

Rosie's Beach



Kathy Sampson

CHAPTER SEVEN Return to Severance

1

Julia found Martha in the garden. “When will Paul be back?” she asked, waving a piece of paper. “I’ve just had a rather strange phone call for him.”

Martha switched her attention from the bed of Azaleas and frowned. “From whom? And how do you mean strange?”

“He said his name was Ben,” replied her secretary. “He was very wheezy and difficult to understand, but I think I heard him right. The message I took was - *tell Paul he’s needed here urgently*; then – *Rosie’s beach isn’t doing it for her anymore*. Does that make any sense to you?”

“None whatever.” Martha’s reply was curt. She stood motionless for a moment or two mulling over the likely possibility of another disaster in the making. “Did you try to contact him; Paul, I mean?”

Julia nodded. “But he wasn’t answering his phone.”

Martha was on the move, setting a brisk course for the house, talking back over her shoulder: “If he’s still on the boat I may be able to reach him on the radio, always assuming it’s working now.”

As it happened, Paul responded almost immediately. “I’m a bit tied up right now, Martha. Is this important?”

“Perhaps,” said his grandmother, trying to hide her irritation. “Only you would know. Someone called Ben left you a phone message.” She read out what Julia had written. Radio static went to hissing quietly. “Paul – are you still there?” She waited before asking again.

“Yes,” he replied, rather vacantly. “Look, I’ve got to go. I’ll be home soon.”

“You sound worried, dear. Is something wrong?”

Paul became even more vague: “Um... er... Sorry... I’ll...um...” The radio went dead.

Julia returned to Paul’s work-room to find Martha staring at the wall. “Will Paul be here for lunch?” she asked casually.

Martha let out an extended sigh of frustration. “From what he’s just said, he’ll be here. As for lunch, I wouldn’t count on it.” She cast a forlorn look at her secretary. “What *am* I going to do with him, Julia?”

Paul arrived in a determined rush. Julia noticed he’d left his car carelessly parked in the driveway and assumed he would be going out again. Apparently that was on his agenda, but he wasn’t intending to drive himself. “Could you call a taxi for me, Julia?” he asked curtly as he brushed past and headed for his room.

“To go where?” was her response. She was sure the cab company would want to know and it was, in her opinion, a reasonable question.

He obviously regarded it as totally unnecessary. “The marina, if you must know,” he snapped, “And I’d like it ASAP.” Then he had gone.

Although not one for prying, Martha had overheard and followed him. She stood peering through the open bedroom door at her grandson who was hastily dragging clothes from drawers

and tossing them into a sports bag. “You seem to be in a panic, Paul,” she observed calmly. “I assume it is prompted by the phone message.” He ignored her and carried on packing. “Before you go off half-cocked, you should remember that one person’s idea of ‘urgent’ is not always another’s. And rash decisions do tend to land you in trouble...”

He spun to glare at her. “Ben is *not* prone to exaggeration! If *he* says it’s urgent, then it is! And before you start grilling me for an explanation, I can’t give you one; not now. All I *will* say is that I have to go back to Severance. Someone there I care about needs me; and this time I won’t let her down.”

In a matter of minutes the two women were standing at the window looking out, watching the taxi pull away. “Who is the ‘*she*’ he was referring to?” pondered Martha. “You’d think he would have learned his lesson with Cheryl. Obviously not. I have a feeling I shall soon be picking up pieces again.”

“Well,” said Julia with a wry smirk, “You were always good at it.”

“Perhaps.” Martha closed her eyes for a moment of reflection. “Sometimes, however, it seems to be more of a curse than a talent.”

2

Copernicus was cruising steadily down river towards the estuary; not fast enough for Paul; but speed limits in enclosed waters had to be adhered to. Martha had accused him of going off half-cocked and, as annoyed as this made him, he couldn’t deny it; his clenched teeth confirmed as much. Like alcohol, unbridled anger and boats didn’t mix. He would have to compose himself before he was into the open ocean.

