

Rosie's Beach



Kathy Sampson

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by Kathy Sampson

A Drama / Romance

The lives of two people from very different backgrounds have been ruled by the sea. The down-trodden wife of a fisherman, Rosie is barely surviving financially in a small coastal town, whereas Paul's occupation as a marine research scientist could be regarded as enviable to many; yet, whereas money is not an issue for him, he is plagued by a lack of confidence in both his profession and life in general. When they are brought together by a tragedy it seems to be love at first sight; and maybe, as an old seafarer is convinced, they are meant to be; but before any kind of lasting happiness together can be realised, they must find the courage to overcome a series of adversities that fate has in store for them.

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CHAPTER ONE The Whale Watchers

1999

The surroundings were bright and pleasantly functional, contrary to the statue of a man tense and brooding, head bowed over the bench at which he sat. The tableau could have been a photograph, a moment frozen in time except for the betrayal of movement seen through windows on the port side. They told of life yet, of rolling swell and salt spray. A dip to the left drove the horizon up past the top of the anodized metal frames. Following a slight hesitation, the motion reversed until only sky was visible. The alternating pitch of marine engines hummed along as the animations continued to re-play: the same sky above an unchanging sea, rising and falling again and again. It was repetition of a kind that might have continued forever, but patterns of life are rarely more than convenient, seldom predictable.

Shoulders straightened and heaved as the man released a prolonged sigh of resignation. He sat upright to stare unseeing at a collection of lights and switches on the radio before him. What Paul needed now was a lull, no complications or eventualities; just time to accept, regroup. Then the volume of the engines was rising and a surge of acceleration forced him back in his seat. His gaze swung to the windows. Just ocean remained within the frames and he was leaning in that direction as the craft powered onto its new course. The radio added to his confusion, hissing and crackling at him. A woman's voice broke through the static: "Paul? Are you still there?"

He turned back, slowly, reluctantly, closing his eyes and squeezing the lids tightly, creating fresh pain to ease one less physical yet far more debilitating. "Paul?" the voice repeated, growing pedantic. His hand drifted to the panel and a finger hovered beneath a switch. An upward flick would cut the transmission. Here and now required it – there were things which needed his full attention. What were they, though? He couldn't remember, was unable to see them clearly through the mental fog. That was why they had regressed to become mere things, not the specific tasks and important responsibilities they surely were before he had been called to the radio.

"Damn it, Paul!" insisted the speakers, "I know you're there."

The outer door burst inwards. The sudden action was probably accentuated by the pitch of the vessel, but the look of concern and urgency on the newcomer's face added credence to his dramatic interruption. "They turned for the shore." The disappointment in Darren's tone bordered on despair. "I thought it might be us, so I gave them space. Didn't make any difference." He rubbed the salt-encrusted tangle of a greying beard as he waited for a response and seemed irritated when one wasn't forthcoming. Paul was gazing blankly at him, seemingly incapable of making any sense of this latest information because his mind was elsewhere. Darren flicked an accusatory glare at the radio. "What do you want to do?"

What indeed? Paul's deputy was older, probably wiser. Was he thinking what most of the others hadn't had the courage to say – that the man seated at the desk was too young and inexperienced to head a project of this nature? When Darren glanced backwards to the deck outside it was something of a wake-up call. At least, Paul took it as such, an impatient reminder that someone, he in particular, ought to be out there and handling the problem.

“I need an answer, Paul,” the woman's voice grated testily over the radio.

The mist in Paul's eyes cleared, the trance faded. His hand moved to the button on the microphone base and depressed it. “I can't give you one, Cheryl.” The intention had been to sound regretful yet business-like, mainly for Darren's benefit – Cheryl could take it whichever way suited, she always did - but an uncontrollable hint of angry frustration had managed to leach through. Following a brief pause to re-invent a level of composure that was totally alien to his current mood, he droned unconvincingly: “Not right now.” A curt nod to Darren was a sign he would follow shortly, now that he was back on the ball. The deputy's eyes narrowed slightly, mistrusting; then the man was drifting out onto the deck. Paul waited until the door had begun to close before adding to his message: “I've got a bit of an emergency.” He released the button, heard only static and depressed it again. “Cheryl?” The static continued. Paul's shoulders slumped momentarily. Finally, he shut down the radio. It took a few seconds to review the conversation, the relationship, the entire unfortunate episode, then he was pushing all of it back under the carpet with a soft: “Shit!” and heading for the door.

Once outside, the contrast was quite remarkable. The air on deck stung his nostrils and took his breath away. It was a shock to the system, instant freedom from the claustrophobia of his personal life. The ocean had become and, for the present, continued to be his only world. As an entity, it was self-sufficient, a universe unto itself, one providing the safety and comfort of inviolability. The euphoria began to dwindle as certain exceptions were extrapolated: the immediate environment was less than comfortable in consideration of what had occurred; any decision he made in that regard would affect both; and each would impact the other, whether satisfactorily resolved or not; and so on, and so on. In a matter of seconds he was back to the butterfly principle, the reality that whatever he did would have far-reaching consequences. The way events had been unfolding lately, it would be sheer luck if something didn't come back to bite him.

A wave slapped the bow, interrupting the rhythm of the rolling deck. Paul tottered drunkenly and grabbed the doorknob to steady himself. Jemma was sweeping by and sent him a grin. It probably meant nothing. She was the youngest of the team, an undergraduate on work study who seemed to have adopted him as something of a role model. At least, he preferred to regard it as that, rather than believe the gut feeling that she fancied him. At the moment, however, she was just another critic, another complication, one more witness to whatever screw-up everyone seemed to be expecting him to make.

Righting himself, he walked casually to the rail, reading the pitch of the vessel, making sure he didn't stumble again. He would now be in full view and it was time to prove to anyone with doubts, and to himself perhaps, that at the tender age of twenty-seven, he could be not only a leader, but a damned good one. To achieve this meant a careful assessment of the

situation and a workable plan to resolve it which was not born of paranoia or knee-jerk reactions. His gaze swept the ocean ahead, locked onto a dark mound which broke the surface, then disappeared. Two more rose and sank, then others. The pod of whales was three hundred metres off the port beam, cruising gracefully. But it was no longer following the coast as it had been. Now it was heading in, seemingly oblivious to the awaiting danger.

The long, narrow beach stretched between small promontories of rocks. Beyond these, turbulence extended well out to sea indicating shallows, possibly more rocks. A further hazard to the safe navigation of both whales and craft was the wide expanse of discoloration between, where a continuous procession of breaking waves rolled in to churn the sand on the shelf below. How deep was that? Darren would have read the charts. He would know.

So too the whales. Generations of them had probably been up and down this coastline for millennia, were familiar with its vagaries. They'd be aware of the dangers posed by the shallow water, the incoming tide. There was no reason for them to swim that close and risk stranding. Then again, other strandings had seemed senseless. Everyone had a theory, but no-one really knew why. That was why Paul and his team were out there: to acquire much-needed knowledge through scientific observation. After months at sea they'd managed to fill up a hard-drive with information that was probably similar to that already previously documented; and none of it told him what he really needed to know.

He shot a glance along the deck looking for Darren and couldn't see him. A fleeting twinge of panic left a small knot in his stomach. It tightened as he hurried in search of the iconic personality he feared most in terms of criticism, yet who made him feel less alone simply because he was older and usually sympathetic. A movement above attracted his attention. Craig was leaning out over the rail of the bridge focusing binoculars, presumably on the pod. Paul called up to him: "How's the calf looking?"

Craig turned his head to reply. The binoculars remained in position as if his hands and arms had frozen. "Not good – slower now. The others are staying back, just following." Craig broke off to check on the whales. He began speaking again as he looked, but his voice was lost to the wind.

Paul wouldn't have heard – he was already on his way to the stern. Darren saw him coming and met him half way. The grim expression was not the comfort Paul had been seeking. If anything, it was a challenge, not necessarily to his authority, but to his right to retain it. Even if it was in his imagination, he had to meet it and asked: "Can't we head them off, try turning them?" What had been intended as the positive decision of a confident commander came out like a desperate plea for approval.

None was forthcoming. "That window's closed, Paul." Darren looked past him in the direction of the beach. "Ten minutes ago, maybe." His gaze returned, not exuding blame this time, merely stating an opportunity lost. "We have one chance, as I see it. And if we wait much longer, we'll lose that as well."

They'd already discussed the alternative. It was awful then, more so now and Paul was still reluctant. "Get us up near the leaders," he grated, "Then we'll decide." Why hadn't he said: *I'll* decide? He took Darren's hesitation to be some internal battle between further

argument and expediency. If that was the case, an almost imperceptible shudder of his grey eyes decided the contest. Then he was wheeling, hurrying to the bridge ladder, leaving Paul only slightly relieved.

His brisk walk to the cabin for his binoculars was another exercise in leading by example. He hoped his gait reflected a sense of urgency tempered by optimism – everything will be okay as long as we do our jobs efficiently and without fuss. Maybe the gritted teeth gave him away. Whatever the case, when Jemma caught up with him, she was apparently not fooled by his performance. “Are we going to lose them?”

He hated to think ‘yes’ because it was not only an admission of defeat, but would invite a mind-set that almost guaranteed it. To consider voicing the opposite, however, would leave himself wide open if he failed to deliver. “We can only do our best,” was all he really had to offer. Jemma’s pained expression demanded more. The last thing he needed at his elbow now was a young, pretty devil’s advocate continually undermining his self-confidence. Rather than telling her to simply get out of his hair, he added: “We can’t afford any delays. Grab a two-way and meet me at the bow.”

By the time he was leaning on the rail, the speed of the vessel had picked up and the new course was taking them out to sea. Although necessary to clear the submerged rocks, it was still frustrating because the clock was running down. Ignoring the jolting and spray as they ploughed through the swell, Paul tried to keep his glasses focused on the pod. The view would have been better from the bridge, but he valued his own space; and Darren was quite capable of handling this part without a back-seat driver.

Though the next five minutes passed agonisingly slowly, they delivered a blessing of sorts. Continuing on course towards shore, the pod had now slowed considerably. Perhaps the approaching boat was a random element worthy of deliberation. The fact that they didn’t form into a huddle as humans might was only indicative of their powers of communication over great distances, not necessarily complacency. But if they had not yet had a change of heart, they did seem less determined to strand and more open to an acceptable alternative. Paul liked to think such was the case and rasped into the two-way: “Slow down. Start your turn towards them. Head for the calf, but don’t get too close.”

He waited for his orders to be executed. Jemma was at his shoulder, asking what their chances were. At another time, the nasal quality of her voice would simply have been a tolerable peculiarity; now it came across as sneering. He instantly regretted the sideways jerk of his head and the defensive glare he gave her. He blinked, then tried a reassuring paternal smile. “We should know soon. A lot depends on the calf. They’re unlikely to desert it, even to save themselves. So if we can guide it back out to sea, the others should follow.”

This best-case scenario was what he was hoping for and it was beginning to look as though declaring the prediction out loud had somehow encouraged fate to smile kindly just this once. With the vessel less than a hundred metres and closing, the calf was faltering, perhaps confused by the sound of the engines. Closer still and it was turning parallel to the coast, hopefully with the intention of re-entering the bosom of its family. Paul jammed the

radio against his mouth. "Slow ahead – just enough power to hold your course. Try to keep the deceleration smooth – we don't want to startle them."

The plan might have worked, had they been dealing with a herd of cattle, but whales possessed far more than simple intelligence and basic instinct: they were motivated, perhaps to a greater degree, by emotion, passion and loyalty - very human and often unfathomable. For anxious seconds which stretched into minutes they watched and waited; so too the enigmatic whales. The calf appeared unable to make up its mind. Paul urged it on with a whisper, begging it to make the move and take them all out to sea. But the telepathic message was either misread, or not received at all, and the infant renewed its course towards the beach. "Stay ahead of it," was the command Paul sent and he expected to hear the engines pick up, but they didn't. "What's the matter? Go after it!" When there was no reply, he barked: "Darren? What the hell are you playing at?"

The tinny voice that answered over the two-way was Craig's. "Darren's on his way to you, Paul. He said to forget the calf and concentrate on the pod."

"Damn it!" Paul was about to repeat his orders in no uncertain terms when he felt another presence at the bow rail. He knew who it was without looking and was ready for the confrontation; but as he turned, his annoyance switched instantly to shock and his focus was not on Darren, but the rifle in the man's hands.

"It has to be done, Paul," said Darren sombrely, "Before they start after it again."

Suddenly, Paul's head was filled with noise. His gaze leapt from the calf to the other whales, then back to the calf. Jemma's voice was begging through the pandemonium: "It's going to die anyway, Paul. Give the order! Shoot the calf, or risk losing them all!"

