

Rosie's Beach



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CHAPTER SIX Despair

1

When she first entered, Rosie was unaware that the public bar had been the stage for a debacle; but that something had happened became obvious as she took in her surroundings. Sergeant Jackson's presence there was odd at that time of day; and the others huddled in a group were less than their usual rowdy selves, appearing strangely subdued. The sight of Steve Malloy leaning on the bar dabbing a handkerchief to his lip added a sinister touch; plus, instead of beer he had a glass of scotch cradled in his free hand. Then there was the smashed cup on the floor which hadn't yet been cleaned up. She frowned trying to make sense of the scene and something twigged. Glancing back at the front door there was no sign of Paul, but it was a fair bet that he had been involved somehow and this caused tightness in her stomach. No doubt all would be revealed eventually; for now, however, there was work to do which, like cake-making, would serve as a distraction from unresolved problems.

Malloy's mates were crowding the bar ordering drinks and Sid was serving them in a kind of dream with a blank look on his face. The expression brightened as soon as he caught sight of Rosie. Although he didn't speak, a couple of slow, pleading blinks seemed to be begging assistance. Sliding behind the bar she said: "What's it to be, Rusty – the usual?"

Once the rest of the patrons had been served it was just a matter of occasional top-ups and general bar maintenance. Consequently, the day dragged. Memories of her very recent chance meeting with Paul kept invading her thoughts – she should have said something rather than ignoring him. That had merely rubbed salt in a wound she had inflicted and wished she hadn't. Too late now, maybe; or maybe not. He would still be around until Les gave him permission to leave; at least she assumed that had not been the case because Jackson hadn't mentioned it when he had a word just before leaving: "There are a few things to sort out, Rosie."

"Not the car registration?" she droned irritably. "I said I'd pay that as soon as I could."

"Forget the rego. It's to do with the, er..." He was going to say 'the body', but this seemed too insensitive and he thought better of it. "Arrangements need to be made, people should be contacted..."

"What arrangements, which people?"

"For Wayne's funeral..."

He had said more, but the painful issue she had conveniently buried in the depths had risen to the surface and her mind went off-line. Before her thoughts were starting to clear, Les had gone. Whatever had occurred earlier was something of a blessing because it tempered the general atmosphere. Tending bar, especially for a woman, meant putting up with sexist remarks, which was both expected and grudgingly accepted. There were often comments that were a little close to the mark: the suggestive ones accompanied by a meaningful chuckle declaring they should be regarded as just harmless banter; but at the same time intimating that if she wanted to test the water the "joker" wouldn't mind a bit. Today, however, Malloy and his cronies were clearly involved

with their own issues and left her alone. Although it wouldn't last, she was glad of the reprieve; more so to be leaving when her shift was over.

Thinking back on Les Jackson's words, particularly those she had been unable to process at the time, she seemed to recall he had said something about coming to the house to discuss matters. In the past he had visited on numerous occasions, usually when her husband was out at sea, for reasons that were rarely official and hardly important; or maybe they were for him.

It was no secret around town that he had feelings for Rosie; but it was his belief that he had expressed them in the platonic way of a friend merely on hand to help when needed. After Wayne's death he could have been excused for figuring he might have been in with a chance. The union of a widower, as he was, and a widow who was struggling to cope with her recent loss was, in his mind, quite natural and appropriate; and no-one could argue with that. The fly in the ointment was Longstreet. Rosie had made it very clear that she preferred his company to that of Les. Surely now that he had sent the interloper on his way the previous status quo had been re-established?

At that moment, Rosie was thinking along similar lines, but from a different perspective. The unfortunate episode that had since transpired between her and Paul was their affair and only theirs; so, as far as anyone else knew they were still an item. All the time Paul was around it would keep prospective suitors at bay; and once she had repaired their relationship, which she had come to realise was her primary focus; perhaps her future might become more bearable, joyous even. That happy prospect took a sudden dive as she crossed the tavern car park and looked out to sea. Paul's boat had gone!