As soon as he was, the weather reiterated the warning. It wasn’t friendly and the sea responded appropriately with heavy swell and higher-than-normal waves whipped up by strong winds, certainly precluding any high-powered mercy dash. Needless to say, Paul’s focus was on Rosie, and that was a dangerous distraction to be consigned to the back-burner for the duration. Perhaps if he treated it as just more research...?

He did try, shelving the idea of a non-stop trip by pulling into a sheltered anchorage that night. He even switched on the recording equipment to listen for whale-song. If there was any he didn’t hear it. His mind was elsewhere, skipping through a series of imaginary scenarios that he might or might not have to face – how would Rosie be when he arrived? Would she be pleased to see him, overjoyed; or be bitter and dismissive? And how would he respond, what would he say that wouldn’t make matters worse? There were, of course, no answers and he eventually drifted off into a troubled sleep.

Morning came, so said the clock; but the sun failed to appear through the blanket of clouds and it was still dark. He couldn’t face breakfast and weighed anchor. The trip would take another two days, longer if he lay over again. Radioing for a weather check decided it – there was a storm due to come in, likely to hit the day after tomorrow. There was nothing else for it but to push on.

Cat-napping on auto pilot for the next 48 hours was all he could afford, and by the time he was

nearing his destination Paul was tired to the point of exhaustion. It was early afternoon and overcast. The storm had fortunately held off and was still just a bank of darker clouds in the distance. Slowing Copernicus as she was passing Rosie's beach was both a reminder of his purpose and a boost to motivation; not what he had wished for, though. The beach was deserted with no sign of Rosie.

He thought that dropping anchor at the mouth of the harbour in roughly the spot he had used before might give her encouragement, always assuming that she had been keeping an eye out for him; assuming also that she still cared. One old seadog on shore was banking on it and experienced a huge wave of relief when he spotted Copernicus rounding the headland. Ben waited until Paul's dingy was heading in to shore before walking to the beach. The first question was fully expected and the old man answered: "She's not good, Paul; been worse since the funeral - something Wayne's father said or did. I think it was likely the day after the wake, in the pub. I was there, but didn't catch it, and Rosie never let on what."

Paul looked past the old man towards the tavern. "Is she at work now?"

"Was; but I saw her leaving early," said Ben. "Robert's been with her over the school holidays, and after..." He almost blurted it out, then realised Rosie's thwarted suicide attempt was the last thing Paul would want to hear. He changed tack: "Well, you know – safety in numbers. Kevin Malloy's mob have been hassling him again, so he's been staying close to his mum. Best for both of them, I'd say."

Paul mulled over the latest news for a moment or two. "Where will she be now, do you think - at home with Robert?"

"Unlikely – school started back a couple of days ago, so she should be on her own till later this arvo." Ben noticed the consternation on Paul's face and tried to reassure him. "I know what you're thinking, son, but she *will* want to see you, I'm sure of it. If she's not home she may be at the lookout. Robert said she's been spending a lot of time there recently. I'm betting she's been keeping a watch for your return."

About to take his leave, Paul had a sudden thought: "I was wondering how you got my home phone number?"

Old Ben's self-satisfied grin spread behind the grey whiskers. "Internet," he said proudly, and was a little disappointed that Paul didn't seem to appreciate this as an achievement; so he added: "Boat registration. Hope you didn't mind."

"Not at all, Ben: I'm glad you called, but..." Paul hesitated, unsure whether he should continue. With an internal shrug he threw caution to the wind: "In future, though, I'd prefer you to contact me on the mobile... Um-er, it saves Martha worrying."

Ben frowned. "Martha?"

"My grandmother, Martha Longstreet – she owns the boat; well, one of her companies does. That's how you..." Realising he'd gone back to babbling as usual, he sighed heavily and fished in a pocket for his wallet. Withdrawing a business card he handed it to Ben. "My mobile number's on there. Call if you need to, Ben."