The panic he had been holding at bay found a way through his defences and snared him. "There has to be another way!" He was pleading – with whom, he had no idea. His grip tightened on the rail as he scanned the bay for possibilities, for any small hope which would delay this terrible decision. But there was nothing. During the long minutes of waiting, the tide had brought them closer to shore. The distance between the deeper water and the start of the sandy shelf had narrowed considerably - the final window was closing. The sound of the rifle bolt being rammed home banished his confusion, but not in the way he needed. The emptiness it left behind was absolute. He was devoid of reason and emotion, unable to think because there was no consciousness to draw on. He couldn't move because his mind was stunned and refusing to tell his muscles how.

The next few moments were even more bizarre. Darren's lips were moving, and Jemma's, but the voices were not theirs. They came and went in whispers, odd phrases pertinent to now, yet recalled from the past – other times of indecision. When the rifle came up to Darren's shoulder, Paul stared at it, along it, stopping short of tracing the sights to the target. He even fancied he could see the bullet leaving the barrel, spinning on its dreadful way. Finally, he was watching it coming towards him, waiting for it to strike. He was with the calf. He was the calf. Then he was diving, sinking into a dark, timeless blue.

Three years later

Paul was within it again as if he had never left. The moment of recall, however, was erstwhile. The enigmatic intensity which had captivated him so totally all those nightmares ago had been different. This time there was a light, a bright yet fuzzy beam which speared into the depths wherever he looked, changing the tone of blue to one more familiar, far less welcoming. This was all-encompassing, certainly, but it no longer harboured that feeling of peace and comfort. Neither was it as pure or ethereal. This blue was murky, tactile, its cold fingers tangibly and undeniably encircling his body, restricting movement and breathing. Worst of all was his eventual rationalisation of the experience, a fear-filled conviction that this could be the reckoning for that fateful day of indecision three years ago. He had been expecting it, had resigned from the team and his job at the Institute, had done everything humanly possible to ensure that he never had to face an ordeal like that again. But the dreadful memory of it continued to invade the here and now.

Panic increased and his head jerked from side to side as he searched for clarification of his current situation. The light beam stayed with him, slashing ineffectually at the surrounding gloom, moving as if affixed to his gaze. He was aware of pain in his chest and the spasmodic convulsions of his diaphragm. His eyes were popping fit to burst. When the agony was all too much, he gasped. Bubbles exploded. Cold, salty water flooded his open mouth. Then the presence of mind which had deserted him just seconds before suddenly returned and his hand was scrambling for the convoluted air hose, returning the mouthpiece to his lips from which it had escaped in his moment of *déjà vu*.

Able to breathe once more, he waited for his head to clear before taking stock of the surroundings. Now he remembered the chill of the water as he had entered it, and his reason for doing so. The strange beam was merely from the lamp attached to his head by an elastic strap and he dipped it now to illuminate the reef just below, expecting something more but seeing only a ridge of craggy limestone. He must have drifted. Swimming into the current, he followed the reef until a dark shape loomed. Closer, the mesh of a fishing net became visible, trailing up from the rocks on which it was snagged. Further up, tangled in the folds was his anchor. Then, and more importantly, he was able to see the final vestige of hope and freedom. Attached to the anchor was the taut chain stretching towards his boat on the surface, beyond his present field of vision admittedly, but there, nevertheless. He was almost sure of it.

Unable to recall whether he had actually started on the net when he'd been overcome by his panic attack, Paul moved closer and found the thin line extending up to his marker buoy, the one he had tied on so that the exact spot could be found later should he have to leave the area unexpectedly before completing the job. It had been a simple, routine precaution. At least he had been thinking straight then. Next, he slid a hand down his leg to feel for the knife. It was still sheathed, so he hadn't dropped it – that was a bonus. Taking a minute to collect his thoughts, he withdrew the knife and set to cutting the anchor free.

His return to the surface was deliberate and slow. Decompression was never an issue in the relatively shallow water, but there was a need to convince himself that he was back in control because he would have to go down again for the net. That would be after he'd reset the anchor and disproved the sneaking suspicion that, once back on board, his personal survival itinerary would preclude anything remotely wet or blue. The sense of relief experienced on seeing his boat rocking gently did nothing to help. It shone as a sanctuary he might never want to desert. Did the net really matter? Was it worth risking his sanity to retrieve it? There was no-one to take advice from this time, no crusty, self-assured deputy to shoulder responsibility on his behalf – just him alone with his boat. He'd named it well, almost as if anticipating current circumstances – Copernicus, an advocate of knowledge based on observation, not hallucination. But if boats could ever listen, he declined to ask this boon of it.

He took only fifteen minutes to disentangle the net, a near-miracle considering he was also struggling with a very tenuous courage. So pleasing was the accomplishment that he was hyperventilating for a moment. The icing on the cake was being able to record the event and the outcome on tape, just for the log, all the time listening to the tone of his voice, trying not to betray his exuberance at being high and dry and, presumably, still sane. Self-control fell apart as he was voicing his frustration over the lack of consideration by commercial fishermen who obviously cared more about profits than the creatures they put in mortal danger by their apathetic practices. In a way, he was just as bad. The result of his misgivings was the annihilation of his composure which could only be restored by some desperate, outlandish display of reckless abandon.

The best he could come up with was to weigh anchor and power out to sea at full throttle. As a spectacle, it was a non-event: the few seagulls around took no apparent notice; at midday, there was no sunset to ride off into; and it had begun to rain. But, as far as Paul was concerned, it was exactly what he needed. If no-one else cared, it was their loss and he could forgive himself for not caring about them either.

2

From the dunes, rain could be seen as a distant haze, masking the horizon and moving parallel to the coast. That was unfortunate because a sudden downpour was just what Robert needed to save him from himself. The wise, they being mainly adults who would probably know if they weren't too old to remember, maintained he was at a difficult age. Fifteen was a time of change when hormones were running riot and commonsense took second place to spontaneous acts of passion which were over in a flash and regretted forever after. The warning bells had resounded the instant Simone had grabbed his hand and hauled him off to the beach, but they had been drowned out by the lewd gibes and encouragement of his so-called friends. Thanks to small-town gossip everyone knew he was still a virgin, and it was common knowledge that girls matured quicker than boys. So, when a seriously sexy sixteen-year-old offered to show him the ropes, even if she hadn't actually

said as much, he figured his standing within his peer group would plunge to an all-time low if he declined. His contingency plan to shake her once they were out of sight of the others hadn't eventuated – Simone was an accomplished temptress; and together they were, still.

Choosing the right spot was a delaying tactic that gave him a few extra minutes. Simone knew all the usual ones, but Robert insisted they find their own – somewhere special. That was his second mistake. Until then, he had avoided any reference to sex, trying to keep this particular liaison platonic. Now, with a single careless insinuation he'd given her the green light. In an attempt to defuse the situation, he'd settled on a shallow, sandy crater clearly visible from the lookout car park in the hopes that exposure to the public eye wasn't on her agenda. Not only didn't Simone care, but she was excited by the prospect of an audience, albeit sparse and somewhat distant.

Unsure how to guard against what he expected to come next, he'd let Simone sit first so that he could leave a respectable gap between them. That, and his apparent reluctance to look at her, drew a wry smile and a sensuous, purring reassurance: "It's okay, Robbie. I didn't know what to do my first time, either." She turned, placed a hand across his chest and pushed him back onto the sand. "Just let it happen."

Strange things did – feelings of a kind Robert had not experienced before. The only woman he could recall ever kissing him was his mother, never passionately and always with tenderness. And even if he was finding this particular expression of motherly love embarrassing of late, he accepted that it was necessary for her and tried not to break contact too soon in case he upset her. But he would willingly have exchanged that kiss and more for what he was being subjected to now.

Simone was all-consuming. Her lips were devouring his face, tongue snaking and intrusive. As one hand clawed and fumbled at the button on his jeans, the other was pressing his to her breast, coaxing it to knead and caress. Both of them were gasping, but while hers was an expression of sensual anticipation, his was the result of sheer panic. Fighting desperately to free himself, he rolled from beneath her and began scrambling away. The soft sand hampered his flight and left him on his knees barely two metres away, panting and nauseous. He waited for her words to reach him through the pounding in his head, expecting a derisive tirade; but all he heard was laughter.

She broke off and began to speak, amusement replaced by disgust: "We were all wondering and I needed to find out for myself. Now we know." She fumbled in a pocket, withdrew a small packet, regarded it for a moment, then chuckled. "I brought it along, just in case. Never imagined I'd use it. Guess I was right about that too." Tossing the condom on the sand between his feet, she began walking off. "Call it a parting gift. Where you're going, you'll definitely need it."

Her footsteps receding through the dunes were little more than whispers as if they too were disappointed with his cowardly performance. A glance in the direction of the lookout confirmed that the two people leaning on the rail were more interested in the distant rain than the destruction of a young boy's self-esteem. But that wasn't what really hurt. He didn't care about the lack of empathy, or even the intense loneliness he felt at that moment. His

greatest fear was that, suddenly, he was seeing himself for what he was. The revelation he had been waiting for had finally arrived – and it was devastating.

Moisture welling in his eyes caused him to close them tightly. His clenched fist hammered a thigh. The blow punctuated the story of his life to that point, defined an end to the setup. It hadn't been exactly easy, but he'd been young and innocent enough to believe that something would come along to make him feel normal; or, if not that, then at least a level of understanding from others. Now, who would understand? His mother might, but could she really empathise? As for his father, he would hate him. But not as much as he hated himself.

3

Rosie Sherman lived in the coastal town of Severance. Her place was little more than a holiday house, the kind rented out, sight-unseen to folks from interstate who would be too tired after their long trip to complain overmuch about the condition – like a lounge room being sealed off because the ceiling was unsafe. She tried her best to keep it presentable, but the only paint she could afford was neither weather-proof nor scrubbable and required constant retouching. Such had been her intention, in particular the splash-back behind the kitchen sink which had been washed so frequently that it was down to the bare fibro. Unfortunately, the oft-removed lid of the paint can was so distorted that it hadn't sealed the last time she'd used it, causing the remains of the lemon yellow acrylic to dry solid in the bottom.

Buying more paint wasn't in the budget and she supposed leaving it another month wouldn't be a problem, except for the fact that she would have to keep staring at the eyesore. And the more she did, the more it would serve as a reminder of her life in general – in definite need of TLC, perhaps a complete makeover.

Returning to the kitchen had been intended as aversion therapy – carry on regardless, look frequently at the splash-back and convince herself it didn't matter. Ten minutes was all she could suffer. Then she was heading for the dresser and taking down the old shortbread tin where she kept her rainy-day money. Had anyone told her to beware repainting the wall behind the sink because it would give her nothing but grief, Rosie would have laughed. She was, indeed, chuckling to herself as she prised the lid off the tin.

Mirth turned to puzzlement. There was no cash, not even a coin, only the small plastic storage box containing Robert's money. In the scheme of things it was a pittance, but when Rosie had had to scrape a bit here and a bit there from the housekeeping, it wasn't a bad effort. And it meant Robert didn't have to ask his father when he needed paper and charcoal and suchlike. Not that he ever would – Wayne refused to recognise his son's artistic talent and still wouldn't have approved if he had. Hearing the front door squeak open, she guessed the man in question had just entered and she called out to him: "Wayne. Have you been at the biscuit tin?"

From the sounds of his footsteps, he had intended to go somewhere else other than the kitchen and now had to back-track. Judging by the scowl on his weather-beaten face when

he came in, the diversion hadn't pleased him; neither had his wife's insinuation, even if it was founded. "So what?" he grumbled with a sneer.

Rosie withheld her reply. She was in the process of taking the lid from the small box. At the end of the previous week there had been over forty dollars in there. Now all that remained was a single five-dollar note and some loose change. Her head jerked up and her eyes burned across the room at her husband. "Robert's money, too! How could you?"

Wayne's anger seemed to petrify his body momentarily. He stood, arms by his sides, fists clenched, face puffed and reddening: a stocky, rather fearsome troll guarding the bridge to his failed integrity. The comedy of the situation was lost on Rosie. If anything, she was a little afraid. Wayne had often approached the line of physical violence, but had never stepped over it – yet. Despite her fear that he might be close to losing control, she stood her ground and continued to glare, soliciting an explanation in heavy silence.

Maybe he read the fear in her eyes, or merely decided it wasn't worth losing his cool over a matter so petty. An apathetic calm replaced the aggression and the sneer became one of condescension as he trudged over to the old fridge and yanked the door open. "I needed spares for the boat – the motors are playing up again."

Rosie had been watching a jar on the top of the fridge. Wayne's rough treatment of the appliance had started it tottering. She'd put it there and it would be her fault if it fell and smashed on the floor – just the excuse he needed to counter her accusation with one of his own. To rush over and catch it, however, would draw attention to an accident which hadn't, as yet, happened. So, she walked casually and took the jar as if it had been her intention all along. "There was almost seventy dollars," she said, trying to hide her exasperation.

Wayne looked at her over the open fridge door and smirked. "Pity it wasn't seven hundred."

"Not funny, Wayne. The boat's killing us."

"For Christ's sake!" He let out a huge theatrical sigh. "We've been through all this. It's our livelihood. Without it, we're finished!"