She must have stood staring for a while until a police vehicle drove past along the street with Les Jackson behind the wheel. Had Paul been told officially that he was free to go; or was her stinging dismissal back at the house so apparently final that he'd simply left without permission? Jackson's car seemed to be heading in the direction of the police station; so by taking a short stroll she could get the answer to her burning question from him. There was, however, a shorter walk that might achieve the same.

Ben had seen Rosie approaching, her gait stiff and purposeful. He had been anticipating this and wasn't looking forward to it. Somehow he felt guilty because he'd helped Paul with the refuelling; and when she was right before him, lips tightly pursed, switching her gaze from him to the empty sea where Copernicus had been, then back again, he felt he was on the witness stand. Rosie didn't launch into a blistering admonishment as expected; she just said: "How long?"

It was obvious from her demeanour and area of focus what she was referring to. "A couple of hours," replied Ben, and added: "No more," as if it made a difference.

"Did Les tell him he could go?"

"In the pub earlier apparently," confirmed the old man, and began coughing.

She pondered the revelation for a few seconds. Maybe if she'd spoken to Paul at the tavern, given him some hope of reconciliation; maybe he wouldn't have been in such a rush to leave. Maybe if... Maybe. Too many maybes...!

Seeing the pain on her face cut Ben deeply. He needed to tender a word or two of comfort – it was his job as self-appointed surrogate protector – and he tried: “Don’t give up, Rosie. Paul may be back. The sea has ways of making things right.”

“The sea?” she sneered, scowling darkly. “The sea is what took him away!”

“But she did bring him here in the first place,” he reminded her. “Just have faith.”

In truth, faith was really all she had left. As for the rest, the once-familiar, even previously-friendly sights as she walked the streets appeared now as a grey and dismal ambiance brimming with hostility. The souvenir shop welcomed only free-spending tourists, not a local in need of comfort and support; and should it have such ethereal gifts on its shelves, the likes of Rosie couldn’t afford them. In fact, there was little she could; and this state of affairs, she realised, was the prime cause of her anguish and attitude. Some would say it was paranoia because, no matter how bad things might seem, there was always a solution if one only looked hard enough. Well, she had, was continually doing so, and it was becoming tedious almost to the point of despair.

2

By the time she was entering the police station her mood had deteriorated further. Everything was against her, everyone; and whatever it was that Les wanted to discuss was bound to make it worse. The cheerful greeting from the WPC behind the desk stirred the festering animosity: afternoon it might be, but *good*...? And why so formal, calling her Mrs Sherman instead of Rosie? Was this a precursor of ominous things to come? A subsequent ten-minute wait was irritating – didn’t he know she wished this interview over as soon as possible? Les was really asking for it! The desk phone buzzed. The policewoman answered it, replaced the handset and said pleasantly: “The Sergeant will see you now, Mrs Sherman.” Kind of him, thought Rosie, but she remained tight-lipped.

Fully aware that her expression would be radiating belligerence she did nothing to soften it. “Will this take long?” she grated. When he suggested she might like to sit down Rosie turned away for a second to glance unseeing through a window, hoping to portray an air of dismissive superiority. “I’ll stand, thank you.” She turned back to face him, nostrils flaring. “Can we get on with this? I have things to do.”

From an outsider’s point of view, the police Sergeant was being considerate and exceptionally accommodating. Rosie was thinking the opposite, especially after discovering that he had given Paul the green light to leave. Although she didn’t say as much, it was her belief it was all part of his selfish agenda, underlined by the admission that he had paid for the car registration out of his own pocket. She scowled at him. “And what do you expect in return?”

“Nothing, Rosie,” he replied quietly. “I just thought it would help ease the pressure, what with the funeral coming up.”

“God!” she gasped, her head tilting back, eyes rolling in their sockets. “I can’t afford a black dress, never mind a funeral!”

“What about Wayne’s family?” he suggested. “Or your own parents? Surely between them...?”

The prospect of a visit by the in-laws hadn’t dawned on her. They had never liked her, and she could imagine the chill and animosity of a face-to-face confrontation. In their eyes, she was most likely to blame for their son’s death; or at least had been instrumental in his decision to leave the comforts of the city for a god-forsaken fishing village that nobody had ever heard of. When they learned, if they didn’t know already, that Wayne was drunk when he’d blown himself up; that would be her fault too. As for them having to contribute to the cost of a funeral, she’d never hear the last of it. “My parents won’t be coming,” she said woodenly, “And please don’t ask why. As for Wayne’s, I haven’t contacted them yet.”