The old man wasn't wrong about Rosie's way of burying her troubles beneath a veil of hope, however tenuous. On this occasion, however, she had been home when Copernicus had cruised in; and the anchorage spot was tucked behind a bluff which couldn't be seen from the lookout. Watching the fishing boats and a few pleasure craft moving back and forth was hardly therapy; more a painful reminder of the events that had brought her to this point. Why had she been so stupid? Paul would have been her salvation, but she had been too blind and stubborn to accept it. Now all she had left was... nothing really, except for a dreadful gnawing emptiness that she couldn't placate.

A wave of sorrow came over her and she leaned heavily on the guard rail; then she heard it: "Rosie." It must have been imagination, wishful thinking, surely...? Breathing and heart stopped when the voice whispered again across the clearing: "Rosie, it's me, Paul. I've come back for you." Not just 'I've come back'; but 'for *you*'..." Rosie spun, eyes wide; and there he was. She opened her mouth to speak, but couldn't find the words; then it was all too overwhelming and she fainted.

Regaining consciousness was like a dream. He was sitting on the ground beside her, his arm cradling her close. "It's okay," he said softly. "Just take your time, breathe slowly. Once you've fully recovered I'll get you back to the house."

"No!" she snapped, too hastily she thought and repeated: "No, not yet. Let's keep this moment a while longer, just the two of us."

"Sitting on the ground?" he said with a frown.

"Wherever," she replied as she looked deeply into his eyes. "Forever, I hope."

"It can be." Paul was trying to calm himself, think of what to say without making a mess of it. He had practised over the last three days; rehearsed, constantly changing comments, editing those which were clichéd or sounded too-Hollywood. Now excitement was buzzing around in his head and he couldn't remember any of them. "If it's truly what you want." Her reply was a quiet 'Mmm' and she buried her head into his shoulder. "If you've forgiven me," he added.

She jerked away slightly, presumably shocked. "I'm the one who needs forgiving. I said some terrible things to you, all of them totally unjustified. Robert told me what really happened. At first I was too pig-headed to believe him; then it started falling into the proper place; but by the time I'd buried my stupid pride and realised that, it was too late and you'd gone. I am so sorry, Paul."

"No, I'm sorry." He groaned inwardly. This was turning into one of those afternoon TV soaps. All they had to do to really set the scene was stare at each other with frozen expressions for ten seconds before continuing. He blinked the notion away. "I should have stayed. Instead I ran away from my responsibilities as usual. Not this time, though; not anymore, Rosie. Whatever your problems, we can fix them together; yours *and* Robert's, if he'll let me. How do you think he'll take my coming back?"

"Relieved, I'd say. I'm sure he's wanted to talk about you at length, definitely would have supported your case if I'd given him the opportunity." Her head dipped, an indication of the

shame she felt. “Instead I’ve been snapping and snarling and feeling sorry for myself. He’s been walking on glass, poor love; certainly since the funeral...”

Not thinking, it slipped out: “Ben said there was some problem that upset you...”

“You’ve spoken to Ben?” It was obvious he had: he wouldn’t have said so otherwise. She struggled to stand. “When?”

What an idiot! He might have known even mentioning the old man’s involvement would have her on the offensive. Then again, it was completely in character: thoughtlessly blurting out the truth before weighing up the consequences. Following a deep breath and a heavy sigh of resignation, he said: “Just after I moored. He was my first port of call – had to be: he phoned, left a message...”

“About here, about me?”

Paul nodded. “And before you start blaming him for interfering, he was concerned for your... well, just concerned.” He pondered her reactions, gleaned nothing from them except bewilderment; then thought of something and glanced at his watch. “What time is Robert due home? Shouldn’t we be there?”

Rosie drew his hand towards her so that she could read the watch. “He won’t be back for a while yet – he’s doing some shopping for me.” She gazed up into the sky, hoping to find inspiration or a hint of clarity. The clouds were darker now, much like her own feelings of uncertainty. “Thanks to his self-centred grandfather’s interference he’s confused, Paul. One minute he’s trying to get used to the idea of relocating to the city; next it’s all off.” She went on to explain about John Sherman’s turnaround and spiteful dismissal of her son. “I didn’t dare tell Robert the real reasons for John not wanting us with him. I lied, I’m afraid: said I’d refused his original offer because I thought it best we stayed here; at least until he finished his schooling.”