The truth was, it was over the day they'd signed the papers – a huge debt they'd never be likely to clear. Why she'd agreed to it, she couldn't recall. Maybe it had something to do with love – or what she imagined was love at the time. Rosie frowned. "How come you're paying cash all of a sudden? What about the account?"

His snarl was meant for his wife and the supplier, neither of whom seemed to realise how hard it was for a battler these days. "They stopped my credit."

For a moment she was on his side and close to some kind of forgiveness. "They can't do that! We paid the arrears two weeks ago." Then she was studying his expression and saw what a fool she had been. "You didn't pay it, did you?" His indifferent shrug fuelled her growing anger. "What, then? The TAB? Your boozy cronies?"

A hand came up and he was pointing a shaking finger at her. "You leave them out of it. They're good mates." He realised how ridiculous the statement was. They were only *his* mates because he needed them. But *they* didn't give a shit about *him*, not some blow-in out-of-towner who was muscling in on their business, even if he did shout the bar regularly.

Preferring to drop the issue, he stared back into the fridge. “Where the bloody hell’s the beer?”

“I forgot to get it.” Rosie’s admission was a deliberate challenge – *make a mountain out of that one, why don’t you?*

Wayne obliged: “How could you forget? You work at the flamin’ pub!” Not waiting for a response, he bulldozed on: “And that’s another thing – you know I don’t like you doing that job. I thought you were going to quit.”

Here we go again, thought Rosie – the old chestnut. Walking to the dresser she slid the jar she had saved onto a shelf. Unfortunately, this brought her face to face once more with the shortbread tin and the reason for this blow up. Which was as well – Wayne was obviously trying diversion tactics and she’d almost fallen for them. “We need the money. I don’t think you realise how hard it is.”

As he slammed the door shut, the fridge shuddered. Something inside fell over. “What do you take me for – an idiot? Of course I bloody know! I’m doing the best I can, but it’s the off-season. When it warms up, the tourists will be back and we’ll be quids in.”

Rosie sighed. “You’ve been saying that every year since we came here and it never happens, Wayne. We just get deeper in debt.”

“We’ll manage,” he grumbled sourly, “We always have.”

“Maybe we will,” she countered, desperately trying to get him to face reality, “But what about Robert?” Wayne’s eyes rolled. His son’s future wasn’t his favourite topic. Whenever it came up, he usually found an excuse to retreat, so Rosie had to make the most of his erstwhile presence. “College won’t be cheap. And then there’ll be lodgings. His grant won’t cover it all. What he needs ...”

“What he *needs*,” interrupted Wayne forcefully, “Is to get his hands dirty for a change, do an apprenticeship – not bugger around with arty-farty crap at some poofy art school! You’re turning him into a wooss, Rosie, and I won’t have a bar of it!”

“He’s going to art school,” insisted Rosie.

“Not while I’m his father, he isn’t!” Wayne narrowed his eyes at her and waited for her to say the words, pretty sure that she wouldn’t. There was no way Rosie would take Robert and leave. Not that she’d ever threatened to, although he’d seen it in her eyes a few times. At that moment, she was stunned and silent, which probably meant she was thinking along those lines but was too afraid to take the plunge. He doubted she would now - if she was screwed up about many things, Rosie knew which side her bread was buttered. He let some more seconds tick by for effect, then turned towards the door. “I’m going down the pub.” Pausing in mid-stride, he remained facing away when he spoke to her: “And when I get back I’d better find you obliging. It’s time you started behaving like the wife you’re supposed to be.”

That should have been it. Their confrontations normally ended this way with her eventually running out of steam, beaten by his pig-headed arrogance which he wielded like a club. This time, however, it wasn’t finished, couldn’t be because she felt so strongly and her self-

esteem demanded compensation, no matter how superficial. Snatching the five-dollar note from the tin, she flapped it at him. "I want it back, – every last cent!"

His anger flared briefly, then he was turning his back on her and leaving. "Screw you!"

Rosie followed him into the narrow hallway. "I mean it, Wayne. Robert needs that money. / need it!"

The man ceased his rolling swagger half way along the passage where a small table sat against the wall beneath a framed mirror. A glance at his reflection confirmed he was wearing the guilt he couldn't afford to show, necessitating a quick adjustment of expression. Back in character, he regarded the tabletop on which was displayed a small arrangement of ornaments hand-crafted from shells and coral. Rosie made them with materials gathered along the high-tide mark. He picked one up – a frog, quite clever, in a way, for anyone who liked that sort of thing. He turned to her, but kept his attention on the ornament in his hand. "If you're so desperate for money, maybe you should try selling some of these. Then again, you probably wouldn't want to part with them."

Rosie knew exactly what he had in mind. Maybe she was actually willing him to vent his spite in a way that would underline both the moment and the stand she had resolved to take. It would be the bottom line of a declaration setting them worlds apart, something she had known forever, but that hadn't hurt enough for her to do anything about - until now. She watched his fingers part. The action could almost be taken as gentle, were it not for the malice it engendered. The shell-frog dropped quickly. In the movies it wouldn't have; but whereas slow-motion would have been a lingering, agonising pain, the speed of reality was a sharp, deadly stab to the heart. She could do nothing but stifle the gasp of dismay and bear the loss bravely.

Wayne leered down at the broken ornament. "Personally," he began, adding to his former assassination of his wife's simple pleasure, "I think it's shit." If dropping the frog had been over too fast to have any real impact, he was going to make sure the coup de grâce could be savoured. Placing a boot over his wife's damaged pride and joy, he applied pressure and ground it slowly, noisily underfoot. "But, then, I know bugger all about art."

After that, he must have left. Rosie couldn't remember. Her focus remained on the crushed remains as she knelt beside them. She could make another, of course, but it wouldn't be the same. She had always considered her little creations to be unique, individuals with souls - like people; like most, anyway; but not all.

Outside, foliage moved on the straggly, overgrown Westringia by the shed as Robert pushed further in to wait. He'd caught some of the argument from the back door and had been momentarily glad of the raised voices, the sound of which had prevented him from making an untimely entrance. Then he was wishing he hadn't stayed to eavesdrop. What he'd heard had cut deeply, adding to his torment.

While his contretemps with Simone had left him bruised and embarrassed, it wasn't the end of the world; not as long as his home remained his sanctuary. Now, it seemed, he was alone and vulnerable. His father despised him, and his idea of confessing his dilemma to his mother would likely force her to take sides. If she did and decided to leave, a distinct

possibility, then the onus would be back on Robert to make his own choice. Should he stay with a father who hadn't been much of one; or go with his mother who would be torn eternally between love for her son and her resentment of him for being different and the principal bone of contention?

The other options were unthinkable at that moment. Better to remain insignificant like the junk around the yard – unwanted for now, but not yet beyond reclamation. From his vantage point, he could see the front veranda, but was too far away to hear footsteps clumping along the hall. When the fly-door suddenly burst open and his father appeared, Robert winced in surprise and shrank deeper into the bush.

Wayne paused on the threshold, perhaps contemplating further psychological cruelty. The hesitation was unfortunate. The fly-screen swung back, hitting him on the arm. Anger flaring, he grabbed it, stepped clear and slammed the flimsy door shut with a loud crash and enough force to break the frame. The futile act of aggression did nothing to quell his frustration. It merely compounded the feeling of guilt which he would never admit to, or apologise for. What was worse, the destruction was relatively minor and could easily be repaired by Rosie who would gather it up gladly because it fitted well with her role as protector of wimps and inanimate objects. With a grunt, he spun on his heel and stormed off the veranda in the direction of his ute.

4

Wayne would normally have lost the remaining aggression somewhere between the house and the pub, but it continued to dog him, mainly because he'd been forced to lie about the money. This had little to do with conscience. He was not averse to bending the truth, but he preferred to do it as part of a strategy, rather than to cover his back when one failed. Had the horse won, he could have put back her lousy seventy bucks and she'd have been none the wiser. If he'd kept some of the money in reserve, there might have been sufficient left to buy a few odds and ends for the boat, enabling him to preserve a semblance of integrity, at least in his own mind. What he needed now was a boost, something to confirm luck hadn't deserted him entirely. Stopping the ute across from the hotel, he squeezed a hand into his jeans pocket and withdrew what was left of his indiscretion – maybe fifteen bucks, with coin. Not enough to get pissed, or for a decent bet, but it was a start. Decision made, he moved off again, swung across the road and headed for his usual spot in the car park behind the hotel.

The smell of hops and malt made him feel more at home, better still on finding the place nearly empty. A couple of tourists were talking in some foreign language at a table and Josh Ferguson was propping up the bar, gazing mistily into his beer. Now a practising alcoholic, he was a classic example of how not to succeed in the fishing industry. It was just a pity Wayne hadn't paid more heed to the town drunk's sad tale and less to the sales patter of the mongrel who'd sold him the boat. He could hear someone moving chairs in the lounge,

probably Sid, the licencee. As yet, there was no sign of Wayne's mates - they wouldn't be in until Happy Hour which gave him a bit of leeway.

Deciding to leave the drink until later, he drifted to the TAB, a small partitioned section at the far end of the public bar. Sid's wife, Maureen, was behind the counter, attending to one personality not currently at the top of Wayne's Christmas-card list – Ryan Deverell, ex-strapper turned cab driver. Both of them acknowledged Wayne's approach, Maureen tendering her usual cheery greeting, Ryan with a sheepish grin and a: “G'day, mate. Sorry about the other day.”

Wayne had been tempted to tear him off a strip for the trouble he'd started with his outsider tip, but after he'd calmed down the reality dawned that Ryan wasn't generally that far off the mark. Anyway, he'd only suggested it was worth a twenty, not the entire bundle Wayne had lost on it. “No worries,” lied Wayne. He glanced up at the monitors on the wall, then the clock. “Got anything in the 4.20?”

Ryan cocked an eyebrow and shuffled close. “You didn't get this from me, right?” he whispered conspiratorially, “But have a squiz at number 6. He's down on form, so you'll get a good price.”

Wayne frowned. “What makes you think he'll come in?”

Ryan grinned and winked. “No-one's breaking your arm, mate.” He started towards the main bar and added: “Your choice.”

The form guide told Wayne nothing Ryan hadn't and the monitor confirmed the price was holding at \$23.00. He checked out the other runners and doubt set in. With only a fifteen dollar stake, even putting the lot on the favourite wouldn't net much. As for Ryan's tip, it looked like a donkey that only a fool would bet on. Maureen called out to him: “If you want the 4.20, better get your skates on, Wayne. Bets close in two.” Another ultimatum, but from a different woman this time, and helpful rather than harassing. Waving a hand in reply, he reached for the betting slips.

The next few minutes were nerve-racking. A drink would have helped enormously, but there wasn't enough cash left to buy a soda. The rest was riding on Ryan's tip, to win, naturally. One cigarette followed another until the start of the race. He forced himself to show little emotion, but anyone who had seen his face would have been poised by the phone ready to dial 000. In fact, he was sure his heart stopped for a few very long seconds as the field was on the final straight with the favourite dropping back and his horse sauntering along in fifth. He was on the verge of planning his escape before his mates arrived when the miracle happened. The donkey found some extra legs and sprinted past the leaders to win by a head. It was amazing, incredible and *that* Ryan – what a legend!

It wasn't long before Happy Hour had a new meaning for Wayne. It might have been better, had he not blown fifty bucks on the last race at Belmont, but all this meant was that Rosie would have to wait for her bloody money. He was pretty sure Ryan could help him with that, especially after he'd shouted his top tipper a couple of double scotches. For the moment, however, Wayne Sherman was the best bloke in the world, for an out-of-town loser.

It was usual for the joking to start that way. They would all run each other down, highlighting shortcomings and embarrassing moments, and for a while Wayne had laughed as heartily as anyone. But if the first few beers raised him to merry heights, continuing to drink began to uncover his true nature: that of the aggressive recalcitrant with a huge chip on his shoulder. Then, the jibes and criticisms were less amusing than they were personal. Okay, perhaps he didn't have the sea in his blood like them, but who was it who always managed to find the new spots so that his charters came in with more fish than the self-confessed experts could guarantee?

"You've got to remember, mate," drawled the thick-set man opposite. He had been leaning forward, looking directly at Wayne. Now he sat back, and with a shuck of his head, offered the unnecessary wisdom to anyone in earshot: "Tourists are just the icing – the cake's what happens now, when the buggers don't come." On the surface, Steve Malloy seemed one of those easy going, salt-of-the-earth characters who would give anyone the time of day, and gladly. A third-generation fisherman, he'd gained his sea-legs as soon as he could walk and had learned his trade in the family business up in the Gulf until something had happened that he never talked about. Twenty years later he was a world away, scraping a living like everyone else, hiding his skeletons and resentment behind a casual air and a dedicated work ethic. Very occasionally, he'd inadvertently drop his guard, revealing something of the man lurking inside. Those who had glimpsed the real Malloy only ever whispered about it, certainly not in front of the man himself; and the one person known to have tested his self-control had taken his bruises and left town the following day. Not that Malloy felt any particular animosity towards present company – he was simply offering friendly advice to a bloke struggling much like he had at the same age. "It's tough even for us, and we were born to it."