“I could phone John Sherman now if you like,” said Les. He couldn’t help noticing how she stiffened on hearing this. “Maybe he’d prefer for his son’s funeral to be in Perth...”

Rosie exploded: “Wayne was *MY* husband! I’m next of kin, so where and when is *MY* responsibility! I don’t care what his father thinks – the funeral will be *HERE!*”

The Sergeant absorbed the stinging tirade, pausing for a few moments before saying quietly: “Fine. I’ll let Alf know you’re in the process.”

Rosie frowned deeply. “Process? What process; and who’s Alf?”

“Um... Alf’s the medical examiner.” This was more awkward than Les had imagined. “He’ll need some idea of when he can, er, release the er... Wayne’s body.”

3

As far as Robert knew, his mother was working at the tavern; so he never expected to see her leaving the police station. He was only there because it was a relatively safe street to walk; which he was doing at that moment because, in light of recent events and once his Mum had left for work, being home alone was proving risky. Kevin Malloy and his gang of misfits might return; but they were unlikely to hassle him when police were close at hand. From what he could tell, his nemesis wasn’t following, which was why he had slowed to a brisk walk. On turning into the street where he was now, it was as well he had. Seeing his mother coming out of the cop shop, Robert ducked behind a shrub on the verge and waited.

Rosie was feeling trapped. Wherever she turned another problem reared its ugly head, and she was convinced it was all to do with this town. In the early days it was freedom of sorts, escaping from a world of criticism and innuendo. The parents on both sides of her marriage had made it very clear that it was her decision – not hers and Wayne’s – and she was going to have to live with it. The challenge then was to prove them all wrong. She was fairly certain determination would be enough, and her arrival in the quiet coastal town of Severance had seemed to confirm that. Initially, it was a breath of fresh air, a place to begin anew where they knew no-one and no-one knew them. A better life, she had thought, a simpler one. Then Wayne had bought the boat, and the rot began to set in. So much for simple. Whatever her dream might have been, it had disappeared, overshadowed by a dark cloud of complexity within which she was suffocating. Fate

had landed her with too many responsibilities that were hers alone; none she could resolve without help; and who would be forthcoming with anything of the slightest use, except at a price?

Peering out from behind the bush, Robert was watching his mother's back; but it wasn't her. The woman heading along the street away from him had no spring in her step. It was as if she was finding it hard to put one foot in front of the other, an old-person's walk. And the way her head turned from left to right she appeared to be lost; at least was unsure of where she was or wanted to go. Robert knew he should have gone to his mother, caught her up and offered some form of comfort; but he was afraid, mainly for himself. What had transpired to make her like this had happened in the police station, he was sure of it. Did he want to know what that was? Could he handle it if he did know? Reasoning that caution was the best policy, he waited until she was almost at the end of the street before following her at a distance.

Unaware that she was being stalked, Rosie continued on in a daze, mulling over the latest complications that Les had served up and how to resolve them. Just thinking about phoning her father-in-law had her tense and jittery. What if he insisted Wayne's funeral be in Perth? Her adamant display of pride in Les's office had really been spur-of-the-moment and as much for her own benefit as the Sergeant's; but she doubted a repeat would cut any ice with John Sherman. This brought her back to her inability to shoulder the expense on her own, putting the ball back in her father-in-law's court.

Nearing the tavern she slowed down, deep in thought, and eventually stopped. Staring at the front door her head was suddenly filled with noise: voices suggesting, demanding, criticising; all swimming around and growing louder until it was a deafening cacophony. It was obviously just in her imagination, but it must have meant something. Unable to make sense of it, she lurched forward and continued along the esplanade.

