

Rosie's Beach



Kathy Sampson

CHAPTER EIGHT Mercy Dash

1

When confronted by a sudden crisis, animals usually respond instinctively, often immediately. Faced with similar circumstances, however, most humans have a tendency to go blank; initially, anyway. So it was for Rosie and Paul. They simply stood in the kitchen, minds on hold, gazing about at the horror surrounding them and at each other; asking unspoken questions to which no answers seemed to be forthcoming. Rosie was first to shake herself from the stupor. A thought prompted her to action and had her rushing across the room towards the door. Two paces and she trod in a pool of blood, skidding briefly before regaining her footing and resuming her exodus. The movement nudged Paul from his trance and he was hurrying after her. “Rosie?” She ignored him, so he tried again: “Rosie, where are you going?”

Out in the hallway, he watched as she headed towards what appeared to be the back of the house; but instead of following, for some reason he paused. Then he was calling out: “Rosie, stop! He didn’t go that way.” *How could he possibly know that?*

She obviously heard; it just took a while for the words to register. When they did, she turned, one hand on the knob of the laundry door, glared at him and yelled through gritted teeth: “You don’t know that!” Not waiting for any explanation, she surged into the small room and a moment later was through the door which led to the back garden.

Paul had no option but to go after her; and as he did, he found himself being particularly careful where he placed his feet. Why did he need to, though? It was an unnecessary precaution, and he suddenly realised why – there was no bloody trail on the floor. There were no blood traces of any description leading to wherever it was that Rosie was going. She should be told - Robert hadn’t come this way.

Viewed from the doorway, the scene in the garden that he was witness to appeared bizarre: a flickering silent movie with Rosie as the distraught heroine racing around from pillar to post in a jerky fashion; hesitating occasionally with arms outstretched as if to say: Where? Where is he? Where? Paul couldn’t answer any of those questions yet; but in the certainty that Robert hadn’t come this way, maybe his powers of reason and deduction were returning. That was a positive, surely? Walking slowly, purposefully, he headed not straight for Rosie, but to the point where he calculated her Perils-of-Pauline act would eventually bring her. It took a long minute; then she was there before him: panting, frightened, confused beyond belief and – Paul hoped – sufficiently exhausted to hear what he had decided to say.

Holding her arms gently was intended as a comforting gesture; and also as a precaution should she try to run off again. She was trembling; but apart from that she remained still. “I know how desperate you are,” he started and instantly realised from the flicker in her eyes that she was not prepared to hang around for a protracted explanation. “We *will* find him, but we need to take five and think, figure out where he might go...”

Rosie’s expression clouded. “How? Did he leave a note?” she demanded sarcastically.

Her anger was building and he had to defuse it. “No, but he left us some clues. The blood trail and footprints tell part of the story: that he came in through the front door and left the same way.”

She was scowling and it was obvious that he wasn’t getting through from her curt retort: “There isn’t time for you to play Sherlock Holmes! We have to do something *now*; find him before...” The worst that could happen didn’t bear thinking about and she couldn’t say it.

“A few more minutes, Rosie, please; just a few. Let’s go back through the house and make a calm assessment of where he went; and more to the point, why?”

She fumed for a moment; then, with a purse of the lips and a warning glare, reluctantly allowed him to lead her through the house. Following a brief glance at the front entrance, they concentrated on the door of Rosie’s room. There was blood on the handle, so Robert had opened the door; but the lone footprint on the carpet just inside the doorway suggested he hadn’t gone in. Further along the corridor, the evidence seen at Robert’s room was puzzling: no blood on the door knob and very little elsewhere in the room; some, though. “He must have been in here,” explained Paul, “But the absence of a blood trail suggests it was after he dressed his wounds.”

Rosie’s eyes widened. “Wounds? More than one? Oh my God!”

That was a mistake. He’d have to be extra careful with his words. “Maybe only one – a cut on his hand...?”

“Not just a scratch, judging by the way he was bleeding.” She was looking at him with those pleading eyes as she asked: “How did it happen?”

Paul shook his head. “I don’t know – perhaps a broken glass...?” He was clutching at straws. There were too many unknowns and he imagined she would be losing confidence in his ability to solve the riddle. “Let’s go back to the kitchen. I think his priority was to stem the bleeding, so it was possibly Robert’s first port of call.”

In truth the kitchen was the only room in Rosie’s home that he was familiar with. Apart from the copious amounts of blood and the medical kit, everything else was neat and tidy the way he remembered. “I’d say tending to the cut was the only reason for Robert coming in here,” said Paul, his gaze tracing the blood on the floor. Now that he had a better idea of what to look for, he realised what he’d missed before. He pointed. “See the footprints, particularly those leading out of the room. I believe his next stop was his bedroom; and I think it was the last place he went before leaving the house. Why did he feel the need to go there? He must have had a good reason.”

His idea of bringing Rosie into the investigation was, perhaps, a dangerous ploy – it could send her over the edge – but it was necessary: only she would know what her son was doing in there; what he might have touched, and why?