Although the news didn’t surprise Paul, he was more concerned that Rosie’s decision meant any future relationship would have to continue here in this small-minded fishing village; initially, anyway. That unenviable prospect had never been considered an issue for him because there was no relationship; at least there hadn’t been until suddenly it seemed there might be...? He was doing it again: if it wasn’t bad enough that he made a mess of conversation, now his innermost thoughts were tying themselves in knots.

Finally Rosie said: “I know I don’t have the right to ask, but I need you to be honest with me.”

“Of course I will,” he retorted, casually he hoped. “Didn’t I say that? Maybe I didn’t. If I didn’t, I’m sorry – I should have...” He interrupted his pathetic rambling with a moan. “Sorry. Ask away – anything.”

She hesitated before answering, unable to find the right words. Perhaps she’d caught something from Paul – a dose of bumbling virus. Okay, she thought, only one way – boots and all: “Is it really me you want, or are you here because you feel duty bound?”

Paul frowned deeply, amazed she could contemplate such a thing. “Yes, and yes,” he stated positively. “Yes I really do want you; and yes I believe I have a duty: not to Ben or even Martha; but to you, to Robert, and to myself. I have spent an eternity dodging responsibility, allowing

someone else to make the final decisions and always regretted it afterwards. Not anymore..." He paused momentarily, not for effect, although it might have seemed like it: he had simply run out of breath. "I've answered your question, now I'd like to ask one of my own; and I too need total honesty. So, here goes: will you let me take you and Robert away from here? Are you prepared to spend the rest of your life with me?"

"That's two questions." She waited for the look of puzzled confusion; and when it flowed over his face she knew for certain who this man was and that she never wanted to let him go. Rosie smiled gently, lovingly. "And my answers are: yes, and yes."

3

Going back to school had made Robert's life even more complicated. The holidays proved a double bonus in a way, giving him time to spend with his mother while keeping him free from the hassle of avoiding Kevin Malloy. It hadn't been easy, though. After the business on the beach she bore watching constantly. Her moods changed with the wind and the boy needed to be ready just in case; of what, however, was the problem. He knew from personal experience that anxiety and depression could be triggered by the simplest of things; and for Rosie they were often related to finance. Windowed envelopes usually meant reminders of unpaid bills and their arrival would arouse a level of anger that he had difficulty placating without making matters worse. He had even taken to intercepting the mail, occasionally opening letters from companies that were obviously on the danger list, and some were still in his desk drawer. No doubt there would be more when there was no response to them, but he planned on facing that eventuality as and when. In the meantime, keeping his mother calm was Robert's main focus.

He tried convincing her that he should take extra time off school to be with her, but Rosie had insisted: "You need to make up for what you've already missed; and I'm fine now." Although he was positive that she wasn't, to argue the point would have set her off again, so he complied. The first day back at school was a continuation of a previous strategy – ensuring he was in sight of teaching staff whenever Malloy and his gang looked ready to hassle him. Going to and from anywhere, particularly home, was a brisk walk, breaking into a run when necessary. Today, unfortunately, didn't fit the plan. Stopping off at the store was a delay he could have well done without, and after school he made a bee line for the supermarket, fairly sure he didn't have a tail. Shopping not being his forte, unfamiliarity with the shelf layout caused much wandering up and down aisles to find what was on the list; then there was an annoying wait at the checkout for a supervisor to sort out a pricing error. Finally he was at the front entrance ready to leave.

A hasty glance before exiting seemed to confirm Malloy's crew weren't anywhere ready to pounce; not that they would if people were around, and there were plenty of them. Figuring he was safe for now, Robert stepped onto the footpath and was about to head for home when something caught his eye. From where he was on the esplanade he could see across the harbour, and in almost the same spot as it had been previously, Copernicus was anchored.