Ben was on his way back to his usual spot after re-fuelling one of the fishing boats when he caught sight of Rosie: in a hurry certainly, a woman on a mission. The thought that she might be coming to see him had him waiting in anticipation – or was it apprehension? His hand was rising for a wave of greeting, but she didn't even notice him and sped on. Ben let the hand fall back and was about to delve in a pocket for his tobacco; then Robert appeared. The boy seemed to be following his mother, making no attempt to catch her up; only for a moment, though. His step faltered as he was passing the beach-front café. Suddenly he picked up the pace to close the gap between him and his mother. The reason poured out of the shop – Kevin Malloy and his gang were in there and had spotted Robert passing the window.

Had she known what was going on behind her and how it might develop, Rosie would have gone to her son's aid. Actual physical confrontation was never likely: although Malloy wouldn't think twice had Robert been on his own, he wouldn't dare touch a woman. A simple glare from a disapproving adult would be enough to make him back off. This, however, hadn't eventuated. Rosie was too focussed on her personal problems to even know her son was following; or, indeed, that he might be in danger; so she continued on. Ben, on the other hand, was watching and had decided to even up the odds.

Forgetting about having another smoke, the old man headed off the jetty towards the group of youngsters near the café. It was clear they had begun to track Robert, staying at a distance, maybe keeping their options open should anyone guess their intentions and try to intercept. That was exactly Ben's idea, and it was as well the kids were just sauntering otherwise he would never have been able to make up ground. Even then it wasn't easy. By the time he was drawing close he was struggling. The wheeze got the better of him and he stuttered to a halt as a bout of coughing took over. The group ahead of him heard and turned to look. Responses of the individuals ranged from feelings of guilt over what was planned, to relief now that the arrival of a witness precluded it. Clearly there were those among them who had been pressed by Kevin and weren't too happy about being a party to his continuing harassment of Robert. Judging by the scowl on his face, Malloy, however, was annoyed by the unwanted interference. It took him a moment to decide that teaching Sherman a lesson for the spear-gun incident would have to wait. A side street they were approaching was a way out, another convenient face-saver. Casting a sneer at the old man he growled: "Come on," and he veered off the main street, dragging his relieved cohort in his wake.

Still unaware that she had a shadow, Rosie trudged out of town along the road that led to her special beach. On arrival she paused just metres onto the sand. Turning on the spot, a confused bewildered woman took in her surroundings and seemed surprised to find herself there. If this had been her destination all along, what was she expecting to discover - some clarity or inspiration? Perhaps she might, had the shoreline presented its usual welcoming bounty; but any shells or bits of coral were obscured by mounds of seaweed. This was the unforgiving present obliterating past pleasantries, an ugly reminder of growing discomfort compounded by a chill breeze laced with moisture and a hint of rain to come.

Robert watched from a distance as his mother began walking again. He waited a few moments, unsure whether to continue after her, knowing of old that when she was in this frame of mind she did not respond well to any kind of sympathy. Further back down the road, Ben was having similar thoughts about both the young boy and his mother. The only reason he was there in the first place had faded into nothingness. Robert, for now anyway, was no longer in danger; at least not from his belligerent peers; but would he be strong enough to handle the enormous psychological battle Ben was certain he was heading into? And with respect to Rosie he had nothing practical to give. His sagely advice would be about as much use as a beach which was never his to give that he had merely bequeathed in a poetic gesture. There was, he was sure, only one who could heal her pain and save her from herself; but he had gone.

Rosie knew this only too well. The sea which had taken him was empty now, as was her life. Her mouth was open, perhaps to say something; but what and to whom wasn't forthcoming, so she merely sucked in air and ozone for a few minutes, trying to clear her head and make sense of everything. Then she was walking, a slow amble through soft sand just above the mounds of seaweed. Spotting a crab's claw perched on a tangle of brown strands she almost stooped to pick it up. Her mind began ticking over just as it had in the old days, going through the process to

remove the meat without destroying the hard exterior; then imagining how it could be incorporated into a decorative sculpture. A wave of anger and regret drove the thoughts away and she walked on.