Across the hallway and before the open door of Robert’s room, Rosie said: “I think you were right, Paul,” she said, tendering him a meek half-smile of apology. “There doesn’t look to be any blood on the floor except for the footprint just inside.” Careful not to tread on it, she stepped into the room and advanced slowly in an attempt to re-trace Robert’s apparent movements. Standing before the desk, she scanned the top. “There are a few smudges; but then some drips of blood. Why? He’d bandaged it, hadn’t he?”

“Maybe by the time he got to the desk some blood was seeping through...?” Paul’s suggestion was a poor one. Her eyes widened, an indication she was on the verge of panic again. “...but not much,” he continued in an effort to calm Rosie and bring her back on track. “Just a little as he picked something up.” Advancing a short way into the room, he looked past her. “What, though? What was on the desk where the smudges are?”

“Does it matter?”

“Yes, I think it does,” he said. “Despite being in shock, as he probably was, he still had the presence of mind to go to the desk. What was on it that was so important to him?”

Rosie didn’t answer immediately. Her head moved back and forth, eyes scanning the desk top, trying to remember how it usually was. Her focus suddenly jerked back to the crimson smears. “The photo!” she exclaimed. “The photo I took of Robert and Wayne on the boat! It was like a shrine to his Dad. He even used to take it to bed with him...” She turned to look across the room at Robert’s bed, walked towards it, pointing to the odd drip of blood on the carpet. “He must have brought it over here and... what? – lay down to sleep...? Not likely, but it seems he did stretch out. There’s blood on the sheet...” She recalled something else: “He used to sleep with it under his pillow...!” Her hand dived, flipped the pillow and there it was: laying on the blood-soaked sheet. Picking up the framed photograph she turned it to show Paul.

One glance was all it took to bring back the memory of that terrible night; the first, last and only time he had seen Rosie’s husband. This triggered another memory – the incident when the boy had broken into the cabin. From what Paul had learned since, Robert had been totally devastated by Wayne’s death, as would any son who had just lost his father; yet reluctantly and eventually had been forced to live with the torment of losing a Dad who he was probably convinced didn’t really like him, but whom he loved anyway. *Maybe...?* He had been standing off a bit to give her space, just watching. To say what he was thinking could, he realised, give her false hope of finding her son on the one hand; or illicit shock if he told her what he believed Robert’s intentions might be when he had left the house. In truth, it was just a hypothesis. Deciding to keep his theory to himself, he withdrew the phone from his pocket and said in a matter-of-fact way: “We ought to call the police...”

“Les Jackson?!” She exploded. “What the hell good will *he* be?”

“He has people, Rosie – officers who can help look for Robert. We’re only two. We could be running round in circles and still not find him.” She wasn’t taking it well and was glaring at him defiantly. Convinced it was the right thing to do, the next logical step, he turned the phone to look at the screen and said softly: “Sorry, darling, but we have to.”

Old Ben was feeling pretty good. His decision to contact Paul seemed to have worked; at least he had come back. As if to confirm that it wasn’t all wishful thinking he cast a glance across the harbour. The sky was darker, the rain heavier now, causing the distant scene to appear grey and misty, but he could see Copernicus still at anchor. That meant Paul was here too; somewhere

anyway, and with luck things were starting to go well with him and Rosie. Time would tell. He finished refuelling Steve Malloy's ski boat and was heading back to his crate when he noticed Robert. The boy was running. At first, the old man thought Kevin's mob might be chasing him, but they were nowhere to be seen; so maybe he was coming to see Ben...? Apparently not: Robert continued straight past the jetty and onto the beach. What was the matter with his hand? It wasn't clear through the mist of rainfall, but didn't it look like he was wearing a red glove? Surely not. Next, the boy was at Paul's dingy, had pulled out the sand anchor and was pushing the small craft into the water. Only one thing to do – Ben reached in a pocket for his mobile phone.

On the verge of calling the police, Paul's heart kicked when the ring-tone went off. Eyes wide, he stared at the screen; initially moaning inwardly at the prospect of a fragmented conversation with Martha, but it wasn't her; and he didn't recognise the number. "Yes? Who is this?" When Ben announced himself, Paul snatched a furtive glance at Rosie who still seemed preoccupied with her own thoughts. Even so, he sidled further away in the hopes that she wouldn't hear what was said. It was bound to be problematic: why else would the old man have called?

It took less than a minute to find out; a further few seconds to say: "Thanks Ben. We'll be there as quickly as we can."

Rosie heard that bit and frowned at him. "Ben? What did *he* want?"

"He's seen Robert. He's at the harbour. We have to go. Your car – does it still run?" She was standing, mouthing the question: *car...?* "Rosie, darling, we need to go. Where are your car keys?"

Isn't it always the way? When something important has to be done quickly, Murphy's Law comes along to make life difficult. Rosie couldn't find her car keys. They weren't where she usually put them and a fruitless search wasted precious minutes. Eventually returning to the one room she didn't want to revisit, the keys were found in the kitchen on the dresser. During the search, Paul had been the veritable fifth wheel, of no use to Rosie whatsoever; but as soon as she appeared with the keys he put out a hand. "I can drive." Judging by the expression, the offer seemed to offend her. "Give you a bit of a break." She handed over the keys, but didn't seem too happy about it.