An unexpected combination of relief and elation came over the boy, simply because Paul was

back. At least he assumed it was Paul; had to be – even his dingy was there on the beach. Strange how his attitude to the man had changed, he thought. One time he was an interloper, the devil personified; the next a saviour; or might have been, had Robert not been responsible for driving him away. Praying wasn't something the boy practised, not in the biblical sense; he had, however, sent out a kind-of telepathic message for Paul to return so that things could be set straight. Then, maybe, the total mess he and his mother were in might be resolved by someone with limitless compassion, resources and – he was ashamed to even think it – money.

Paul, it seemed, had plenty of that, whereas they had less than none. Without it there would be shame and bankruptcy for his mother, and a very bleak future for himself. Originally she was under the illusion that his fears would be allayed by tendering the prospect of relocating to the city. That, unfortunately, had only made matters worse for him because it would have meant staying with his unsympathetic grandparents. Then, for some reason she said she had declined the offer on the grounds that it would be better to stay here so that he could finish his schooling. Which was worse – the Sherman frying pan or the Malloy fire?

He kept up a reasonable pace on his way home, only slowing to glimpse along each intersecting street in passing, just in case. Perhaps luck was on his side, or his nemesis had other fish to fry. Believing that might have been wishful thinking, hoping it wasn't, he continued on, reservedly optimistic.

Just along the street was an old property which had been vacant for ages and had been earmarked for demolition. The dilapidated house could barely be seen beyond a tangle of overgrown vegetation; and as it seemed to pose no threat, Robert didn't give it a second thought as he walked past. Almost at the front gate - at least where it probably had been before it fell off – he had a feeling that someone was approaching from behind. A quick backward glance confirmed it: three teenagers in school uniform; and he thought one of them was Simone. The boy's heart rate jumped up a peg or two. Where was Malloy? Not with them, he was fairly certain; but he would be around somewhere. Preparing to run for it, Robert switched his gaze to the front and there was Kevin, coming towards him from the opposite direction with two others.

The strategy had been well planned, although Robert failed to appreciate the fact. All he could think of was escape; and with the only option left to him, he spun and dived into the rambling garden. Malloy and his crew advanced en masse, slowing their pace as they entered the property, spreading out to cut off any avenue of retreat. One of the gang called in a sing-song tone: "Come out, come out wherever you are." They all laughed. Malloy added: "Might as well Sherman – you can't hide."

Robert had ploughed through the undergrowth and sank to a trembling crouch behind a bush, hastily taking stock: what to do, what to do? Was there a back fence he could climb over; always assuming he could make it to that before they caught up with him? In a matter of moments it was irrelevant. "Well now..." The words came from above: Malloy's voice; sneering, jeering, exuding supreme confidence. "What have we here? Mummy's little helper?" More laughter, and it was close. Someone said: "Did you remember to get the fairy cakes, Roberta?"

The boy's terrified gaze tracked up the cordon of legs to meet a sea of glowering faces. What they had in store for him he had no idea; only that it wouldn't be good. "Get him out of there!" Kevin ordered. The cohort obeyed, as they would, two of them gripping Robert by the arms and hauling him upright. Malloy must have pointed, because he said: "Over there," then after a brief pause: "On the ground." Robert supposed he should have taken advantage of the situation once he was on his feet; made a run for it, perhaps; but his mind was abuzz with confusion and the idea came too late; then he was dragged down to lay flat on his back.

Malloy sauntered over, slipping a casual hand into a back pocket to withdraw something that was a mystery until he waved it over Robert's face and pressed a button to release the blade of a flick knife. His victim's face registered shock and horror; then self-preservation kicked in and he squirmed in an attempt to break free. The hands on his arms tightened their grip. "Hold him!" growled Malloy. He began sinking down to squat before the prone figure, reaching forward to position the point of the blade on the waistband of Robert's jeans. Kevin leered. "We've been wondering what you've got tucked down there – something, or nothing? Let's find out, shall we?"

His intention had been simple: a quick, theatrical jerk of the knife to cut off the top button. The result wasn't as expected, certainly not the way it happened in the movies. The tip of the knife snagged in the denim which was too thick and resisted. Other things went wrong that hadn't been in Malloy's agenda. By the sound of their pleas and retorts, some of his group either weren't aware that Kevin had a knife; or those who did just imagined it was merely for show. Even so, for them his actually using it was never considered an issue; but now that it seemed Kevin had other ideas they were all stunned. "Enough," said Simone. "You've made your point."