Robert had decided to bite the bullet and go to his mother. He was thirty metres from her when she stopped suddenly and turned to face the open ocean. The boy hesitated, watched. Next, she was walking forward, climbing over the seaweed and onto the wet sand beyond, pausing at the edge where waves broke gently before receding quietly only to be replaced by more coming. Tranquillity reined, a moment of peace to merely contemplate; nothing to indicate what was about to happen. After a second or two and a deep sigh, Rosie stepped into the water and kept going. Robert gasped and dashed towards his mother, reliving his own former desperation; knowing it must be how she felt, but also that he had overcome the need to take the drastic step that it seemed she was about to now. She was knee-deep before he reached her. “No, Mum!” His hands gripped her arms. “Please...!”

The voice and physical contact halted her advance. She made an attempt to pull free, but it was merely a token. Yes, she wanted to end it, the pain and despair; and in the same thought, no she didn't, couldn't; and when he said: “We can sort this, Mum... together we can.” Rosie turned, looked into her son's eyes and drank in a level of warmth and love that she not only needed, but desperately had to preserve. Then he was hugging her close and both of them were sobbing.

Ben had originally turned to leave, but had changed his mind. Why, he wasn't sure; it was just that something was willing him to stay a few moments longer. He gasped when Rosie started into the sea, instinctively thought of running to assist, knowing full well that he was incapable of doing even that and went to coughing and cursing his age. The boy's timely rescue was a blessing, and as he watched Robert eventually guiding her back to dry land, one ineffectual old man breathed a wheezing sigh of relief as he came to a decision.

4

The walk to home arm in arm with her son was reassuring. They had always been close; although once Robert began growing up he had seemed embarrassed to show his affection, perhaps trying to be the man his father had wanted him to be. If anything, Rosie liked to think now that Wayne was gone things between them would change; had changed. By the time they were approaching town she was feeling more her old self, composed and in control. “I have to speak to Sergeant Jackson,” she said quietly, “And I was wondering if you would like to be there.”

Robert hesitated in mid-step. “Why?”

“For moral support,” she replied and hurried on before he could interrupt: “It's about the funeral.” Noticing her son's face had gone blank she gathered this was one aspect of his father's death that he had preferred to sweep under the carpet; or maybe it hadn't even occurred to him – did teenage boys think about those matters? “I have to contact your grandparents and they may want a word with you. I'd rather they didn't know that the phone's been cut off, and Les's office will be quiet. If

you're there they may even assume I'm calling from home. If not... well, so be it."

A heavy silence followed as Robert festered within a wave of consternation which hardened his features. When eventually he spoke there was gravel in his throat: "Who cares what they think? Anyway, I can't imagine why they'd want to talk to me – they never have before. They may be my grandparents, but I hardly know them." Although acceding to her request promised to be somewhat distasteful, it just occurred to him that leaving to return home alone might expose him to another confrontation with Kevin Malloy. For the moment, remaining in his mother's company seemed the wiser option. "Okay, I'll come," he said reluctantly, "But I'll only speak to them if they ask."

Les was very understanding. There was no need to remind him of her phone problem – he already knew that and was gentlemanly enough not to mention it - even so, asking to use his in the police station seemed a bit rude without some kind of explanation. Her solution wasn't planned – it just came out: "I have no idea what arrangements might have to be made for the funeral. In fact, I know nothing about funerals whatever." He was watching her in a non-committal way until she added: "Maybe you could be on hand to help me out with details and suchlike – in case John asks."

He smiled pleasantly and nodded his understanding. "I'll leave you to talk in private, but I'll be out in reception if you need me. I'll have Judy get you the number, if you like."

Hoping to preserve the illusion of calling from home she said: "Just an open line, thanks; and John's number if it's not too much trouble." Receiver in hand while waiting for the connection, her thoughts skipped over how she would respond to John. He was a bombastic man who insisted on everything being done the way he wanted, and if Rosie was to retain her self-respect she would have to stay calm. That wouldn't be easy, especially as the matter of funeral expenses was bound to come up.

It did, which gifted John the advantage: "I can cover the cost of transporting Wayne's body back to Perth..."

"I want the funeral here," said Rosie woodenly.

"Not practical," he stated. "My son should be interred in the family plot. There'll also be other matters to consider..."

"Other matters...?"