Out in the yard rain was falling steadily now, another uncomfortable complication they didn't really need. Paul climbed onto the driver's seat of the utility and expected Rosie to go to the passenger side; instead of which she stood a metre away watching, fidgeting impatiently as he tried to start the engine and failed miserably. After a few long seconds, Rosie said irritably: "It's temperamental. There's a technique. Let me drive. It'll be quicker." From Paul's point of view she didn't seem to do anything he hadn't, but Rosie had more joy and the engine burst into life. They took off with a lurch, a shower of mud and gravel spitting from the tyres. Speed increased as they headed down the street; dangerously so he thought, but bit his tongue and said nothing. By then, puddles had begun forming on the road. Rosie swung the ute around a corner causing the rear end to fishtail on the wet surface. Paul pressed his feet harder to the floor and again remained

tight-lipped.

Presumably once again in perfect control of the vehicle, if not the situation, Rosie had been concentrating in silence; until she asked: "Why would he go to the jetty?"

Believing it inadvisable to divulge what he really thought, Paul concocted something less dramatic: "Robert was most likely frightened and needed help. He came home, but we weren't there; so I think he went to the only other person he trusts – Old Ben."

"What you really mean is / wasn't there!" she rasped with a scowl.

"No, I...," Paul started. His eyes flew wide and he snapped: "Watch out for that dog!"

As she braked suddenly, the ute skidded and slewed on the wet road. By some miracle, the rain-soaked mongrel avoided being hit by a mere whisker and ran on. Rosie sat for a few moments, waiting for her heart to stop pounding; then started off again, considerably slower this time.

Routine was never boring for Ben: it got the job done with fewer mistakes; but there were times when improvisation was necessary; and this was one such occasion. Malloy had asked him to refill the ski boat - 'told' was a better word. Not that he had anything else in particular to do, but at the time it was an annoying interruption for him; now, however, considering the latest development it seemed fortuitous and he was glad of it. Movement caught his eye as a grubby white ute pulled up in the parking area, rather sharply he thought, but under the circumstances he wasn't surprised.

Flicking what was left of his smoke into the sea, he rose from the crate and was on his way to meet Paul. His hastily contrived plan had been simple and hadn't included Rosie; but there she was, jumping out of the vehicle and racing towards him. Neither was wearing wet-weather gear and both were soaked. Presumably they, like Ben, had been unprepared, caught napping by a sudden change of fortune. A wise saying came to mind – the best laid plans of mice and men... How true.

It couldn't be from exertion because he had only walked a few paces, but suddenly the old man was out of breath and had to pause. He was stooped over wheezing and coughing when they reached him. Paul was concerned and asked about his welfare. Rosie hadn't seemed to notice his distress, her eyes scanning the surroundings, especially the beach. "Where is he?" she demanded, "I don't see him. Where has Robert gone?" Paul didn't need to ask – his dingy was missing from the sand.

Ben held up a hand for patience, something that was in short supply for Rosie; but she waited for him to recover from his emphysemic fit. Finally he did and straightened, said nothing, just pointed at the entrance to the harbour.

"Copernicus?" asked Paul.

The old head shook. "Went straight past and turned north. It's my guess he was heading to where..." *Should he say it in front of Rosie?* This was no time for sparing feelings. Shrugging inwardly, he tried anyway: "Where Wayne went down. I think he wants to..." Another hesitation, another change for Rosie's sake: "Be near his Dad."

"I was wondering," mused Paul. "It seems to fit."

Rosie glared at him. “*What* were you wondering, Paul? *Why?*”

“The photo,” he said quietly, and it was an apologetic reply.

Having no idea what that meant, Ben just said: “Go after him. The ski boat’s tied up by the fuel pump and it’s got a full tank; key’s in the ignition.”

Paul glanced towards the far end of the jetty with a frown. “*Malloy’s* boat?”

“There isn’t another,” wheezed the old man, “And it’s fast.” Just noticing a man approaching from the car park, he added hastily: “Uh-oh, he’s coming. I’ll keep him busy. Get going, Paul. You stay with me, Rosie.”

“Like hell!” she rasped and hared after Paul.

Malloy had only come to check with Ben that the boat had been refuelled before taking it out to its mooring. Being focussed on this, and the fact that he had his head bowed against a freshening breeze, he hadn’t seen the two people running towards it. “Is it done?” he asked, his tone sour and ungrateful.

“It is,” Ben confirmed, “But I noticed one of your cleats was coming loose.”

Producing a scowl of irritation, Malloy cast his gaze towards the end of the jetty. By then, Paul had untied the bow rope and was stepping into the boat. “What the hell...!” Knowing what the belligerent man had in mind next, Ben tried to bar his way and as an excuse started saying that he could fix the cleat. Steve’s anger rose. “Get out of my way!” he snarled, giving Ben a shove which sent the old man staggering and a second later falling to the ground. “Hey!” Malloy yelled as he took off. “Hey, you!”

