of his laughing cohort. Danger was never on Robert's mind: just intent on retrieving the tape he ran straight into the pack. "Hold him!" ordered Malloy venomously. He was behind the mob where he had backed off; but as soon as two of his friends had gripped Robert's arms he pushed through to brandish the cassette case in front of his captive. "You want this? Come and take it, why don't you?"

With a sudden burst of strength, Robert broke free of the restraints. One hand lunged for the tape while the other curled into a fist and swung at Kevin's face. The wild blow made contact, smacking across the side of Malloy's cheek. The youth staggered backwards, stunned by the unexpected ferocity of the punch which had scrambled his thoughts momentarily. It was only a brief respite, but enough for Robert to claw the small plastic case free. Another second and he was wheeling, running for the shed.

Malloy touched fingers to his cheek. It felt sore and he could taste blood. The casual taunting

smirk had gone, replaced now by a vengeful scowl. "That was smart," he sneered, more to himself than anyone else. "Stupid queer's backed himself into a corner." Raising his voice he called towards the shed in a sing-song tone: "Coming for you, Sherman; ready or not." Confident and unafraid, he sauntered to the open doorway and looked in. Robert was standing, the spear-gun in his hands pointing directly at Kevin's chest. Malloy's hands came up, palms open and facing Robert in a gesture of mock surrender. "Woah there, buddy boy. Better think a bit. You can't win. There's five of us and you've only got one spear."

Robert's mouth was dry and his words came out as a grating hiss: "And it's pointing at you, Malloy; so one's all I need."

It was set for a Mexican stand-off. Then a voice was echoing across the yard: "Hey, what's going on here?" It was Rosie. Concerned that Robert had been taking too long, she had come to look for him. Now she cast a challenging glare at the group of teenagers crowded in the doorway of the shed. They gawped open-mouthed at her in surprise. "Well?" she snapped.

The youngsters appeared unsure of what to do next. Kevin was in no doubt. He had been wondering how to resolve the situation and avoid ending up with a spear in his chest. Not that he thought Robert would fire the thing, but the kid was frightened and he might trigger it by accident. His mother rocking up had provided the get-out: a way to preserve his self-esteem, and his life, he supposed; while at the same time maintaining his status within his group. Backing slowly into the yard, he continued to glare at Robert as he whispered an almost inaudible: "This isn't over." Then he was turning, pushing past the others to head for the gate, grating at them: "We're done here."

Rosie watched them leaving. She'd considered giving them a warning that if they came back she would call the police; but chances were that everyone in town knew her phone had been cut off, so it would have been an empty threat. Aside from which, the gathering could have been an innocent meeting of friends; although it was unlikely seeing as Kevin Malloy was there. Anyway, they had gone now and she was more concerned for her son. Entering the shed, she pulled up short on seeing the spear-gun. Apparently her gut instinct about trouble had been right. Judging by the look on Robert's face and the weapon in his hands she had arrived just in time.

All she could say was a very quiet, maternal: "Oh, Robert." She watched his slow blink, heard the deep sigh and added: "They've gone now."

Hands shaking, the boy lowered spear-gun and let the point rest on the dirt in front of him. "I've got the tape, Mum," he said simply; then his head dipped and he began to cry.

Nearing the police station Paul considered going in to see if the Sergeant was there. With luck he would have concluded his investigation, at least the part involving Paul; then he would be able to leave. The problem was that he didn't particularly wish to, no doubt still harbouring thoughts of a reconciliation with Rosie. As long as he was bound by law to stay, that option might still be open; so he decided to leave it in the lap of the gods and hurried on before he could change his mind.

Fortunately for Paul, by the time he reached it the pub was almost empty. Sid, the barman, extended a pleasant greeting which Paul returned and asked: "Would it be alright to make another reverse charge call, please?" Sid nodded and seemed to be waiting for something else. Although he didn't want one, Paul ordered a coffee; probably out of a feeling of guilt for only being there to use the phone.