The others agreed with grunts and less-than-sober nods. Rusty Baines figured it was time to stick his oar in. He'd never much liked Wayne anytime, less when the drongo was flashing his money around. The sooner he got the message and nicked off, the better. "Maybe you should cut your losses, get into something you know."

The vindictive snipe was the last straw. His patience at an end, Wayne needed some spontaneous, equally acidic reply, but the beer was muddling his thoughts and all he could come up with was: "What d'you mean by that?" Baines stirred the tension by sending a knowing grin around the table, stopping at Wayne. The expression clouded to become a definite challenge. To what end, Wayne was unsure, but his self-esteem was running low and he couldn't leave it there. Lurching up from his chair, he tottered unsteadily as the altitude hit him, then began shuffling around the table towards Baines. How far he intended to take it once he got there was still in the planning stage, and as he struggled to find an appropriate response, it dawned on him that he couldn't even recall the exact words that had set him off.

This wasn't unfamiliar territory. Wayne had been there dozens of times with Rosie, but she knew better than to let him make a fool of himself; the mob at the table, however, being less understanding and apparently in need of entertainment, were waiting for him to do just that.

He could, of course, make out he was off to buy another round and had temporarily lost his bearings, but that would mean digging into what remained of his winnings, leaving him with another cash-flow problem. A hand on his shoulder resolved the dilemma. He turned to see a tall man with a face he ought to have remembered, but found himself unable to distinguish enough of the bleary features in order to put a name to them. The voice sounded familiar, though: "Glad I found you, Wayne. I'd like a word."

Feeling himself being guided away from the table, it was at least one problem solved. As per usual, it was immediately replaced by another. "It's about the boat." There was an accent, English maybe. The only pommie Wayne knew in the area who would know him by name was Don Gray, the fish-processing plant manager. "You said a couple of days," the voice continued, "It's been over a week."

That clinched it – Don Gray, for sure. As well as the plant, he was also responsible for the jetty where Wayne's boat had been tied up while he made repairs. Don had been pestering him to take the vessel back out to its mooring. Wayne didn't need that kind of pressure right then. "A couple more days, Don." In hindsight, the request could have been less insistent, but he was still smarting from the previous issue. "Three at most. I've almost got it fixed."

"One's all I can give you, Wayne." Don was renowned for his tact and friendliness, especially in awkward situations, and he didn't disappoint now. "I could let you have Ben for a few hours, if it would help."

It was a kind gesture, albeit a token one: Ben Teagle was as ancient as the Marie Celeste and about as vacant. He'd be more of a hindrance than a help. "Thanks, Don, but I'll manage." Wayne glanced at the half-empty glass in his hand and imagined it would taste as lousy as he felt. He walked unsteadily to the bar, slid the glass onto the polished surface, then swept towards the door, sending Don a wounded smile in passing. "You can have your jetty back tonight."

Once outside, the cool night air hit him like a brick and he almost lost it. A minute or so of deep breathing set him right, enabling him to stumble over to the ute. When he couldn't find his keys, he began to think seriously about not driving because he was probably well over the limit; but although the jetty was only a short walk from the pub, he doubted he could stay vertical for the duration. Anyway, a brief scan of the area seemed to confirm there were no cops about, and he'd just noticed the key was in the ignition, so it was all too fateful to ignore.

His drive along the esplanade was slow and cautious, typical of a drunk trying to prove that he wasn't. At least he managed to avoid hitting anything larger than the kerb which, to his uncertain knowledge, he mounted only once. Parking as close as he could, he sat for a while, gazing through the grubby windscreen at the jetty. With only a few lights, it had an eerie, yet romantic air about it. The same feeling had captivated him when he'd first come to view the boat, drinking in the atmosphere as he and Rosie had walked the uneven timbers, listening to the sea lapping and swishing below, drinking in the intoxicating aromas of brine, diesel and fish oil. Already primed by his boyish imagination, there was little more a dreamer required to enter an exciting world of adventure on the high seas. Nevertheless, it had been there – the Norse Raider. Even the name was perfect, fitting so well with his idea of a rags-

to-riches future for himself and his son – no, *sons*: he'd be the founder of a dynasty, great sea-farers who'd...

That part of the dream died very quickly. Rosie hadn't wanted any more kids until they were financially secure, which was not to be demonstrated; nor was ever likely to be the way things were going - bang went the dynasty! As for the flagship of his maritime empire, in the light of day it had turned out to be less elegant than it was in need of a coat of paint and other more expensive attention. The only bonus was that it came with the mooring – hard to come by according to the locals. Then he discovered that it was the furthest one out to sea and the least protected. Had he bought a lemon, or what?

His trudge to the boat now proved gloomier than his deteriorating mood. The fresh air, however, cleared his head somewhat which, in turn, may have prevented him from tripping and ending up in the drink. Old Ben was sitting on a plastic crate beneath one of the lights, rolling a smoke. Wayne couldn't tell if there was a grin behind the tangle of grey whiskers, but he imagined there would be, so he answered the old salt's emphysemic greeting with an ungracious sneer and stomped on.

Once aboard, pride of ownership soothed his wounds to a degree. Norse Raider might not have been the youngest or neatest of crafts, but it was his, give or take a lifetime of repayments. Small print notwithstanding, at that point in time he was the skipper, in complete charge, law-maker, ruler absolute. In practice, of course, he wasn't even the legal owner, but there was no-one around to challenge his exaggeration; and had there been, he'd have punched them right in the mouth!

He struck his head entering the cabin and took it out on the door frame with a clenched fist, the pain of contact reminding him that he could do more damage to himself than a little if he failed to calm down. The solution to his unpredictable temper was in the forward locker – a part-bottle of cheap scotch. It had been his original intention to stock his bar with nothing but the best, providing quality of service for his customers and a very-civilised nightcap for himself while rocking on a deck bathed in the warm rays of a sun setting over the spangled ocean. And there ended the second lesson - now he was reduced to quaffing pub specials in secret, dingy places.

A quick swig helped some, a second provided a little of the incentive required to begin. Switching on the work-lights in passing, he trudged out to the stern, kicking and stumbling through a litter of tools on the deck surrounding the already-open engine cover. He glared down into the pit, wondering what had ever possessed him to buy a boat with in-board engines. The fact that they were diesel about which he knew very little should have told him something. Had he known that he was going to spend half his life groveling around in a poky, greasy hole trying to fix them could have saved him a world of grief. With a roll of the eyes and a grunt of resignation, Wayne took another sip from the bottle then sank to his knees and reached for a spanner.

A joint on the fuel pipe was his target, but after a minute of stabbing and cursing, he was unable to position the tool on the nut, thanks to his inebriation and the black grease which coated everything. Slamming the spanner down, he grabbed for a battered steel jerry can.

The bent cap was difficult to open, a complication he didn't need. Brute force and a curse helped it see reason. A waft of petrol fumes hit him as he tilted the can and doused a rag. For a moment his head was spinning. He paused to clear it, glad that he had because he'd forgotten to close the lid on the can. An open-handed slap fixed the oversight, then he was leaning down into the well, wiping off the joint.

From his spot along the jetty, Old Ben could hear the sounds of labour coming from Norse Raider; or if not actual work, the effect it was having on a drunken landlubber trying to perform it, apparently without much success, judging by the frequent expletives. He fully expected Wayne to eventually accept defeat and head for the cabin where he could put the finishing touches to his binge, then pass out. That, at least, would ensure he didn't come asking for advice or help. When he noticed a head and shoulders rise from the stern of the boat and turn in his direction, Ben sank lower onto his crate and tried to appear invisible.

Wayne peered back along the jetty as he wiped his hands on the petrol-soaked rag, but his sight was so blurred that it was hard to tell if the old bugger was still there. Not that it mattered, although he would have preferred there were no witnesses around when he tried to start the engines – just in case they refused to behave. Crossing metaphorical fingers in lieu of the physical version which was far too complex, he staggered to the wheelhouse.

As luck would have it, the motors fired up perfectly, but they didn't stay that way for long. In a few seconds the rough idle was back and had now been joined by an occasional cough. "Bitch!" He reeled out and lumbered purposefully astern, hissing though gritted teeth, saliva dribbling over his chin.

The light breeze was barely a whisper, but enough to carry fumes from Norse raider back along the jetty. Ben sniffed the air. The smell of petrol rather than diesel was strange; but the unique combination of fuel and ozone was comforting. It took him back to the good times, gone now, though well-remembered. And, as usual, the memories brought on melancholia, a result of being land-locked by age and infirmity. What he wouldn't have given to be twenty years younger.

A voice interrupted his reveries, harsh and demanding: "Ben! Cast me off!" The old sea dog turned slowly and ancient eyes gazed at the figure in the stern. Silhouetted by the work lights, any expression was indistinguishable, but the body language spoke of agitation and impatience. The figure stumbled and grabbed for support. As Ben rose, he released a sigh of dismay. Booze and boats didn't mix. It was just as well this idiot was only going out to his mooring.

He took his time untying Norse Raider, not in retaliation for the rudeness and lack of respect, but simply because age and arthritis dictated the pace of everything these days. Wayne was obviously unsympathetic and barked at him to hurry up. Ben waved a casual acknowledgement that he had indeed heard, then continued in his plodding way until the rope slipped off the bollard and splashed into the water. There was no word of thanks. None was expected.

Ben shuffled back to his crate, dipping into a pocket for the tobacco before he sat. The Raider's motors rose in pitch and coughed. He watched it heading across the bay, tutting at

the sight of the rope still trailing behind in the water. Deciding it probably wouldn't matter, only being a short run to Wayne's mooring, he dropped his gaze to focus on rolling his cigarette. In a second he was looking up again. The engines were accelerating. The craft had changed course and was now powering out to sea. Ben's head shook. "Stupid," he muttered, then put the affair out of his mind to finish making his smoke.

CHAPTER TWO A Meeting with Rosie

1

Paul was relishing evenings at sea of late, especially in calm conditions. The solitude was its own reward. Being alone with no-one to judge or impress was a bonus. Nature added the final touch. As night closed in and horizons faded, the comfort of isolation became complete, the world at large forced to retreat into darkness, leaving behind a simpler environment to contemplate. There was nothing sinister or pressing about the gentle lap of water against the hull. No gulls circled and screeched to remind him of his own society's greed and opportunism. No fishing vessels or runabouts disturbed the tranquillity. There was just Paul aboard Copernicus adrift on an ocean of peace.

He wasn't entirely on his own, however. There were others out there, calling, singing, conversing. Not with him, of course, and a considerable distance away, but technology enabled him to eavesdrop, amplify and record. What were they talking about - whale dreams, the weather, the family's next great journey?

Pulling off the earphones, he flicked over to the speakers, adjusting the volume so that whale song filled the cabin. Sitting back with eyes closed, he allowed himself to be mesmerised by the mournful, echoing sounds. Would anyone discover the secret to unlock this strange language? Should they even try? Perhaps it would be better remaining a mystery, a private world that humans had not yet managed to violate.

The sensitive instruments picked up another sound, faint at first, but growing clearer, closer. Paul frowned momentarily, then snatched up the earphones. Deft hands skipped over the panels, making adjustments, fine-tuning reception in order to clarify the intrusion. In moments the culprit was obvious – another craft was in the vicinity and approaching at speed.

Wayne glared at the paper in his hand. The effects of alcohol on his sight blurred the text, but he had read it enough times to know every word by heart, one in particular - "repossession". On the 23rd of next month this was to be the fate of his boat. "Bastards," he grated bitterly. The letter crumpled in his hand as he leaned on the steering wheel and peered through the screen. It was hard to see anything past the grime and spray on the glass, certainly no way out of his predicament. One man against the world - it wasn't fair. Switching to auto pilot, he pushed off the wheel and surged towards the door, sweeping up the scotch bottle in passing.

Once on deck, he clamped a hand on a rail and swayed unsteadily, acclimatising himself to the fresh air and the sudden rush of clarity it incited. Or was it emptiness? There was nothing left to try, no salvation, nowhere to go except out there. He looked over the bow rail, hoping the ocean and the night sky might offer some inspiration, but the glare of work lights masked whatever lay beyond. No matter. There was nothing there he hadn't seen before, and he'd purposely set a course through deep water without hazards so that he didn't have

to concentrate on navigation. And, of course, all the other boats were at their moorings, skippers still in the pub.

Taking a swig of scotch, he wedged the bottle in a coil of rope and fumbled in his shirt for the cigarettes. He was attempting to light one when Norse Raider's engines coughed. Anger began to rise, but he fought it back. There was no need to get upset – everything was locked in, pre-destined, and there was nothing he could do about any of it except, perhaps, simply enjoy the moment. Eventually managing to light the cigarette, he inhaled deeply. It tasted awful and made him cough, as did one engine, then the other. So, what was new? Something was – a metallic grinding that hadn't been noticeable before, and a vibration that could be felt through the deck.