Paul had just fired up the engine and it was doubtful Rosie would have heard Malloy’s shout over the noise. She was still concentrating on untying the stubborn rope holding the stern when he reached her. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?” he growled, shooting a venomous glare at Paul while grabbing Rosie’s arm. She reacted instinctively, jerking an arm behind to shrug him off. Her elbow caught him on the nose. He yelped and fell backwards. As he hit the deck, he rasped: “You bitch!” The curse was muffled by a hand covering his bloodied nose. Although unintentional, the blow was lucky for Rosie, giving her time to free the rope and jump into the boat.

Paul had been watching, waiting; and despite being wet and chilled to the bone, he was glowing with pride for what she had just done. He sent her a smile of approval which it was doubtful she noticed. It didn’t matter; all that did was that she was onboard, so he called: “Hang on,” and pushed the throttle lever forward.

Malloy struggled to his feet. By the time he was waving a fist and yelling: “Bastard!” his ski boat was already speeding out of the harbour.

The leading edge of the storm was in. The wind had freshened, whipping the peaks of waves, sending spray in the air to become lost in the rain. More came from the bow of the ski boat as it powered across the surface in a series of bounding surges, nearly air-born at times. The swell had risen too, and as Paul turned to head parallel to the coast, a heavy sea was driving at him from the northwest. It could have been worse, for an inexperienced seaman it would have been, but he knew enough to compensate and prevent the boat from broaching.

While Paul was reasonably at home behind the steering wheel, Rosie sat in the back terrified, hanging onto a safety rail for grim death. Where were they going? She asked the question a few times, yelled actually; but the noise of the motor combined with that of the pounding sea drowned her out. Vaguely familiar with the coastline, she eventually recognised her beach as they were approaching it. Paul had too and slowed down. He had risen from the seat and was leaning over the steering wheel to peer ahead.

Thanks to the storm clouds it seemed almost night, and the blanket of pouring rain added to the mask. He was frowning, squinting, as if that would make a difference; but strangely enough it did. Twisting to send Rosie a little encouragement, he called out: "I think we've found him."

Robert was in a quandary. He knew where he was, of course; well, was fairly sure this was somewhere near the area that Norse Raider had gone down: he had watched the search from a distance, had seen the helicopter circling and boats heading to a spot roughly off North Beach. A quick glance at the shore brought back the incident when he had saved his mother from... Had she merely intended taking her own life because it had become so unbearable; or was it to be with his father again? Bit by bit something was starting to make sense; at least why he had come. Wasn't he here to finish what his mother had barely started before he had interfered?

That was his intention, wasn't it – to end the misery and torment he had suffered, and would continue to suffer? One final gesture of defiance and he would be free. Knowing he might, most probably would chicken out at the last moment when he jumped; what he needed was something to weigh him down, keep him under water. There was nothing in the boat except for the sand anchor. Being fairly light it was unlikely to do the job, even with the short length of chain attached to it; but it was all he had and would have to do.

Shuffling to the bow caused the craft to rock. He paused momentarily to let it settle, which it did after a fashion. Why did it matter? Well, it could capsize. So? If it dumped him in the sea he wouldn't need to pluck up the courage to jump; and he was concerned he would be lacking when the time came. There was no choice but the anchor. The rope was tied to a ring and it ought to have been relatively easy to undo. The trouble was the knot was wet, and no amount of grunts and curses would free it. Everything, it seemed, was against him: the wet anchor rope; the rocking of the boat; and a hand that hurt like blazes.

Slumping back, he sat on the front seat. Wrapping arms about him to combat the shivering, the boy gazed into the darkness. What did he do now – just leap in and hope the sea would take him before he panicked and aborted the suicide attempt? He was pretty sure he would. Yet another dismal failure. His Dad was right – he was a useless waste of space. An image popped into his head. It was of his father standing there, saying those very words. Robert's wounded pride rose and he growled; to the sea, to the wind: "No I'm not! You never really knew me, didn't try to understand. I was stupid to want to be with you again." He broke off to run the trembling fingers of his good hand through rain-soaked hair. "You aren't even here, not anymore, are you? You're back there on land; not even that really. You're just ash in a pottery urn; a memory. I've had it with you, Dad. I'm going home to Mum."

Despite the poor visibility, Paul was certain it was Robert just ahead. The boy had been sitting in the bow slumped over. Now he was making his way to the stern. At least he was there and still alive. They had made it in time. Slowing his approach, he turned to tell Rosie: "It's too rough to tow the dingy. Once we pull alongside, you take the wheel and hold us steady while I help him on board."

"What?!! Rosie's stomach was suddenly tight. "I can't drive this – I don't know how!"

"Yes, you can – it's easy." He patted a black lever. "This is the throttle and this..." he touched a small red button beneath the grip, "...locks it. All you do is press the button and move the lever forward – simple."

Rosie was about to protest and happened to glance ahead to see how close they were to the dingy, and she was just in time to see the one thing she never wanted to. "Oh, My God, NO!"

Robert hadn't noticed the approach of the ski boat. His focus was on starting the outboard motor; but it was worse than trying to untie the anchor rope. He was right-handed, but that one was useless and the one time he had caught hold of the cord and pulled sent a sharp pain up his arm. He switched to his left hand and pulled again and again to no avail. Why wouldn't it start? Then he remembered – *you haven't primed it, you idiot!* A few pumps of the lever on the carburettor and he tried again. Using his non-preferred hand was awkward, his action jerky; and because it was so unnatural he involuntarily shifted his body weight. Swell accentuated the tilt in that direction. He leaned back on the other foot to compensate; but the crest had passed under the hull and the small boat was dipping into a trough the other way. Robert was thrown off balance. Another second and he was over the side.