Martha sounded peeved, unusual for someone who rarely displayed any obvious annoyance: "How soon can you be back, Paul?"

"Um... pardon... Back where?"

"Here, of course," snapped Martha. "I have some papers for you to sign."

"Can't they wait?" asked Paul, feeding on his grandmother's mood and producing a scowl of irritation.

"Only if you want Cheryl's lawyers hanging you out to dry."

"Aren't you being a tad overdramatic?"

"You should know me by now, Paul," hissed Martha venomously. "I am never a *tad* anything. It has taken considerable effort to broker a deal that is more than favourable for you; and I want it signed and sealed before those solicitors of your soon-to-be ex wife have time to think. When can you be here?"

Explaining to Martha that circumstances precluded leaving at that time, Paul made a total hash of it; mainly because he avoided mentioning that it was a legal requirement. He did suggest she could perhaps mail the documents to him; but Martha wasn't happy with the idea because of the time delay; and when she informed him his signature would have to be witnessed by someone like a police officer, Paul wasn't keen on it either. The conversation terminated with Paul agreeing to resolve the problem at his end; adding a promise to call Martha as soon as the matter had been expedited. Martha left him with a: "Right, do that, Paul; and please don't take forever." Then she hung up.

As was usual after talking to his grandmother, confusion reigned. In a fog, he began walking towards the exit when he was pulled up short by Sid asking: "What about the coffee, mate?"

"Thanks, but I think I'll leave it," was Paul's reply, expecting that would be an end to it.

Not as far as Sid was concerned: "Do what you like, as long as you pay for it."

Paul stuttered to a halt. "Oh, sorry, I..." A sudden tightening of the stomach was a physical nudge that he had left Copernicus in something of a rush and had forgotten to pick up his wallet. A brief fumble through his pockets was more play-acting for Sid's benefit than anything else. "I'm, er... I don't seem to have any money on me."

"That'd be right," came a voice, but it wasn't the bartender's. Steve Malloy had entered the pub just in time to hear Paul's feeble excuse. He sauntered close and leaned on the bar. "Typical of this lot..." He was looking at Sid, but it was obvious his words were directed at Paul. "...Flash boat, money coming out their ears, and too cheap to pay for a cup of coffee."

"It's not like that," Paul tried to explain, adding: "I'll be back shortly."

Malloy produced a derisive snort and tossed some coins on the bar. "Don't bother. Have this

one on me. Then you can leave; and I don't just mean the pub. The town can do without your sort. We take care of our own here; and that includes our women, Rosie in particular." His tone was quiet yet sneering and provocative. "Maybe you thought she was a soft touch after you watched her husband blow himself up – convenient that – but you were dead wrong..."

Paul was very aware of his sudden anger rising to fever pitch; but somewhere within it that small voice was calling out, warning of consequences if he said what he knew he was about to. Shooting the briefest of glares, he bit his tongue and started towards the exit. A hand grabbed his arm. "Don't walk away from me when I'm, talking to you!" snarled Malloy. The intention was simply to shrug off the restraint, but fate decided to make more of it. Perhaps Malloy was off balance. Whatever, the sudden jerk had him stumbling against the bar, his free arm sweeping the cup of coffee onto the floor. Hearing the smash of crockery, Paul turned in time to catch the mere glimpse of a fist flying towards him. He only meant to parry the blow, but the swinging force of it changed the direction of his own arm, driving his knuckles in an open, backhanded slap across his aggressor's mouth.

Malloy's face registered momentary surprise as he touched a finger to his lip and saw it was smeared with blood; then, eyes blazing, the expression transcended to hatred. Someone shouted: "Bastard!" but it wasn't Malloy. Rusty Baines and his drinking buddies had arrived in time to witness Steve being attacked by the blow-in; at least that was the way he interpreted it.