Paul had frozen, his finger on the start button. The anchor was still down and if it failed to pull free he could only move a few metres which might not be enough. It was probably too late anyway. His eyes widened as the blaze of lights kept coming and he was already regretting his decision. Had he remained on deck, he could at least have jumped. He judged the moment of impact to be merely seconds, thirty maybe, all of which he was wasting just thinking about it. Muscles tensed, breathing stopped, eyes closed as he waited for the collision. Nothing! A gasp kick-started his heart and he looked again. Incredible though it seemed, the other vessel was dead in the water, rocking and rolling lazily in the light swell.

When the engines eventually gave up the ghost, Wayne could have cried. It was the final indignity. He was even past cursing, managing only to rasp: "Strewth, what now?" He was in the process of lumbering astern to try fixing the problem when the echoing voice came at him from nowhere. It was so unexpected that he pulled up sharply and turned. At least, the top half of him did. His feet, however, carried on walking, just a pace or two, enough for him to lose his balance. The next thing Wayne remembered was hauling himself up from the deck.

The other boat was drifting away in the tide and as it started to swing, Paul was sure he'd seen a figure on the port side, just briefly before it dived out of view. Why would anyone do that? Maybe they'd tripped and fallen, or been overcome by a bout of dizziness. Even a heart attack wasn't beyond the bounds of possibility. He called out again: "Ahoy, there. Are you alright?"

Wayne clung to the rail and peered across the dark void through bleary eyes. There was a light in the cockpit of the other boat and he could see a shape at the window.

"Do you need assistance?" Paul hailed.

Wayne frowned. What was the bloke saying – something about assistance? What he needed was a bloody miracle, not some smart, do-gooder boatie towing him back to port to face humiliation and ridicule. He flapped a hand in a dismissive wave, then began shuffling along the rail towards the bane of his life. Needless to say it was still there, lurking silently in its shadowy pit, mocking him. Following a long, resentful glare, he squatted. The sudden change in altitude sent his head spinning and he rocked backwards to sit with a thump on the deck. This was when he spotted what was left of a cigarette smouldering close by. The fact

that he couldn't recall lighting or dropping it was irrelevant. A puff or two might help to steady his nerves.

The next few seconds epitomised the life of a man born to fail in almost everything he cared putting a hand to. He picked up the cigarette from the wrong end, burning his fingers and instinctively tossed it away. That same hollow feeling hit him, the one he always got on realising, usually too late, that he'd made another bad decision. He snatched a breath as the butt hit the deck and fell in a shower of sparks down into the engine bay. And Wayne had no time to appreciate that this last unplanned, careless act resolved all of his problems in a way he would never have dared dream about.

Paul caught his breath and simply stared. The explosion was totally unexpected, literally over in a flash; then there was just the darkness. Hurrying from the wheelhouse, he switched on a searchlight and began sweeping the sea for signs of the other craft; at least, where he remembered it had been. Maybe he was mistaken, or Copernicus had drifted; except that was unlikely with the anchor still down. Widening his search, he spotted something – was that a lifejacket? The next few minutes were more like hours, were certainly taking too long as he hauled up the anchor and started the engines. Eventually he was inching closer to the floating object. His suspicion was confirmed. Closer still and Paul's heart was in his mouth. He was praying, actually praying the man was wearing the life-vest; but no Gods were listening. What he managed to pull up with the boat-hook was just an empty item of safety equipment that had saved no-one.

A subsequent radio call to report the incident was really routine and should have been an end to the incident as far as he was concerned, Paul being merely a witness to a dreadful tragedy. The accusatory tone of the police officer taking the call, however, suggested that the law of the land would prove to be even harsher and less understanding than the law of the sea could ever be.

2

Sergeant Jackson's evening visit to Rosie was one of those obligatory occasions no policeman cherished. On arrival, a problem other than being the bearer of bad news provided temporary respite. Rosie must have noticed the headlights of his approaching vehicle and met him in the yard. She looked distressed and was soaked to the skin. "The kitchen tap burst," she declared with a sniff as she wiped water from her face. "I tried to turn off the mains, but the valve's stuck," she added, pointing to the water meter just inside the dilapidated front fence.

"No problem," said Jackson, returning to the vehicle for a flashlight. "Have it sorted in a jiffy." While Rosie held the torch, the man apparently had no difficulty turning the valve. "That should do it," he announced. As he took the light from her, he glimpsed apology and embarrassment on her face. "It was a bit stiff. I'm not surprised you couldn't shift it." That was a lie, but it seemed to do the trick and obviously brought her some relief; then he went

and spoiled it with a thoughtless comment: "If you can manage without water tonight, I could get Macka to come out in the morning to fix the tap."

"Thanks, Les, but Wayne can do that. Why were you here, anyway? If it's about the car registration, I should be able to pay it next week."

"Not the registration," he mumbled awkwardly.

"What then?" Rosie was frowning.

Following a brief hesitation which he hoped she wouldn't notice, he said: "You're shivering. You might like to put on some dry clothes, make us a cuppa; then I'll tell you why I came."

Rosie smiled sheepishly. "A shower would have been better; and you might have to settle for a milk, seeing as I'm out of water." The smile broadened for a second or two, then began to fade as she picked up something in his eyes: an apologetic solemnity which didn't fit the occasion. The policeman's eyes closed in a slow blink and he swallowed noticeably. Rosie stiffened. "Tell me now, Les. Has something happened?"

Robert had seen the police vehicle arrive and had been hovering in the background. He'd never had past dealings with the police, but recent events regarding his sexuality had left him with a huge burden of guilt. Not that he had broken any laws, at least he didn't think so, but in an adult's world anything was possible. He was intending to make himself scarce, and was doing so when Jackson's news stopped him dead in his tracks.

"It's about Wayne," the Sergeant began hesitatingly. "There's been an accident."

Rosie felt a jolt in her chest, an involuntary reaction to bad news that had been a long time coming, had been often expected, yet was still shocking nevertheless. Composing herself, she breathed a heavy sigh. "Is he badly hurt? What did he hit?"

"It wasn't an MVA," explained Jackson, then realised she probably wouldn't know what he was referring to. "It wasn't a road accident - he was in the boat." A confused frown creased her brow and she waited. "There was an explosion."

Her eyes widened. Suddenly she was blustering. "You have to take me to him. Where is he - still at the dock, or have they taken him to the hospital?"

She was starting out towards the police vehicle in a rush. Jackson caught her arm, felt the resentment of the shrug as she tried to break his hold. It was always hard when you were trying to restrain someone in a necessary but kind way. "He isn't..." he started, unsure quite how to make it easier. "It didn't happen at the jetty, Rosie. He'd taken the boat out. We're searching for him, of course, but there isn't a lot more we can do tonight. Maybe tomorrow..."

Rosie wore a mask of disbelief. "You're telling me he's dead? Wayne's dead?"

"We can't be certain..." The distraught woman had already turned and was stumbling towards the house, trembling noticeably. "Rosie..." Jackson scanned the yard, looking for the boy. He could help, be of comfort to his mother. God knows, at a time like this, they needed each other. But the yard appeared empty except for rustling shrubs and cool breezes; all, he imagined, whispering about the complete mess he had made of it. Was there anything to salvage? Perhaps he should go to her? Then again... His shoe kicked the gravel. God, he hated this part of the job.

A muffled bang startled Paul and his head jerked sideways to look for the cause. Through the glass of the dividing partition, he was able to see three people in the reception area of the local police station. A woman was reaching down to a small boy, snatching a paper bag from his hand, the one he had presumably just burst. She was not amused, unlike the uniformed police officer leaning on the counter, pen poised and a wry smile on her face.

"Okay, let's forget about the explosion for a moment." Paul frowned and turned back. Jackson was watching him from across the desk, observing probably. That's what they did, the police. It was a stratagem - watch, wait, unnerve, assume. Then the Sergeant's eyes dipped to the paper before him. "You say here that you thought he was in no fit state to pilot the boat. Why didn't you offer to take him on board?"

Paul tried to remember - the events of the tragedy, his actions and inactions, what he'd put in his statement; but recollection was confused. "Didn't I mention that?" As his head came up, Jackson's eyebrows kinked as if repeating his question, but he said nothing. His expression reflected boredom with underlying disbelief, driving Paul back onto the defensive. "Are you insinuating that it's my fault, that I could have prevented him from blowing himself up?"

One eyebrow drooped, the other rose. "I don't know. Could you have?"

The chair was hard and uncomfortable, everything about the place and the situation was; and growing worse by the minute. Given half an hour of this man's badgering and he might well end up behind bars charged with murder. "Look, Sergeant: I've told you what happened. Maybe I ought to have been more insistent, but I decided it wasn't warranted. I only assumed that the man might have been drunk by his actions; I don't know for sure. And even if he was, what was I supposed to do - drag him off against his wishes? Then I'd be accused of abduction, or whatever you people call it."

"You aren't being accused of anything, Mister Longstreet."

Paul sat back and sneered. "Of course not. I'm just helping you with your inquiries."

"A little more than that," grated Jackson, the blase attitude overcome by impatience. "You are the prime witness, Johnny-on-the-spot. One of ours had an accident, is probably dead, and you saw it. Don't you think we might want to know how and why? Is answering a few simple questions so inconvenient? Maybe you have a pressing engagement, important work you need to get back to?" The volume of the man's voice had been rising and was obviously not an intentional ploy, because Jackson paused briefly to calm himself. "What was that, again - your work? What were you doing out there in the middle of the night?"

"I told you," said Paul meekly, intimidated by the display of resentment. "I am researching the behaviour of whales."

"On your own." droned the policeman sardonically. "Isn't that usually a team thing? What are you - freelance, or something?"

It always seems to come back to this, thought Paul. To explain the circumstances behind his preference for solitude would be both painful and unnecessary, at least in his estimation.

It would simply open old wounds and convince Jackson that he had a witness who was indecisive and cowardly. "I have a few theories I'd like to test on my own before I put them to the Foundation."

The consummate opportunist, Jackson swooped on the new information to steer his interrogation into, as yet, uncharted territory. "Must be an expensive hobby. Your boat would have cost a small fortune, by the looks of it. How do you manage without a grant?"

Paul's brow knitted. "I don't quite see what my finances have to do with this."

"Maybe nothing." Jackson's eyes narrowed vindictively. "Maybe everything, if your meeting with Wayne wasn't purely coincidental. You see, I can't quite figure why he would take his boat out at night, not when it wasn't seaworthy. Why risk it, unless he had something very important to do, someone he just had to meet...?"

4

As Paul walked in a daze from the police station, the insinuations were still tumbling through his head. They were nonsense, of course - drug-running, contraband, people-smuggling. It was a wonder Jackson hadn't thrown in espionage for good measure. Trying to reassure himself that it was just part of the standard interview process was small comfort. He was convinced these tactics were the reason decent, law-abiding people were reluctant to come forward: because they were made to feel guilty for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. And he did feel guilty. A man was most likely dead, a direct result of his indecision. Had he rendered assistance, he might be dead too. At least then he wouldn't have been subjected to the grilling he was still smarting from. It was why his head was down, coming up sharply when he bumped into another pedestrian.

Old Ben hadn't been watching either. His mind was on the same affair that plagued Paul. He was one of those innocent bystanders who preferred anonymity, but had been sucked in anyway - Les Jackson needed his statement. On his way from the fish plant to the police station he had been mulling over certain indiscretions that he deemed to be irrelevant, yet might, nevertheless, require a deeper burial - there were things a person might not be proud of yet had to do to just survive. The fact that he spoke in a slow drawl was an advantage. It would be expected, so he could think on the fly and pause when necessary, making sure he didn't blurt out something that others, especially the police, didn't need to know about. There was nothing really serious, of course. He didn't smoke weed, only chop-chop which was, he supposed, technically illegal, but only a little. He bought the odd item that fell off the back of a truck, as did nearly everyone - it was a national pastime, local anyway. And omitting to declare some of his income to the taxman hardly made him Al Capone. Unfortunately, being a relatively upstanding citizen didn't always count these days, so it paid to be cautious. Then came the bump as he collided with someone and he nearly had a heart attack.

"So sorry," mumbled Paul. The old man wheezed something unintelligible and lapsed into a coughing fit. "Are you okay? Do you need to sit?" A look along the footpath for a bench of

some kind, failed to find one. Stupid question, he thought. Perhaps he'd caught something from Jackson.

Ben shook his head and gasped out a refusal. Then he was peering quizzically at Paul. "You're him, aren't you? Saw you come in last night. Nice craft, that. Good name - Copernicus." He paused and glanced past Paul in the direction of the police station, then appeared to straighten marginally as he came to a decision. "You seen her yet?" He absorbed Paul's frown and accompanying silence. "Rosie needs to know what happened."

"Rosie?"

"Wayne's missus. You know Wayne - Norse Raider?" He looked past Paul again, as if expecting something to eventuate. "You were there. You can tell her, and the boy - they deserve that much."