When it happened, Rosie was behind Paul, gripping the back of the driver's seat tightly. Mouth open, she stared ahead looking for any sign of her son. She had seen him go in and under and fully expected he would surface in a matter of seconds; but he didn't.

Strangely enough, it felt warm when he went in. There was no time to wonder why. All Robert knew was that he was completely surrounded by water and desperately needed to breathe. Confused and in a panic, he kicked and clawed to take himself up. Bursting through the surface, he sucked in a gulp of air; except it wasn't. The crest of a wave slapped him in the face. He took in a mouthful of water and went under again.

Paul was creeping the ski boat closer, cautiously. He had seen Robert go under and was fairly sure where that had been; but tide and currents could have dragged him away. The last thing he wanted was to inadvertently run over him. For a few long seconds the dingy was his only guide and he was hoping its drift would be similar to Robert's. Then again, maybe not – the craft was on the surface and subject to wind: it might have moved further towards shore. This was merely a snap thought, a distraction to be pushed instantly away. "Where are you, boy?" he hissed. "Come up, please come up..." As if an answer to a prayer, Robert's head broke the surface just metres to starboard. Cutting the power, Paul lurched out of the seat. "Take the wheel Rosie!"

The prospect horrified her and she stood immobile. Paul was prising off his shoes and noticed. "The wheel, Rosie! Keep the boat from drifting: just enough power to compensate." The shoes

were off, his jacket was next; then he was diving over the side.

Robert had been easier to see from the boat; once in the water the height of waves hampered visibility. Ploughing on, as he rose on the swell he took the opportunity to look ahead. At first there was nothing; then the boy surfaced again to Paul's right – he had been going in the wrong direction. Turning, he swam on.

Floundering was the best he could do; anything to stay afloat. Robert learned quickly, though, only taking a breath when he was high enough not to swallow water. The same as Paul, he was surrounded by the churning sea and oblivious to anything beyond. It wasn't until he felt a touch on his arm that he became aware he wasn't alone. The grip on his arm tightened. It couldn't be a human being, not out here? Shark was his immediate thought and he lashed out, trying to fend off the predator.

People being rescued from drowning usually panicked and flailed about. Paul had been expecting it; but the back of a hand smacking his temple came as a surprise and stunned him temporarily. Recovering quickly, he grabbed for Robert's free arm and held both tightly, shouting: "Robert, it's me – Paul. I've got you. Don't struggle. You're safe now."

From her higher position, Rosie could see what was happening. The relief she felt once Paul reached Robert was short lived: the ski boat had not only drifted further from the two in the water; but wind and waves had turned it towards shore. It's easy, Paul had said – a total lie. Turning the steering wheel made no difference and the boat kept on in the same direction. "Turn, damn you!" she grated, "Why won't you bloody turn?" Then she remembered something: just enough power to keep the boat from drifting, he had said. Of course: she needed power to move, power to turn – she had to use the throttle. Hand curled over the grip, she pushed it forward a little; at least she tried but it wouldn't move. "What's the matter with you, you stupid thing? Why won't you...? *The button! – I've got to press the button to unlock the lever.*

Once unlocked, it did move, but too much. The boat took off, straight towards the shore. In panic, Rosie jerked the throttle back, cutting the power almost immediately. She felt the click under her hand as the lever locked itself again. *Damn the button!* A hasty glance behind to where she thought Paul and Robert should be proved fruitless - they were hidden beyond a blanket of driving rain. She had to turn about, go back for them; but without power she was going nowhere except towards shore which was where the swell and waves were pushing her. And there was something else she couldn't quite make out. Another surge and the object ahead was recognisable as the remaining piles of the old jetty out from her beach. If she didn't steer away the boat would ram straight into them.

Assuming the motor had no reverse and would only drive her forward, she pressed the button, teased the throttle and was turning the wheel to avoid the nearest pile when an incoming wave hit the stern. That part of the boat rose, the bow dipped, and Rosie lurched against the steering wheel. At the same time, her hand inadvertently pushed the throttle lever, increasing the power. Not for long, though. The bow hit a pile. The boat stopped suddenly, but not Rosie. She was airborne, flying over the bow; and a second later was plunging into the sea.

Where is she? Still supporting Robert to keep the boy's head out of the water, Paul turned this way and that; but the ski boat had gone. He was left with only one option - swim to the dingy. Fortunately it was still relatively close. Even so, hanging onto Robert with one arm, while clawing his way towards the small boat using the other was exhausting. How long it took was anyone's guess; too long for Paul's liking, because the sooner he got Robert safely in the dingy, the sooner he could look for Rosie. Where was she? What had happened? Something terrible, was the initial thought nagging at him as he pushed on; then he found a second possibility which was easier to live with – she was disorientated and had simply become lost.