"Like arranging the ceremony, and choosing the casket of course, neither of which will be cheap." Her failure to respond opened the door wider for him: "I can take care of the expenses up front and you can pay your share back once you settle in and get a job."

Rosie was frowning. "I've already got a job."

"I meant after you re-locate to Perth. There's plenty of work for you in pubs and supermarkets. Then there's Robert. Once he leaves school I can't imagine there'll be much on offer for him in your one-horse town; but I can give him a start in the business as a trade assistant..."

She did remember saying that both she and Robert would be staying put for the time being, but he wasn't listening. As a consequence her focus became overshadowed by a strange mental hum

that grew to the point where she was incapable of reasoning. The last thing she recalled was asking Les to speak with John about details; then, she presumed, Robert had escorted her home.

5

Life is usually a progression of consecutive events each leading to the next; for most people, that is; Rosie, however, had ceased to be one of them. For her, things came and went in the fashion of movie jump-cut scenes with nothing in between except meaningless fog. Matters needing her attention seemed to surface at inconvenient times and she had to force herself to deal with them.

His mother's condition was difficult for Robert and he was walking on broken glass, never sure if he ought to suggest her seeing the doctor for something to help her cope; always shelving the idea because he figured it might make her worse. Then one of those important matters cropped up which he couldn't prepare her for because he hadn't anticipated it. Sergeant Jackson arrived at the front door. Clearly unaware of Rosie's unstable mental state he wasn't expecting her reaction to the news that he'd heard from John Sherman who was still insisting on having the funeral in Perth. Robert could feel the sudden surge of electrified tension in the air. Snatching a breath he held it, eyes wide, looking at his mother.

Rosie exploded: "I told him the funeral would be here! He never listens! Well, damn the man! I've decided..." She paused to glance at Robert. "...We've decided Wayne will be cremated. Afterwards, they can take his ashes and stick them in the family plot. Maybe," she added with a sneer, "We should just go with one of Wayne's drunken comments and give him a Viking send-off - toss him in a boat, push it out to sea and set light to it; but, let's face it, Wayne tried that once and managed to make a dog's breakfast of it." Realising her words would be hurtful to Robert she sent him a silent apology for her cruelty. The boy took it well, blinking slowly to hold back a tear or two.

"If that's your final decision," said Les, "I'll inform John. You will need to arrange the cremation with the funeral directors, and..."

He carried on listing other considerations. Rosie's mind went blank. It was a safety mechanism she employed that Robert was becoming accustomed to spotting and knew how to handle. He simply made a point of remembering what the Sergeant had said and wrote down the details before he forgot them. Bit by bit he mentioned them to his mother; painting by numbers, really; and as long as he picked his time it worked as well as could be expected - like booking a room for his grandparents at the hotel. He offered to accompany her, but she insisted on going alone.

Sid was surprised: first that she was there at all because he'd given her time off; secondly that her in-laws were coming here for the funeral; and finally, having heard that, he'd assumed they would have been staying at her place. Keeping personal feelings under wraps, Rosie claimed it was impractical, adding a lame excuse about problems with the water. She watched Sid's eyebrows kink as they did when he figured someone was feeding him bulldust. Rosie knew the expression of old. So he didn't believe her, so what? She was past caring what anyone thought.

Her mind was in such a whirl that she left to trudge home in a stupor, only realising she had

arrived when Robert met her at the front door. "Are you okay, Mum?" he asked, a concerned look on his face. When her only response was to stare blankly at him he guided her into the kitchen. "Have a sit. I'll make you a cup of tea."

Over the coming days Les was really helpful by taking care of the funeral arrangements; and when the Shermans arrived he was there to meet them on Rosie's behalf who, he said, was a bit under the weather. Although he planned on being at the service, he did stay away from one particular event, reasoning his presence would be inappropriate. Choosing the coffin was bound to be an awkward and uncomfortable experience which he preferred not to be a part of.

The others were all there, though, in the funeral parlour's display room, including Robert who had elected to be his mother's constant companion. As expected, his grandparents had barely spoken to him since their arrival and continued to remain markedly distant. John was his usual morose self as he insisted on a rosewood coffin that was one of the most expensive. "But it's just going up in smoke," pleaded Rosie, her anger rising until Robert gave her arm a squeeze. Slightly calmer, she offered: "Surely the plain pine would do?"