Paul's head was suddenly filled with noise. He was being put on the stand again, this time by a complete stranger. "I don't see it's my place. Surely Sergeant Jackson will..."

"Probably already has - police protocol and all that. What makes a difference is he's sweet on her: everyone knows it. Guaranteed, all he'd have done is soft-soap so's he didn't hurt Rosie's feelings. She needs the truth and you're the one who can give it to her." Ben's head jerked as he caught sight of movement along the street. Jackson had just come out of the police station and was looking in his direction. Ben gave a casual wave and said hastily: "Third Street, old fibro with a green roof." Following an emphatic pause, he added: "It's your duty, son."

Before Paul could say anything, the old man was shuffling off. He had a mind to catch up with him, but when he turned and saw Jackson hovering on the steps of the cop-shop, courage failed.

5

Even on land and in daylight, Paul's nightmare continued to run. Maybe he hadn't paid his dues in full yet and there were more trials to come; or perhaps fate was simply presenting the odd flail for him to whip himself with, if that was what he truly wanted. There was a third possibility - that he was on a pilgrimage, gathering pain and suffering along the way to make the destination more meaningful - but he wasn't generally masochistic and had no idea where he was going anyway. At that specific point in time, he didn't even know where he was.

Pushing the disturbing thoughts aside, a quick glance confirmed he was on a footpath. To his left was the bay, and beyond that, the open ocean. Both seemed to welcome him, but a search helicopter raking low and parallel to the coast was a harsh reminder that his life at sea was on hold for the moment. If he was in any doubt of this, the protective railing along the walkway was both symbolic and tangible with respect to how far he could stray. Sergeant Jackson had made it clear he needed Paul to *stick around*, and an old man he'd literally bumped into had given him every reason to flee; then in the next breath had made that

impossible. The two locals seemed to be in league with his conscience; and all three sniped at him on every turn.

In a confused daze, he roamed and pondered, then wandered some more, almost coming to a decision, before dismissing it to go in search of an alternative which would be similarly rejected. On his way along the esplanade he had noticed a tavern and thought a drink might help concentration. He had barely made it to the forecourt before turning on his heel and retracing his steps. Now, here he was, leaning on the railing again, watching Copernicus rocking at her mooring out in the bay, wrestling with the temptation to up-anchor and head off; yet knowing full well that he couldn't.

At some point he found himself in a small store, only he failed to remember why he was there. When a voice had asked if he needed help, he could have screamed out: "Oh, yes, yes!". A blink later he heard himself asking: "Do you have a street map of the town?" As it happened, they did, only a monochrome photocopy, but it was free. For some peculiar reason, Paul felt guilty about taking something that was of no financial benefit to the shopkeeper and bought a souvenir fridge magnet. Why that, he couldn't imagine - he hated clutter and those things just made the galley look messy. Once far enough down the street that he couldn't be seen from the shop, he dropped it into a bin and was sorely tempted to follow it with the map. This, however, wasn't part of the plan, not one of his creation, anyway. The paradigm he was presumably following blindly had been prescribed by fate, dictated by an old man who had told him it was his 'duty'.

Unimaginative though the practice might have been, naming streets after numbers in sequence made finding a particular one easier for those unfamiliar with an area. It simply required coming across First Street to know that the rest were somewhere further on. There the convenience ended. Having trudged for ages with no sign of an intersection of any description, Paul was wondering if he might be heading in the wrong direction when he eventually came upon Second. By this time, the original sealed road he was walking had deteriorated, and eventually the bitumen vanished altogether. That, and the tumble-down nature of the houses supported the conclusion that it was not the 'better' part of town.

Although critical of the tendency in others, he found himself making other assumptions based purely on impressions gleaned from limited knowledge. The odd, early-model vehicle parked in a yard or driveway suggested that the residents of these shacks were, most likely, very working-class, if they worked at all. This, in turn, led to the uncharitable suspicion that they were probably all drunks like Wayne, and he had to reprimand himself. It was unfair to judge people he had not even met, and he should clear his mind of such nonsense. Despite the warning, he had already summed up Rosie to a T. As he was crunching along the red gravel at the poorer end of Third Street, he looked down to see his shoes had taken on a rusty hue from the dust. This promoted an unforgivable expectation that the woman would be in keeping, metaphorically similar in both appearance and character.

He found the house which was as the old man had described. An envelope poking out of a mailbox on the front gate-post caught his attention and it reminded Paul that he only knew the woman by her first name. Considering his reason for being there, even though he still

wasn't absolutely sure what that was; knowing her surname would help keep the meeting on a formal, hopefully distant level. Withdrawing the letter, his confidence dipped as he glanced at the single line of print. It said simply The Occupant. Obviously, his mission hadn't become any easier.

Reluctantly, he walked the weed-infested path which led to the house that Jack built. Most of the supporting timbers of the verandah were rotting at the bases, as were wooden window frames held together by peeling paint. Taking advice from this observation, he climbed the creaking steps with care. Although the fly-screen was closed, the main door beyond was open, providing a view of the interior. From the little he could see, the house was clean and tidy. Why did that surprise him? Assumption was clearly the truth's worst adversary. His first knock was tentative and barely made a sound. He waited. Nobody came. Taking a deeper breath, he rapped more forcefully the second time, too hard apparently. The fly-door rattled, jumped and bounced towards him, just a fraction, but enough to clear the step and sag, the bottom corner dropping a few centimetres onto the threshold. Paul moaned inwardly and waited. Again, no-one came. Something was going right for a change. If he ever saw the old man again - he would do his best not to - he could honestly say that he had tried. Extremely relieved, he was about to turn when he caught sight of movement in the house. His pulse quickened as he watched a figure approaching along the hallway and he was mentally rehearsing his first words to Rosie. Unfortunately they were of no use. He found himself confronted by a boy who stood in moody silence, peering at him through the fly wire. Paul tried to gather his thoughts and asked: "Um-er, is your mother in?" Assumption again: there was no saying that this was the boy the old man had mentioned, or that Rosie even lived here.

The youth's expression changed from apathetic to resentful. "Round the back," was all he offered, before turning on his heel to scuff off along the passage. Paul hovered awkwardly, absorbing the fact that he had just been dismissed and was now searching for any lame excuse that would propel him out into the street and away. None was forthcoming, so he creaked from the verandah and headed for the side of the house.

Rosie was in the garden, knuckles bleaching whiter as her hands absently continued to strangle an item of damp clothing. She was staring into the distance, seeing nothing, eyes misting once more as they had been all morning. After a night of crying, there ought to be no more tears to shed, but there were apparently reserves for this kind of grief. It annoyed her. She was convinced she was stronger, able to purge it from her system and move on - for her own sake, and for Robert's. It was the reason she had walked down to the jetty at first light, to be there for the resumption of the search which would hopefully provide closure. In the back of her mind, however, lurked the possibility that they might find Wayne alive and, terrible though it might seem, the thought drove her to praying that it would not be so. Les Jackson had noticed her presence on the dock and had sent her home, promising to let her

know when there was any news. Since then, she had been keeping busy, fighting back tears, and praying.

A small sound broke her trance, a cough; the quiet, excuse-me sort that was barely audible, yet it was so unexpected that it made her jump, causing her to spin around, heart in her mouth. Jackson was her first thought, that he'd come with the news she either wanted to hear, or didn't; but the man facing her was nothing like Les. He was younger, wore civilian clothes and, what was more important, he was instantly categorised by an object in his hand - an envelope, by the looks of it. The conclusion that he was here to serve one of those soul-destroying legal documents brought anger welling up inside her. The vultures should be more considerate at times like this, but they couldn't wait to put the boot in. "Don't you know what's happened?" hissed Rosie venomously. "You people are unbelievable!" She surged towards him, one hand out-thrust, the other still clutching the washing which dragged along in the dirt. "Just give it to me and go!"

Paul's mouth had been open from the moment he had set eyes on her. Nothing like the image he had conjured, she was slender and quite tall, a fresh, innocent vision of beauty, an angel in a woollen jumper over a knee-length skirt – not the faded jeans he'd expected – and her long blond hair flowed as a shimmering golden waterfall to her shoulders. Anticipating sweet music from her unpainted lips, he wasn't prepared for the rasping tirade she delivered. At odds with his expectations, it caught him unawares and he continued to gawp. Feeling a trickle of saliver leaking from one corner of his mouth, he reached up to wipe it and was reminded of the envelope in his hand as it brushed his cheek.

Rosie glared at him, hand outstretched. "Well? Are you going to give it to me?"

The silence was heavy. She waited, nostrils flaring; he stammered nothing intelligible and was blinking furiously. Finally, he gathered what she was talking about and offered the letter. She grabbed it and scowled at the printing on the face. Her expression underwent a transformation from wounded indignation to puzzlement. Then her eyes were narrowing at the stranger in her yard. "What is this - some kind of sick joke?"

Unable to hold her belligerent glare, Paul looked beyond to the clothes hoist. It was leaning to one side, favouring the weight of damp washing already hung. Most of the empty lines sagged, others were missing. "I don't know for sure," he said meekly. "Junk mail, I guess."

Rosie's hostility was unyielding. "You could have put it in the box." She flicked her attention to the envelope again. "It doesn't say hand-delivered."

Small wonder he preferred whales - his people-skills were abysmal. "I-er, I wasn't delivering it. Well, actually, I suppose I am now, but I didn't, not in the first place." He rolled his eyes and groaned at his bumbling ineptitude. "What I mean is that it had already been delivered. I just took it out of your mailbox." Even if he had made a meal of it, in his own mind the explanation seemed clear enough.

She didn't think so. "What gives you the right to take my mail? Don't you know that's invasion of privacy?"

"I didn't mean anything by it. I just wanted..."

"What?" she demanded.

"Um... to know your name..." Her expression hinted at another outburst, so he hurried on. "Your surname, that is. I only know you as Rosie, but I couldn't call you that..."

"Why not? It's my name. How did you know it, anyway? Who told you?"

Was this going badly, or what? Despite never having any prior experience with a shovel - he hated gardening with a passion - he was managing to dig a hole for himself with consummate ease, one he might never be able to climb out of. "An old man - I don't know his name."

Rosie paused for effect, then said: "Shouldn't you have added 'either'? You seem to have a problem with names. Or am I jumping to conclusions again?"

The tension within dissipated and a faint sigh escaped as Paul decided it was time to abandon this lost cause. Avoiding her gaze, he said: "I'm sorry. It was a bad idea. I'll leave you to..." He was going to say 'mourn', but felt it inappropriate, finishing instead with: "Sorry for your loss."

She watched him turn and begin walking, his parting words causing a sudden jolt, a feeling that she had discarded an essential that was badly needed. "Wait!" More a command than a request, she attempted to soften it. "Please." He stopped in his tracks, not immediately, though. His pace slowed gradually, hesitantly until he eventually came to a halt, as if he had been deliberating the wisdom of staying when it was obvious he would have preferred not to. It was to be expected - she had noticed from his expression and body language that he had never wanted to be there in the first place. Perhaps it was why she had been so aggressive, asserting the rare advantage to belittle someone weaker even than herself. One in particular would not have tolerated it. This stranger was clearly nothing like him. In the hopes that she had not alienated her visitor beyond redemption, she said: "Why *did* you come? Was it to do with Wayne?"

Would he know who she was talking about? He must do, otherwise he wouldn't have said what he did. She let her question hang and waited. When he turned to face her, an expression of understanding and a brief nod made it evident that they were, at last, on the same track. Sympathy was there too, and she hoped it would not be a precursor of condolences. She wanted hard facts, perhaps reassurance, certainly not pity. He remained silent, apparently feeling he was still on very thin ice, leaving her to make the next move. Rosie closed her eyes for a long second and produced a tired smile. "Can we start again?"

There followed a period of cautious advance and retreat as they felt their way with each other, testing boundaries, neither wishing to offend, very aware that any careless word or insinuation could rekindle the previous animosity. When he admitted that he had been there at the time of the accident, Paul fully expected a backlash: criticism of the Jackson kind, questioning his failure to prevent the disaster; but Rosie was less interested in cause than she was in effect. "Was it..." She seemed to be choking on the words and took a few moments to compose herself before adding: "...over quickly?"

Paul, of course, assured her that her husband would probably have felt nothing, it was all so sudden. He spent the next few minutes justifying the statement, awkwardly aware that he

was babbling, finding the need to repeat those incidents and observations that would hopefully exonerate him from any blame. In truth, he was talking more about himself than he was about Wayne's plight. Rosie didn't *appear* to mind.

She actually didn't. In fact, a transformation had taken place. An enormous weight had been lifted, so much so that life after her husband's death was a distinct possibility. There would be problems, many of them, but the independence she had longed for, yet had been forced to abandon, had suddenly been thrust in her lap. It was chance, fate, and she had a peculiar warm feeling that this man who had given her the blessed relief she now experienced could be far more important to her future than might be imagined. Another thought popped into her head, a warning that caused a tight knot to form in her stomach. Not daring to look at him, she continued pegging a towel and said: "I suppose, once this is over, you'll be moving on."