Hoisting and pushing Robert into the dingy was a struggle. The boy, however, had recovered somewhat and helped a little. At least he was sufficiently aware to comply when Paul asked him to sit close to the far side to compensate for the tilt as he climbed aboard. Standing for a moment, he made a three-sixty scan of the surrounding sea – still no sign of Rosie. A wobbling shuffle took him to the stern. Luckily, the outboard started second pull. Robert was sitting on the front seat facing the stern, wearing the glazed look of a person in shock; which he was. The motor firing stirred his consciousness and he produced a puzzled frown as if to question a sound that didn't fit with wherever he thought he was. By way of an unnecessary apology, Paul said: "I'll get you to the beach first; then I'll go and find your mum."

The frown changed to bewilderment. "Mum? You brought her out here?"

"No time to expl..." Paul's voice cut off as a wave hit the small craft slewing it sideways. Hastily increasing the speed, he only just managed to prevent the dingy from broaching. What he needed was more power to outrun the following sea; what he had was an outboard motor that was next to useless in the present conditions. Keeping fingers crossed, he aimed the bow towards the shore and only hoped the tiny craft didn't capsize before they reached it.

Surf carried the dingy the last few metres. Paul hopped out and dragged it onto the sand, then helped Robert out. Once the boy was seated above the high-tide mark, the intention was to go and look for Rosie. He hesitated momentarily, undecided whether to give the boy a more detailed explanation of the situation and decided against it. Time was wasting and Rosie was out there, alone and undoubtedly frightened. At the bow of the dingy he paused again to stare into the distance. Exacerbated by a roaring wind, the rain had intensified considerably. She could be anywhere; not that he'd be able to see her: being even darker now and visibility seriously reduced. Maybe the sea had driven her onto the beach. Was that too much to ask? A quick glance to the south proved useless – he could barely see further than twenty metres, not clearly, anyway; then something unusual drew his attention seaward. There was a light, faint at first; growing brighter by the second. Next he was sure he could hear an engine.

The thought that news would have got around and a search instituted had never occurred to Paul. Old Ben, however, had called Les Jackson the moment the ski boat had disappeared from view. The police launch continued to approach the beach slowly, the beam from its search-light sweeping from left to right and back again, illuminating more of the shore-line as it came closer. Paul was about to attract attention with a wave when he noticed a familiar shape as the light

passed over it. At least he thought he had. For a few seconds all he could see was darkness; then the light reached the end of the beach and began to track north again. There! The light moved on briefly, then returned to hold on an object at the water's edge. The launch came closer; the flood-lit object was much clearer – a red ski boat!

Paul was off and running, stumbling, falling, scrambling to his feet and running again. The vessel had become beached, or had Rosie driven it onto the shore? The closer he came, his heart rate increased; not just from the exertion, but with apprehension because he couldn't see any sign of her. Maybe she was still in the boat, resting, unconscious; surely not...? Please, no. Almost there and the search-light started moving, leaving the boat to trace north. It passed him by, paused; then came back.

The engine of the ski boat was still running, but stuck on the sand it was going nowhere. A hasty scan of the interior from stem to stern failed to locate Rosie. Moving to the bow, he leaned in and switched off the ignition; then was staring wide-eyed out to sea, concentrating on the remains of the jetty. Could she be there, maybe clinging onto one of the piles? The light from the launch continued to play on him as he began wading into the water. There was a sound, a tinny voice calling through the roar of wind and rain: "...need of assistance?" was all he caught. There was more, yet Paul ignored it, wading deeper into the surf, heading for the closest of the decaying stumps. The depth of water was shallow to start with, but fighting with the surf was still hard going. By the time he made it to the first post, water was up to his neck. Clinging to the rough timber, he yelled: "Rosie, can you hear me?" Only the wind replied.

Reaching the next pile was harder. The sea was deeper, his feet no longer touched bottom and he had to swim; a frustrating exercise because most of every metre he made was lost to the incoming surf. Energy was failing, certainly – he didn't know how long he could last; determination, however, and desperation he supposed, knew no bounds. Calling out again, he waited, listened. All he could hear was that damned bull-horn, but no Rosie. Looking ahead, the next stump appeared a million miles away. So be it. Releasing his grip on the timber, he pushed off once more.

By the time he reached the next, the police launch was closer, its search-light blinding. A final, muscle-wrenching stroke and he was able to grasp the post, but only with his hand; and that began slipping off. Afraid of being swept away he threw the other around and felt something on the far side – not rough timber; something soft. "Rosie?" Before he could explore the anomaly a wave crashed into the pile and he lost his grip. Thrashing desperately, he summoned all of his strength, and prayed in his mind, after a fashion.

That final metre was more than a million miles; it was never ending; but he made it. Physically, he must have been wracked with pain; but as Paul set eyes on Rosie clinging to the timber pile, he felt only absolute relief and a supreme outpouring of love. "Thank God," he hissed; and he meant it, literally. Her lips moved and she managed to say his name. Although barely a whisper, to Paul it was the sweetest sound he had ever heard: it was everything.