Rusty was one of those people who loved confrontation, mainly from the sidelines. A practiced agitator, he could stay safe while keeping the pot boiling with snide comments from afar. Rarely would he become physically involved; however, on this occasion he couldn't help himself. The bloke who had attacked his mate was facing away, a prime target; but he was bigger than Rusty so it was only fair to even up the odds. There was a bottle sitting conveniently on the bar top and it was just the job. Grabbing it by the neck, he raised it on high. Unfortunately for him, there was still beer in it which poured down his shirt front. Rusty froze, initially because of the unexpected drenching; a second later a strong hand had encircled his wrist accompanied by a growling hiss: "Leave it, Baines!" then, rising in volume the warning was extended to the others: "Settle down, all of you!"

The harsh order came from behind Paul and in seconds more voices joined in. He made the mistake of turning to look which was probably fortuitous because Malloy's fist only glanced off his cheek. It was enough, though, to send him reeling. In a second he was on the floor. What happened next was hazy, a jumble of shuffling feet and legs.

"I said quit!" The voice was familiar, authoritative and definitely timely. Sergeant Les Jackson was perhaps the only man capable of defusing such a volatile situation by his mere presence; but to ensure the belligerence went no further he warned: "And that means you, Steve; unless you want to spend a night in the lockup." Two paces brought him to where Paul lay. Stooping, he reached down to help the fallen man up. "Are you okay, Mr Longstreet? Do you need a doctor?"

Paul shrugged off the policeman's hand and struggled to his feet. "No to both questions," he mumbled acidly. "What I need is to get out of this town."

Jackson took a few moments to scan the faces surrounding him. They seemed to have accepted the ceasefire. What they would make of his following comment was anyone's guess. Turning back to Paul he said: "I think that might be a good idea. I've finished my enquiries – you're free to go."

It was as if a vacuum had swallowed up the here-and-now, only for seconds, though. A faint buzz of conversation broke the silence. Paul was the first to say anything coherent: "Thank you, Sergeant. I'll be out of your hair as soon as I've taken on fuel and fresh water. Could that be arranged?"

"Already sorted," drawled Les. "I've cleared it with Don Gray. See Ben when you're ready."

The vacuum returned, but just for Paul. It was hard to reason within it – one moment hoping the recent trials would cease dragging on and it would all be over enabling him to leave; the next, *carte blanche* and the prospect of the freedom of open seas. No more hassles, no small-town animosity; and no more... Rosie... Aye, he thought, there's the rub. Aware that he was hyperventilating which caused his head to swim, he was careful to give the group of Malloy's mates a wide berth, ignoring their muttered insults as he set an unsteady course for the door. The air outside was contrastingly fresh; but that was not what brought him to a stuttering halt. Rosie was there. Suddenly his pulse was racing.

It was obvious she had not expected to see him and was initially lost for words. "I... er," she started, drawing her eyes from his gaze to stare over his shoulder through the door and into the pub. "Can't stop," she continued awkwardly. "I have to work." Stepping around him and far enough away to avoid physical contact, she added in passing: "You forgot your jacket. I left it with Ben."

The old salt was waiting for him on the jetty as Paul brought Copernicus in. Handing over the jacket was a convenient gambit for uttering a few brief words of sagely advice to Paul who chose not to respond, rather burying them in the depths to concentrate on practicalities. These were performed on auto pilot and seemingly over in a flash; although he did pause occasionally to cast glances at the front door of the tavern for obvious reasons. Ben could not help but notice. "Are you sure you want to do this, Paul? Just because you're cleared to go doesn't mean you have to."

Following one last long, sorrowful gaze at the pub he declared quietly: "I think I do, Ben. Sorry."

Perhaps it was a mistake, cruising closer to shore as he drew level with it; but one final look at Rosie's beach seemed necessary. She wasn't there, of course, and that was as well: fate had presumably taken a back seat, handing over decisions both easy and hard to the man who had difficulty making either. Not this time, though. With a heavy sigh, Paul closed the book on what might have been and powered out to sea.