Ten minutes before, Paul would have grabbed the implication and said 'not a doubt in the world'. Extricating himself from an awkward situation had been a priority; so too putting distance between this town-of-affront and a peaceful life. Then he had met Rosie. His reaction was a ghost from the past, similar to the one he had experienced on his first encounter with Cheryl - increased heartbeat, a bout of stammering and flushed cheeks. In the blink of an eye they were married; in another he realised he had made a poor decision. Taking a deep breath, he vowed not to repeat the mistake; then heard himself saying: "Not immediately, no."

She gazed at him for a moment with a look of casual acceptance; but, dare he think, she also seemed relieved. Turning back to the washing basket, she pulled an item from it and began to peg it on the line. Her actions were pleasing to him as she performed an ordinary, most natural household chore; and he realised why. Cheryl would never have stooped so low - she had women come in to 'do' for her. Warmed by the mere presence of Rosie being Rosie, he found himself drifting to the wash-basket with the intention of helping, for some reason needing to. Dipping into the tangle of clothes, he fished out something, and as she turned he gave it to her. She smiled, he frowned, then recognised he was holding a pair of lady's panties. Complexion reddening, his mouth opened. Following a few rapid blinks he said: "Sorry."

Unconcerned, Rosie pegged her underwear. "Whatever for?"

"Well... you know..."

"No, not really." Her hand reached towards him. "Can you pass me the towel?" Squinting through a fog of embarrassment, Paul groped in the basket and started to withdraw something. Rosie's head shook. "That's a shirt." As she reached down their hands touched briefly, enough for her to feel a slight tingle. She was not to know that Paul's arm had experienced an electrified jolt. "You said not immediately - leaving, I mean. Do you have business in the area?"

His heart had already skipped a beat from her touch; now it was beginning to race. The momentary infatuation had caught him off guard. It was Cheryl all over again, although more so: Rosie was excitingly different. And there was the trap - she was too nice, too pretty, too

desirable. If he was to salvage anything from his close encounter with Wayne, he had to cast aside emotions and regard Rosie as a black widow. It was his own fault for listening to the old man. He ought to have gone back to Copernicus where he was safe and could have waited for the law to run its course. "Not business, but I do have to work. I should really continue my research." The mere mention of the subject tended to have most people running for cover. It had never failed to work at Cheryl's functions and cocktail parties. With luck, Rosie would be like his wife: a hater of anything remotely scientific, particularly the nautical variety; and this would be an end to a very brief, decidedly risky acquaintanceship which he could leave behind, relatively unscathed.

For different reasons, Rosie had an aversion to boats; however, she was worlds apart from the egocentric Cheryl and sounded like she was genuinely interested. "What kind of research?"

Maybe she was just being polite. Either way, Paul considered the ideal opportunity had cropped up to bore the panties... pants off her and slip quietly away. "Whale migration and behaviour: very time-consuming, totally unnecessary from the point of view of most people..."

Quite the opposite of Paul at that very moment, Rosie had been searching for anything to extend their meeting and maybe talk about something in common other than the possible death of Wayne. Suddenly - and she was imagining, truly hoping that he had intentionally given it to her - this new subject would keep him in her company a while longer. "We love whales, my son Robert and I." She was off and running. "We watch them from the bluff when they come; and we record how many. This season they appear to be moving much closer to shore, too close, I think. I worry they might strand. Silly, I know, but I want to swim out and tell them to be careful, that it isn't safe. Not that I could - I'm a shocking swimmer."

Sucked in again, Paul! It was a wonderful discovery that they had a mutual interest, unbelievable in the normal course of events; and yet, with respect to his misgivings, was highly unpropitious at that time.

Rosie, on the other hand, was likening their meeting to a passage from a cheap romance novel. Not that she read them; well, admittedly she had browsed one out of curiosity once. It had proved to be rather simpering and contrived; although it was probable that avid readers would have welcomed each nauseating turn of events as obligatory. She worried this might be Paul's critical reaction, predicting he would believe she was just trying to impress by claiming the behaviour of whales to be a passion. She needed him to know that she wasn't making it up and definitely wasn't one of those people who regarded the intelligent giants of the ocean merely as big fish that spent a lifetime doing tedious things. In the hopes of dispelling this assumed inference, she added: "Anyway, even if I could talk to them, I don't suppose the whales would understand."

The affinity did seem too good to be true and the scientist in Paul was obliged to test its authenticity. The ordinary man, however, continued making a nuisance of himself in the background, doing his best to undermine the hasty-departure plan, and was more than willing to take Rosie's words on trust. Without even considering that it had already caused

him more trouble than a little, he went with his heart. "I think they could. They will, one day, perhaps."

Rosie was frowning. "Why do they do it - strand, I mean?"

"I wish I knew. It's what I need to know, why I continue to monitor them."

"And then...?"

Paul sighed. "Sorry. I haven't thought that far ahead. I'm not good with predicting the future. In all honesty, I have a problem managing the present without making a hash of it. You can testify to that."

They continued to chat, Paul taking the washing from the basket, Rosie hanging it. The two parts of a wooden peg separated from the spring. She fumbled in an attempt to fix it, expressing simple gratitude when he took it from her and finished the job. Had a stranger witnessed the scene they might have taken little notice, accepting it as an example of domestic harmony, just part of the daily routine and quite unremarkable. For the two of them it was anything but. It was a sign, perhaps a taste of things to come that would be so much better when they knew more about each other.

"Would you like a cup of tea or coffee?" she asked, stooping to pick up the laundry basket. "The water's back on now."

"The water?"

Rosie produced a casual shake of the head. "Doesn't matter. I could show you some of Robert's drawings."

Paul was about to take the basket before she did, but the comment about her son triggered a warning which stopped him. He glanced at the back door. The boy was standing inside the house looking out at them. How long he had been there was anyone's guess. Although no features were visible, he seemed to exude animosity, at least Paul thought so, and he took the presumption as another sign, a cue that it was time to leave on a good note. "Can I take a rain-check? I have a few things to sort out, but I really would like to see you again, if that's not too forward of me."

Rosie smirked, amused by the unusual display of propriety. Resisting the temptation to make fun of it, she said: "I'd like that too."

"I'll phone you."

"Sorry, but my phone's on the blink." It had actually been disconnected, but she was embarrassed to admit it. "Drop in anytime."

His eyes flicked to the door again. Although there was no sign of the boy, his belligerent aura remained. A gust of cool breeze fanned the garden and Paul switched his attention to the sky. Cloud was building and it looked like rain was imminent. "Forgive me, Rosie, but I really must go. I promised Martha I'd call."

"Your wife?" prompted Rosie, realising suddenly that Paul being married hadn't been mentioned. Although the possibility dampened her expectations considerably, she tried to produce a smile of mild curiosity.

"Martha's my grandmother. If I don't keep in touch on a regular basis she worries." Her smile brightened to one of understanding. She was also nodding, presumably accepting

their parting was necessary. Paul returned the smile and began to walk away. A brief backwards glance confirmed she was still hovering; and as he continued walking he was sure he could feel her eyes on his back. Almost at the front gate, he felt a few spots of rain. He hesitated, the thought occurring that Rosie's washing would need taking in before it became soaked. It was an opportunity, a good excuse to delay leaving; then he remembered the boy and resumed his trek at a faster, more determined pace.

7

By the time he was approaching the jetty the weather had deteriorated. Although drenched and shivering visibly, he was still warm inside from his meeting with Rosie. If he came across the old man now, he would shake his hand and thank him for his insistence, but there was no sign of him, or anyone. The only living creatures on hand to see his arrival were three gulls perched on bollards, leaning into the gusty wind and looking quite despondent. Paul had no reason to be, not until he came close enough to view the bay and noticed another craft alongside Copernicus. A few more paces and it was recognisable as the police launch. With that, his euphoria dissipated as if it had never been.

Bristling with anger, he rushed to his dinghy and dragged it from the sandy beach into the water. His mood regressed to wounded indignation as he headed out to Copernicus. Closer and he was able to see Jackson stepping across to the police launch. Apparently, the Sergeant had been on board Copernicus, snooping no doubt, uninvited definitely! Paul fumed in silence as he pulled alongside, refusing to acknowledge Jackson's help in steadying the dinghy.

The policeman waited for him to tie off the runabout, then said: "You have some pretty high-tech equipment there." He meant expensive. "I was thinking about what you said: that you were recording sounds when Wayne was approaching. They might help with our inquiry, maybe give us a time-frame."

Paul was facing Copernicus, about to climb the ladder, so his vindictive sneer would not have been noticed. The edge on his voice, however, was plainly obvious. "I'll make you a copy."

Jackson pounced on the reluctance. "I'd prefer the original. Copies can be... unreliable."

Paul's head jerked around. "Are you suggesting I would doctor the tape?" Catching the man's apathetic shrug, he parried it with an aggressive look of his own. "I suppose I have no choice. You'll get the tape, *after* I've made a copy - originals have a convenient habit of disappearing on occasions." He turned his back and began climbing the ladder. Before he had reached the top, the police launch was powering away.

He left making a copy of the recording for a number of reasons. First came a hot shower and a change into dry clothes. Switching on the electric jug in passing, he was heading for the recorder, trying to rekindle some of the magic of the meeting with Rosie when he realised that Jackson's insinuations had soured even that, so he deserved to wait. Another issue took priority. Usually he would contact Martha by radio, which was what he attempted to do; but some problem seemed to have eventuated since last using it and he was unable to get

through. Breathing a disappointed sigh, he dragged the mobile phone off the desk and pressed a speed-dial button. There followed five minutes of wandering the boat and waving the phone around to conclude that the signal was too low and he'd have to use a landline. A further ten minutes saw Paul dressed in wet-weather clothes, steering the dighy back to shore.

CHAPTER THREE Rosie's Beach

1

Although there was a fully-equipped office just along the hallway, Martha Longstreet preferred her sitting room. Perhaps it was a mite opulent, but as such it was a reminder that she had served her time managing the family business and could finally reap the rewards of retirement. Not that she had detached herself entirely: as the controlling shareholder it was necessary for her to stay in touch. She employed a gaggle of executives who handled day-to-day affairs quite adequately, but they were ambitious and more inclined towards their own agenda than they were dedicated to the companies in their charge. Ensuring they didn't stray too far off the mark needed a watchful eye, and at the ripe old age of 76 Martha still possessed a pair of very sharp ones. So, when her primary concern was less about profits than the politics of making them, decisions came easier being surrounded by the home-comforts money could buy.

There was also more space to roam, to ponder on the wander. It usually helped her separate the wheat from the chaff and focus on important details, but on this occasion she still had no idea what they might be. Paul had called yesterday in a flap, presumably seeking advice on a legal matter; then had talked around in circles and finally hung up without saying exactly what it was. Today, he was on the phone again, trying to sound blase as if nothing was wrong which clearly was not the case. The marine radio would have been better, and hopefully would be later once it had been repaired. Martha held her frustration at bay as she listened to the tinny echo from the phone speakers. Something should be done about that - surely, in this day and age there was a system available that sounded better than a person shouting into a baked-bean can? She would put her secretary onto it - hopefully Julia could source one before her grandson called again: he was bad enough in person, worse on the phone. "Paul," she said, then gathered he had failed to hear and repeated it a little louder: "Paul, you are gabbling, dear, and making no sense as usual. If, as you claim, you aren't in trouble, why would you need a lawyer? Before you answer, please remember that I am fluent in only three languages and whatever you are speaking isn't one of them." There was a long period of silence. "Paul, are you still there?"

"Yes, Martha. Sorry about that. It's a bit noisy in here - I'm using a phone in the pub."

"You won't do anything silly like driving under the influence, will you?"

"Not very likely, seeing as I don't have a car."

"But you do have a boat, a very expensive one that I paid for," she reminded him. "You haven't run into something have you? Is that why you need the lawyer?" Silence again. "Paul?"

Eventually, he said: "Still here, and no, it's nothing like that." After another hesitation, he added: "Look, I'm certain I can handle this myself; well, pretty sure; not that there's anything much to handle; and, anyway, you are probably very busy. Well, of course you are - stupid of me - you always are..."

"You are jabbering again."

"Sorry, sorry. I'll - er, I'll sort it out and let you know how it goes."

Martha sighed. "Very well, dear. Whatever you think. I have every confidence in you, even if you have none in yourself."

"I'll get back to you soon. Love you," he added, then a final: "Sorry."

There was a click as he hung up followed by the familiar dial tone. Martha listened to it for a few seconds - they could get that right; why not people's voices? Sweeping to the desk, she flicked the off-switch. Just as she was doing so, Julia entered waving some papers. "Was that Paul? This is from Cheyl's solicitor about the divorce settlement." Martha took them from her - snatched would have been a better description - and began flicking through. "Their demands are really quite outrageous," commented the secretary, falling silent as she watched Martha scowl her way through the pages. Finally, the old lady looked up, an expression on her face that would have had Shylock quaking in his boots. Julia suggested uncertainly: "Perhaps you ought to call him back?"