Their eventual rescue was a clumsy affair: the raging sea saw to that. Paul had to take his hat

off to the pilot of the police launch. In the treacherous conditions, even the most experienced of seamen would have balked at the prospect of coming so close to shore and the wooden posts. It took nearly an hour to bring Rosie and Paul on board; plus a further thirty minutes and an inflatable rescue boat to fetch Robert from the beach. On the way back to harbour, the three of them sat huddled together wrapped in blankets. Not one of them spoke – what was there to say? They had been through hell and come out the other side safely. As for the future, each had their own thoughts on what fate might have in store for them.

Homecoming

A little over a week had passed. During that time protocol had to be followed. All three of them were initially taken to hospital for medical checks; and Robert's hand was stitched. The attending doctor was all for keeping him in for observation; Robert, however, maintained he was fine to go home. Considering the seriousness of the injury and the time delay in having it seen to might well result in complications, so a further twenty-four hours in hospital was probably advisable and really no big deal; except for the fact that it would mean staying in a place where he was too accessible. It was doubtful Kevin Malloy would risk confronting him there; Sergeant Jackson, on the other hand, would be needing answers. As it turned out, he did; but not from Robert.

"It was the only boat available," Paul explained, "And it was an emergency - there wasn't time to ask permission." Jackson produced a critical sneer, yet remained silent while he scribbled notes on his report. "As for the damage to the boat," Paul continued, "I've said I'll pay for the repairs."

Back at the house Rosie was almost as inquisitive as the policeman, insisting he quote chapter and verse. Paul related only the basics. From her expression she obviously knew he was holding back, but didn't push the issue. "Did he ask about Robert's injury?"

Paul frowned. "He didn't mention it; probably assumed it happened before or during the rescue. Why would it be a police matter, anyway?"

She took a deep breath and sighed. "Robert told me what happened. It was Kevin Malloy. He had a knife. Robert grabbed for it and cut his hand. He said there was a lot of blood and he assumed Kevin had been stabbed in the scuffle and would lay the blame on him; hence he was terrified of a police investigation. That's why he panicked and ran: afraid of the consequences."

Paul thought for a moment. "It's my guess Kevin's injury, if he had one at all, was only minor; and I doubt he would admit he was carrying a knife; least of all to his father. Steve Malloy's a bully, but weapons are not his style. I think you can safely tell Robert no more will be said about it."

Rosie sent him a warm smile. "Why don't you tell him?"

The next few days were taken up with preparing to leave town. Nights were not as romanticists might have hoped for. Wanting to ensure the new relationship got off on the right foot, Paul decided it would be best if he slept on the boat. Rosie understood his reasoning and accepted it as wise; at least she said she did, despite being disappointed. Fully expecting he would have to get used to having a man about the house again, one with whom he would have to share his mother, Robert was initially surprised by the arrangement. Then it struck him as amusing that they

were absolutely, totally attracted to each other, while going to great lengths to keep a tight rein on their feelings. Adults were truly strange creatures.

The day of departure was unnerving in many respects. While Paul and Robert trudged from the ute to Copernicus ferrying suitcases, bags and boxes, Rosie was saying her goodbyes to Ben. A sad affair for both, it was watched by a few standing on the esplanade. Les Jackson was wondering if he should have bade them farewell; glad now that he hadn't. Although still smarting over the loss of Rosie, she and the man who had taken her from him were leaving and out of his hair for good; at least he hoped so. Steve Malloy had also considered delivering a few choice words; but he managed to hold them at bay behind gritted teeth and just watched. Alongside him, his cronies milled, leered, sneered and muttered; recalcitrant and benign as usual. After dropping off the last of the luggage, Robert remained on board while Paul went to see Ben. Not much passed between them; not words, anyway; the silent emotion, however, as they shook hands was unmistakable.

Trudging sombrely back to the boat, Rosie said: "Poor old Ben, he was really upset. I think he had a tear in his eye."

"How could you tell behind all the whiskers?" They continued in silence until they reached Copernicus. Paul held her hand to help her onto the boat. Feeling a tremor of uncertainty, he asked: "Are you sure about this, honestly?"

"What, *us*, do you mean?" said Rosie, "One hundred and ten percent."

"No, the boat," he explained. "After what you've been through I'm surprised you'd want to set foot on one again."

She squeezed his hand. "Call it aversion therapy – get back on the horse. Anyway, you'll be with me. What could possibly go wrong?"

That was a sobering thought, unfounded as it happened. The voyage south went like a dream in Paul's estimation. Both Rosie and Robert wanted to try their hands at piloting the boat, so Paul instructed them. Adhering to his propriety decision, sleeping arrangements were platonic and formal. Robert considered this rather silly but made no comment and kept his smile under wraps. Four days later Copernicus docked.

"They're back," announced Julia, "Should be here in about an hour. Paul sounded nervous."

Martha nodded and cast a glance through the window to the garden. "I can imagine. He's probably wondering what kind of reception he'll receive."

"And what kind *will* it be? You haven't said much about it."

"Because I know so little," replied Martha, closing her eyes briefly before elucidating: "Paul's hesitant babble told me practically nothing. Rosie is still an enigma. All I have gathered is that he's besotted with her. As for her son...?" Her grey eyes seemed to be appealing for reassurance as she focussed on Julia. "I fear I may be too old to start a new chapter in my life."