John's accusatory scowl was venomous. "Our son deserves a good send off. We'll have the rosewood," he declared flatly, "Don't you think, Julie?" As she always did, his wife agreed subserviently and spent the rest of the time there sniffing into a handkerchief.

The service was held at the funeral parlour in a small chapel. Mourners arrived in dribs and drabs; a few going straight in to find seats, whereas most stayed outside to talk quietly in small groups. Wayne's fishing cronies were there, of course; and when John Sherman drove up he actually smiled and waved at Steve Malloy. Rosie was in the back of the car with Robert and the gesture surprised her. She had no idea that the two were acquainted, but supposed they had met in the hotel bar.

Rosie sat next to Robert with Ben on her other side. He was hoping his moral support might be of comfort; for now, anyway. Convinced she needed much more, he was planning to do something about that later. In the meantime the old man just kept a watchful eye, trying not to make it too obvious.

Rosie suffered in brooding silence, barely listening to the eulogy which she considered nauseously hypocritical while ignoring the closeness of people who, judging by their constant fidgeting would also rather have been somewhere else. Steve Malloy sent her the occasional glance accompanied by a smile, presumably of condolence; or as close as he could manage. He probably thought he was back in Rosie's good books after he had given her the proceeds of the whip-round he had organised. "It's not much, but the blokes thought it might help out," he'd said. Although a hundred and twenty-five dollars was hardly likely to make a dent in her financial commitments, she had accepted gracefully; at least she thought so. As the service wound up and the coffin moved slowly through the curtains to the committal chamber, John Sherman's objection to the cremation was plainly obvious. The depth of his disapproval of Rosie, and his animosity towards her wasn't really evident until the post arrived next day – the entire bill for the funeral and service was in her name.

Eventually calming down, she retrieved the piece of paper she had screwed up and tossed across the kitchen; then she left for work. John was in the pub, sitting at a table with Steve Malloy and crew; probably bidding an insincere farewell. Julie would have been round the back loading the car for their trip home – typical of her master’s slave. Eyes were on Rosie as she approached and said: “I’d like a private word, John.”

This took place at the bar, quietly to begin with, growing more heated as differences were aired. John was scanning the crumpled paper in his hand saying: “Rather more than I anticipated, but you were the one who insisted on the cremation.”

“And what about *your* contribution?” Rosie grated. “When am I likely to get that, if at all?”

“I’m still considering how much will be appropriate,” he said. “I’ll let you know when I’ve decided. There is something else,” he added with a sly, almost unnoticeable glance at Malloy and company. “On reflection I don’t think it’s such a good idea for you to come to Perth after all, taking into account Robert’s er...” He hesitated momentarily, perhaps to accentuate what he was about to say, not because he was trying to be sensitive. “I’ve heard he’s a bit *different* to other boys and I have the feeling he won’t fit in.”

Rosie’s eyes widened. She didn’t need to ask the source of this latest information and her anger was rising. She turned to glare at Malloy and sneered: “Thanks for your support, you lousy backstabber.” Snatching the bill from John’s hand, she fought back the tears of a lonely, defeated woman as she barked at everyone and no-one in particular: “Damn you to Hell, all of you!” Then she stormed out.

Ben was on his way to the fish processing plant when he caught a glimpse of Rosie powering along the street, anger and despair written all over her face. Yes, he thought, it’s definitely time. Don Gray was very helpful, and he needed to be because Ben’s technological expertise was limited to the mobile phone, whereas computers were way out of his league. He learned quickly, though, and with guidance eventually managed to stumble around on the Internet until he found what he was looking for. Don had already said he could use the land-line, which was a relief because the mobile signal constantly dropping out wouldn’t help his cause. Picking up the receiver, Ben was about to punch in the number he’d researched, but his hand hovered uncertainly for a few seconds. “Get a grip on yourself you old fool,” he growled at himself. “Do the deed; and just hope it isn’t too late.”