Robert had raised his head and craned his neck to look down towards his waistband. His eyes were bulging, not only from the physical strain of performing the action, but more so as he was visualising what he believed Malloy had in mind to do next. Seized by sheer terror, he jerked free from his restraints and sat up, reaching for the hand holding the knife. The lunge was ill-timed. Instead of grasping Malloy's wrist, the boy's hand closed over the blade of the knife. There would have been sharp and intense pain, but it was over-ridden by panic and the desperation not to let go of the knife; so he tightened his grip and the blade bit deeper. What happened next was a travesty, an uncoordinated scramble by various parties.

Malloy tried to retrieve the knife which he did with ease. The blade being so sharp, it slid from Robert's palm, definitely not in the direction Kevin would have hoped for, though. That was changed by someone grabbing his arm, while another had hold of his pullover and was dragging him backwards. Instinctively his hand went out to stop himself falling. As he fell sideways on the knife he experienced a very slight pinprick and yelped. Although in deep shock, Robert took the opportunity to roll clear of his attacker revealing a large bloodstain on Malloy's jumper. Believing the worst, Simone blurted: "Oh My God, Kevin! Are you badly hurt?"

Malloy peered at the red stain and sneered. "Nuh – not my blood."

Already on his feet and running, Robert heard the girl's words, but not the reply. He could only imagine Malloy had stabbed himself. The fact that he was the one who had initiated the attack

was irrelevant because, knowing him, he would lie about the incident and blame Robert; and that, in turn, meant a police enquiry. If he hadn't gone through enough already, this new development was a worse nightmare waiting to happen.

Out through the gate and heading along the street, fears of consequences echoed through his head, joining forces with circumstances that had troubled him for a while – his grief, his sexuality, and the certain knowledge that he was despised by everyone because he was different. He always knew there would be a day of reckoning, but had never figured it would come to this – the likelihood of criminal charges, a trial, prison, sharing it with an army of aggressors far more brutal and perverted than Kevin Malloy! It was Purgatory, and he couldn't for the life of him see a way out. So he continued to run; but to where? Was there anywhere he could be safe, a sanctuary...? The only one that came to mind was a vision of Paul standing on the other side of its threshold – his bedroom. How safe could a room be, though? Plagued by the hopelessness of the situation, he clenched his fists tightly in anguish, reigniting the pain from the knife cut. With an almost inaudible hiss, Robert unclenched the fist and blundered on.

4

Rosie's agreeing to come away with him was a surprise. Paul didn't know why – it was what he wanted to hear, exactly – but he knew of old that nothing was ever simple; something would rear its ugly head to spoil the moment. Afraid that he might instigate the crashing blow that would scatter his dreams to the four winds, he remained wide-eyed and silent. She did too, except *her* eyes were barely open; not with crying and weariness as they had been for so long; but now mainly with relief. At last she had plucked up the courage to admit the truth: that she couldn't bear a life without this man in it. To say more at that moment might jeopardise what she now accepted as a perfect solution. She felt ashamed for being so brazen in the first place; also annoyed because she hadn't really said what she wanted to. Could she? Did she dare?

Paul realised he was staring at her and switched his gaze upward to the sky. Dark clouds threatened rain and there was a hint of moisture in the air. Hopefully it would hold off, because he had been so eager to see Rosie that putting on a waterproof jacket hadn't crossed his mind. This oversight prompted a recall of the last time they had been in that very same place and had been caught in a downpour. This was a particularly treasured memory; the unmitigated disaster which had followed, however, was anything but and he was determined to avoid a repeat. The mere thought of that tripped an association. He looked at his watch. "Er... shouldn't we be getting back? Robert may be home by now."

Breaking from her reverie, Rosie smiled. "Always the pragmatist; but yes, you're right. What is the time, anyway?" She turned his hand to read the watch-face and felt a slight jolt. Perhaps it was static from the contact, but she doubted the tingling surge that excited her had anything to do with physics. It was merely a resurgence of previous thoughts; things left unsaid that couldn't be any longer. "Will you be staying on the boat tonight?"