The next forty minutes seemed an eternity. When Julia said she'd had a text from Paul and they would be here soon, Martha felt something she had not experienced in decades – a fluttering in her

stomach. The feeling intensified on the front patio where the two waited. Eventually a taxi arrived, but instead of continuing along the drive to the house, it pulled up half way. “Why would they do that?” asked Julia.

Martha pondered, watched. Paul stepped out of the car, went round to the other side, opened the door and offered a hand. Rosie obviously took it and alighted. The boy appeared next from the front passenger seat, hesitantly it seemed. Both he and his mother stood gazing at their surroundings, particularly the house. Martha said: “Coming from a small town, all this must be intimidating. I suspect they may be having second thoughts. I sincerely hope not. We’ll find out soon enough, Julia – they’re coming.”

Paul gave the cab driver instructions and went to join the others; then they began towards the house, Rosie clinging tightly to Paul’s arm while Robert walked stiffly on the other side of him. The boy was thinking: dead man walking; Rosie was merely terrified. Even Paul was unsure how this first meeting would pan out. Troubled by their own thoughts, they came on.

Martha knew how they must be feeling and had decided something. The thought was interrupted by the sound of a telephone ringing. Her secretary said: “I’ll get that,” and flew into the house. Martha took a moment to re-focus. A few short steps and she was off the patio and walking towards the trio, a soft, welcoming smile on her face; at least, she hoped that’s how it would be interpreted.

Paul was his usual bumbling, stammering self: “Um...er, let me introduce you... erm you, Martha, I mean, to er... well...”

“For Heaven’s sake Paul,” Martha chided, “Do shut up. You’re embarrassing all of us.” Three steps brought her close enough to extend her hand and say: “Hello, Rosie, I’m very pleased to meet you.”

Rosie took the hand gingerly. Unusual for her, she blushed and said quietly: “Hello, Mrs Longstreet. I’ve heard so much about you.”

The old lady chuckled. “To which I should reply: not all bad, I trust; but I dislike clichés, so won’t. And please, not so formal. Call me Martha.” She turned to point a finger at Robert. “You too, young man.”

At that point, Julia came jogging from the house and on reaching the group pulled up short. “It’s the President of Haslett Corporation. He wants to speak with you urgently.”

Martha scanned the others briefly before saying: “I am with my family, which is far more important than business. Tell him I shall return his call at my convenience.” Julia hesitated momentarily, then hurried off. Martha smiled. “Now, where were we? Oh, yes.” Taking Robert’s arm, she began leading him away, or tried to. He resisted, so she said: “It’s your choice, of course, but I won’t bite; and I was thinking we ought to have a long chat; get to know each other.” Robert forced himself to relax and began walking with Martha. She noticed that Paul and Rosie were following. “The pair of you are not invited. Show Rosie around, Paul; and ask Julia to bring some tea to the summer house. Oh.” She turned to address the boy: “Do forgive me. I should have asked. Perhaps you would prefer something else – a soft drink, maybe?” Robert shook his head.

“That’s decided, then. Tea for two in the summer house, please.”

After a brief tour of the house, they gravitated back outside. Rosie grinned and said: “That was a tad embarrassing, Julia asking about the sleeping arrangements and our preference; then you put her on the back foot by saying: whatever you think best.”

He stopped walking and turned her to face him. “I know what I *would* like, darling; but it’s early days and I don’t want to offend Martha. What do you think of her, by the way?”

Rosie mulled it over a bit before saying: “I’m not sure yet. She seems happy enough to have us here; and she’s gone to great lengths to put us at ease. Only you’d know if that was genuine acceptance, or a strategy.”

Paul chuckled. “Martha *is* renowned for manipulating situations to suit her agenda; at least on the business front; but when it comes to family, well...?” A few more steps in silence brought them to the azalea beds. Paul touched one of the leaves. “These are Martha’s pride and joy. She planted them herself and tends to them religiously. I’ll say this for her: when something is important to her, everything else, even business, goes by the board.”

The comment triggered a recent memory for Rosie: “When Julia told her about the phone call, Martha said she was with her family. Did that include me and Robert, or is it just wishful thinking?”

Paul smiled. “I’m not very perceptive in this regard, but I sensed that she was excited. I’d say she meant exactly that – we, the three of us, are her family.”

Resuming their walk through the gardens, they were approaching the summer house and could hear raised voices. Paul groaned. “Oh, God. It sounds like they’re arguing.”

“Not arguing,” said Rosie. “They’re laughing. I haven’t heard Robert laugh in a long time.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard my grandmother laugh,” Paul added. “Come on, let’s join them. It’s time you and Martha got to know each other better.”

Rosie chewed her lip. “I’ve been dreading this.”

More laughter echoed from the summer house. Paul squeezed her arm and began leading her forwards. “You’re worrying over nothing. At the risk of sounding too Hollywood, this, my darling, could be the start of a beautiful friendship.”

THE END



Rosie’s Beach © DV & KR Hawkins 2024

Published by aseasonofhappiness.com

Also by Kathy Sampson

Waiting for Michael

The Touch of a Strange Young Man

Extended previews FREE to read, download and print from the website
eBooks available from major online book stores