Paul was puzzled, caught off guard. "Well, yes, I suppose so."

Rosie took a moment to test her resolve before saying: “Why don’t you stay over – at the house, I mean?”

He was on the back foot as usual. “Maybe not such a good idea. Robert might...”

“I’m sure he won’t mind,” she put in hastily.

“But you don’t have a spare room, do you?” For some reason Paul’s heart was beating faster.

The kink of her eyebrows reflected the question: “Why would we need one?”

Now it was trying to burst out of his chest and his head was starting to spin. “Umm – er...”

Rosie was furious with herself and blurted out loud: “Oh, for God’s sake, woman! Say it and be damned! Paul,” she started, hesitated but a second, then went for it: “I want you to sleep with me, make love to me; tonight; and every night...” Now hers was the heart that was thumping, and her eyes were wide as they stared at him, waiting for a response. He simply looked shocked. His mouth was open, lips flapping; but no words would come; or if they had, she was deaf to them, the roar in her head too loud. What now – try to calm the waters? All she could think of to say was: “I’m sorry.”

Confused was insufficient to describe how he felt: flabbergasted was more appropriate; but overriding any other emotion was one that said it all – elation. He realised he had stopped breathing and if he didn’t do something about it he would pass out. Following a hasty gulp of air he said: “Sorry? What for? Being honest? Being human? Being you?”

“I sounded like a tart,” she mumbled.

“Then you must have been singing,” said Paul, calmer now as he took her hands in his. “Because all I could hear was sweet music.” He produced his usual groan. “Dear, oh dear – that was pathetic.”

She smiled. “Not at all. I thought it was beautiful; but it wasn’t enough, not for me. I’ll ask again - will you make love to me? Just one more word; and please, please make it yes.”

Paul’s eyes closed and he nodded slowly as he said quietly: “Yes, of course I will.”

Rosie’s smile broadened. “Thank you. By the way,” she grinned cheekily, “That’s five words.” Then she laughed.

Two people walked the red-dirt track from the lookout; not arm-in-arm as adults do, but holding hands: love-struck adolescents drifting through a scintillating haze that precluded anything worldly or wise. They talked irrelevancies, happy snippets that would mean nothing to anyone except them; and they laughed, even giggled. To say they were on cloud nine was an understatement; to wish that it would last forever merely an impossible dream. “We could always go back and start again,” said Rosie playfully as she squeezed his hand and chuckled.

He pulled up abruptly. “I don’t think I could face a repeat of what we’ve been through.”

She frowned momentarily; then realised he had misinterpreted her suggestion. “I meant the lookout, not... well, not the past. Although,” she mused thoughtfully, “What happened did bring us to this point. We ought to be thankful for that.”

Paul looked into her eyes and smiled. “Love truly does find a way.”

“You should have been a poet.”

“Perish the thought.”

“Consider it perished,” she declared, then added a soft: “My darling.”

Eventually they were off the track and walking streets. In one respect it was too soon for Paul and he was beginning to think they should have adopted Rosie’s suggestion and started again from the lookout; on the other hand, each step forward brought them closer to the ultimate promise of something wonderful. That thought alone stirred the butterflies in his stomach which intensified to a fluttering riot as they were approaching Rosie’s house. He glanced at the mailbox. Two envelopes were poking out of the slot. When he withdrew them Rosie sighed and moaned. Smiling gently, he placed them in his pocket and said: “Mine now.”

They were still hand-in-hand walking across the front yard, blissfully unaware of practicalities, or anything of real importance; certainly not the signs. There were plenty, yet they had walked past them, had trodden on them without noticing; then a hint of something not quite right invaded Rosie’s daydreams. Her hand slid from Paul’s almost absently as she took a few small, hesitant paces towards the house, head turning this way and that, eyes gathering more evidence of something amiss. Climbing onto the veranda and crossing the boards she did so indirectly, side-stepping like an obsessive compulsive avoiding the cracks. At the door she halted, tensed, gasped. This was definitely not in her plan. Her original intention had been to open the door, curtsy theatrically and wave Paul inside with a flourish of the hand; all gone now, replaced by *this!*

Still floating on clouds, Paul had missed the signs too; and even when he noticed a change in her demeanour, it didn’t register at first that something was wrong; but the fact that she became suddenly stiff and unmoving had him quickening his pace. One stride and he was on the veranda, two brought the sole of his shoe down on something slippery that nearly sent him flying. He cast an annoyed scowl at whatever had caused this, not expecting to see what he did. It was a smudge of what looked like blood in the shape of his elongated footprint. Drips and dribbles of deposits led towards the door; and part way along the trail was another shoe tread; not his, though: he hadn’t got that far yet; and it couldn’t have been Rosie’s because she had avoided stepping on the blood. Plus, whoever had made it was obviously coming *from* the house, not towards it.

This piece of deduction was, at that moment, irrelevant to his main purpose. He ignored it and went to Rosie. The look of abject terror on her face was one that he hadn’t seen before and it sent a shiver down his spine. “What...?” he started, meaning to qualify the question, his eyes darting, scanning the surroundings for a hint of what else had apparently stunned Rosie. The broken fly door was ajar, the bottom corner propped on the floor, so nothing unusual there; but a smudge of what looked like blood over the edge of the frame where a handle used to be told a different story. Some had trickled down the wood, and there were splatters on the floor boards. He should have said something, reassured her, taken control of a situation which was clearly beyond hers; but confusion rendered him silent. Before he could come to his senses, she was

on the move.

Rosie's moment of indecision was over. Yanking the fly door aside, she dived into the house, unhindered as it happened because the main door had been left open. That fact simply added to her concern, compounded next by a trail of blood along the hallway floor. "Robert?!!" *It must have been his – who else?* The blood continued all along the passage, but she hesitated at the first door which was also open. It was her own room, and *he* had opened the door – there was blood on the knob – but it seemed he had barely entered because there was only a single dark footprint on the carpet just inside, no further. *Why her room; what was he looking for...? Her, of course! His mother! The mother who hadn't been there for him! What now? Where did he go from here? Follow the trail, you stupid woman!* Spinning about, she almost ran into Paul. A shocked expression was all she could offer him before starting in a rush towards her boy's room, again yelling: "Robert?!!!"

His door was open too, a prospective invitation to a nightmare; but when Rosie entered there was little evidence of anything amiss: nothing apparently disturbed and no continuation of the ominous trail on the floor. At first glance, in fact, the only blood appeared to be a smear and a few drips on the desk. Paul entered to find the love of his life in the centre of the room; turning on the spot; taking in both normalities and anomalies alike; but making no sense of anything. She stopped turning when she came face to face with him. Her plea was just desperate at first: "What's happened to him?" A quick jerk around to make sure she hadn't imagined a horrific scene and conveniently expunged it from her mind confirmed it was almost normal; almost. Then she was demanding: "Where *IS* he, Paul?"

The best he could tender was a shrug and a look of bewilderment. "I don't know..."

"Well you *SHOULD!*" The outburst, instantly regretted, was a warning that she was nearing the end of her tether. A shake of the head to clear it should have helped, but it didn't. Rosie stared into Paul's eyes, her features lined with pain and guilt; and she began to tremble. "We should have come home sooner, been here for him..." A sudden thought occurred and she was pushing past him, was out of the room and heading across to the kitchen. Blood was in there too: on the floor, on the draining board and in the sink; more of it on the kitchen table along with an open first-aid box. The contents were strewn around; a few items had fallen to the floor. *Some mother she was!* Rosie leaned heavily on the laminex top, head bowed whispering: "I meant to replenish it, but I never did." Pushing upright she turned to him. "A few bandaids and some cream was all that was left; and a miserable bandage. What good was that to him? So much blood, Paul; so much blood..." It was obvious she was going into delayed shock and just stared through him for a long few seconds; then she refocussed. In total despair, she asked the impossible questions: "What are we going to do? What *can* we do?"