"Paul?" said Martha in disbelief. "Definitely not! I can just imagine him babbling his way through the legal ramifications with some self-opinionated solicitor - he'll be eaten alive! I'll handle it. These jackals won't find me as accommodating, nor anything close."

2

What an idiot! Mentioning the lawyer in the first place was a huge mistake. He had only meant the follow-up conversation to be on a par with holiday postcards - lovely weather, wish you were here - but trying as he was now to repair the damage caused by yesterday's call had turned a bit of a hash into an unrecognisable slurry. Not that Martha would be over-concerned: she thrived on intrigue; whereas Paul, despite being born of the same stock, had inherited none of his grandmother's wile or fortitude. Had he possessed one tenth of her cunning, he wouldn't have spent all morning hanging around the pub. Someone - he couldn't remember who - had mentioned Rosie worked there, and he was hoping he might be able to run into her again. The original idea was to put into effect the final touches which would make his departure from this town and the situation as painless as possible. That had been his resolution, the pragmatic conclusion to a restless night, commonsense really - attend to official business, then exit stage right as soon as expedient.

His instantaneous infatuation for Rosie was surely and simply erstwhile, wasn't it? Just a schoolboy crush on a new teacher? Unfortunately, somewhere between his morning shower and beaching the dinghy, she had drifted back into his thoughts and although he'd tried dismissing it as a passing recollection, the memory of her began to intensify. It caused him to bypass the street phone in favour of the one in the tavern, and had filled his thoughts to the point of confusion while he was attempting to soft-soap Martha. Despite every reason not to, Paul was following the siren call of Rosie and couldn't seem to help himself.

Initially on arrival, a disappointed glance around the tavern told him what he suspected: there was no sign of her. The only reason he had stayed was because she had confessed that she needed to keep busy, which had prompted the vain hope that she might return to

her bar-work at the pub; but even if she didn't seem the type who subscribed to small-town mentality, Rosie would have the sense not to break the unspoken rules pertaining to grieving widows. Once they found her husband's body, if they ever did - strong currents and sharks would make that very difficult - she would be expected to observe a respectable period of mourning before the local populace gave the nod of approval to move on.

He imagined there would be more than a few willing to help her with this, and he could picture a line of suitors baying at her door. This worried him for very personal reasons. From what he knew of the town, most of the eligible males would likely be drunken chauvinists, and Wayne's replacement was unlikely to be an improvement. Admittedly, this was an assumption based merely on the odd passing comment testifying to her late husband's apparent disregard for Rosie's feelings; and hers for him, he supposed; but if she was remotely interested in any kind of relationship, despite the inadvisability, Paul was determined not only to be at the head of the queue, but to already have his foot in the door before the mob even arrived. Stupid, he knew. He should have been disgusted with himself for having these thoughts; but he had never met anyone like Rosie before. Somehow he had to see her again, be with her, find out if the magic of their first encounter was more than just a flash of light in the gloom of recent times. How he was to achieve this near-miracle would have been bread-and-butter to Martha; unfortunately, he was only her grandson, and a pretty useless one at that!

Turning away from the phone, he headed for the exit and into the street. Although the weather was far from 'lovely', it had cleared marginally. There was still rain in the air, however, and the wind ahead of it packed a chill. Zipping up his jacket, he dipped his head and stuffed hands in his pockets. An object in one reminded him of another reason for coming ashore - he had to give the audio tape to the police. It wasn't the original as requested. He had toyed with the idea of presenting that to Jackson - a large spool from a reel-to-reel recorder which it was doubtful the policeman would have the equipment to play. Then he'd decided that the one-upmanship might backfire if the sergeant took it anyway and sent it off to headquarters, or wherever. So, Paul had brought a cassette copy which he would offer to Jackson with the sincere hope that it might aid and speed his investigation, at the same time preserving the misconception that he was not the slave of a system that had him touching his forelock whenever it commanded. With luck, the policeman wouldn't invite himself on board Copernicus to verify that the copy hadn't been selectively edited.

Paul was on his way to deliver the tape when he noticed a police vehicle parked at the end of the esplanade. Jackson was on the jetty talking with someone and it seemed the ideal opportunity to save himself a long, unnecessary walk. It was not to be. Official protocol dictated that a receipt had to be issued and the Sergeant wasn't in the habit of carrying the book around with him. "See Judy at the station," said the policeman irritably before turning away to resume his former conversation. The man he was talking to was standing in a ski boat tied up alongside the jetty, and despite the fact that they had never met, he sent Paul an unfriendly glare. Small-town mentality came to mind again, and he added natural hostility to a growing list of reasons not to hang around. Severance was a good name for a place he

would be glad to leave behind. Heading off the jetty, a sour look on his face, the rebuff instantly drove amorous thoughts from his mind and Rosie became merely collateral damage. In a matter of a few sultry paces, however, she was returned to his most-wanted list.

It was the result of another chance meeting with the old man who had given him her address. He was sitting on an upturned crate splicing a loop on a rope's end. Although his actions were very slow and deliberate, they were clearly well-practised because his fingers continued to work even though he wasn't looking at what he was doing, rather watching Paul's advance. His cheeks spread and wrinkles appeared beside his eyes so presumably he was smiling somewhere under the grey beard. Paul didn't feel much like returning the greeting, but tried anyway and proposed hurrying on to avoid speaking with him. Then a rasping drawl said: "Hello again. Paul, isn't it?" Hearing his own name from a relative stranger stopped him dead in his tracks. The old man anticipated the question before it was asked and explained: "Rosie told me, said you had a thing about names."

Paul's heart-rate increased measurably. "You've seen her?"

"Half hour ago. She was down here looking out at Copernicus. Lovely lady, that."

"My boat, or Rosie?"

"Both," wheezed Ben. "I was fifty years at sea with a girl in every port. Not one could hold a candle to Rosie. You're a lucky man - just do right by her."

"I'm not sure what you mean," said Paul with a puzzled frown.

Ben's shoulders heaved in a shrug. "It's obvious to me that you and Rosie are meant. If you can't see that, you need glasses. Stop trying to swim against the tide, son."

Who was this person? He seemed to know exactly what Paul was thinking, perhaps even before he thought it, and Rosie was apparently trusting enough to value his confidence. Or was he simply guessing? "What is she to you - Rosie, I mean."

The old salt paused to consider. Eventually, he said: "Maybe she's the daughter I wished I had. Dare say there are some around, somewhere. Can't help them, don't even know them, but Rosie...? When she first came, she seemed a bit lost, like she needed a pilot. Guess I signed on. Now you're here - time for me to jump ship."

Although it was still cold and windy, Paul was heating up under his jacket. "You're intimating that there's something between us, but I hardly know Rosie. I've only met her the once under very awkward circumstances."

Ben held Paul's gaze for a moment, then returned his attention to the rope in his gnarled hands. "I've told you what you need to know. You choose to ignore it, that's your funeral." Then he looked up. "Just remember it could be Rosie's too." His head dipped again. After another pause, he said quite casually: "She's on the beach." Paul's head jerked up and he was scanning the shore of the bay for a sign of her. "Not here," added the old man. "Next one north, Rosie's beach."

"They named a beach after her?"

"Not them - me. She needed something of her own. I gave it to her. Small reward for what she gave me."

This old man was a strange one, a quiet gatherer of hopes and dreams which he contemplated, then handed back in a workable form; but, Paul suspected, only to those he deemed worthy. Was he a likely candidate of such a precious a gift? It seemed so. "And what *did* she give you, er...?"

The falter at the end of the question caused another smile to spread beneath the whiskers. "She was right about the name thing - it's Ben. I answer to Old Ben too, not the ruder versions." He started a chuckle which became a gurgling cough. Once he'd recovered, he added: "Rosie gave me something I haven't felt since I was a child - the feeling that she was glad I was around, that I made a difference to her - a kind of love, I suppose. Not many would understand that, but I don't care. I'll take it with me when I go, and maybe die happy."

Ben's eyes appeared misty and he seemed on the verge of tears. Paul was stumped for words. None he could think of were a match for the heart-felt confession, so he simply nodded his understanding. A strange old man, he thought as he was walking away, and he turned to glance back, expecting to see Ben working on his rope; instead of which he was on his feet, waving something around in the air, bringing it down to look at it before holding it aloft and waving it again. A mobile phone...? Surely not – a tech-savvy ancient sea dog was almost an oxymoron. Obviously it didn't pay to assume anything about a person he hardly knew. Paul would have to remember that when he met Rosie again, *if* he did.

3

Rosie had been standing for a while looking seaward past the skeletal stumps of what had once been a jetty. Somewhere out there Wayne had met his fate; and perhaps the tragedy had unwittingly sealed hers; or if not sealed, the future from here on in might provide alternative choices that had not been available before. Sinking to a crouch close to the water's edge, she gazed vacantly along the dark line of weed defining both the high-tide mark and the time of year. It was indicative of rough weather at sea. Following a severe storm, the beach would be piled high. On this occasion, however, the deposit was light, easy to sift through for shells and the odd bit of coral, some of which she'd already found; but it was merely occupational therapy for her hands while her thoughts were elsewhere. She was picturing herself being in the helicopter as it stuttered to and fro over its current search pattern. Then the sound of boat engines would have her standing at the bow rail, eyes raking the water ahead. The prospect of actually doing either of these was abhorrent because she had a dread of flying and had never shared Wayne's obsession with the sea, being content to keep feet on dry land and merely accept its modest bounty; but she would have overcome both fears if either could lend her peace.

She had come that morning, hoping to rekindle a sense of normality, perhaps step back in time to when life was predictable, boring some might say. Two days ago the beach had been a sanctuary, her saviour really, a place to escape the verbal and psychological pain; but the instrument of her suffering had changed. It was no longer an abusive husband: it was now the void he had once filled; and whereas she had no tender feelings for the man, she found herself mourning the loss of motivation his odious presence had forced on her.

With Wayne gone, she could walk the house without fear of doing something that might incur his displeasure; she could create her little ornaments and not be ridiculed, and gather the items to make them without being accused of wasting time on irrelevancies. His evening meal no longer had to be steaming on the table the instant he walked in the door; and it wouldn't matter if she hadn't managed to remove the oil stains from his shirt, or that it had even been washed. These were the tribulations that had made Rosie's life a misery; but now they had ceased to be a part of it, there seemed no purpose to anything.

She felt there might have been. For a few minutes she had spent time with a man, one so at odds with her husband that she had been transported. To where, she was unsure, but it was a better place than she had ever been, and she had wished to see more. In truth, she still did, but there was a discomfort churning away inside, a feeling of disloyalty. Wanting to see this man again was like cheating. To soften the guilt, she'd tried substituting a stranger, anyone she might meet by accident. Would she feel the same way? Each time she tried to picture a scenario, there was a need for more than just a vague silhouette, some physical features that would make the test-subject a real person. And each time the ghostly shape took on form, it was always the same - the man she knew only as Paul.

It was a simple enough name and suited him well - Biblical, she supposed, gentle too, although she didn't know why. Then again, he was interested in whales which were the epitome of family and caring, so perhaps his affinity stretched beyond research. He wasn't her idea of a scientist, certainly not stuffy. From the little he had told her, he was well-travelled; but he didn't strike her as world-wise. In fact, he had a certain child-like naivety about him and practically no people skills. With respect to relationships and the fostering of them, he appeared bumbling and incapable. Was this why she couldn't get him out of her mind: because she truly was a protector of wimps and inanimate objects as Wayne had often said? Although Paul was neither, she couldn't help but think that he needed protecting. From what or whom she didn't know, only that she could do it; and that she wanted to.

Gently placing the skeleton of a sea urchin into her basket, she stood with the intention of continuing along the beach when a sound caught her attention. The helicopter was coming closer, heading inland. Had the search finally been called off? Maybe it was just going to refuel. Rosie turned on the spot, watching as it passed overhead. When she finally looked down, she was facing in the opposite direction and caught sight of a figure approaching from the town end of the beach. The immediate response was a jolt of apprehension, an association of ideas prompted by the helicopter leaving - was someone coming to tell her that they'd found Wayne's body? She went rigid, steeling herself. Although the new arrival was too far away to recognise, it was obviously a man, and there was something about him, his gait, perhaps: he was hesitating, stumbling occasionally, and tentative, almost as if he was having second thoughts about being there. A few paces closer and she was able to positively identify Paul.

A sudden conflict of emotions had her on edge. The mere sight of him was a boost to her flagging spirits, and she was eager to renew their earlier conversation which had been a welcome diversion from her troubles. A second thought placed him in an opposing role, a

reminder of past and current problems which he was adding to by his presence. The sensible thing to do was run. Rosie stayed.

Although Old Ben had implied she would like to see him again, it didn't seem that way to Paul. Her body language reflected disappointment, certainly unease. Close enough to glimpse her expression, he felt even less welcome. There was something about proximity that defined future action, a line drawn between free choice and none at all; at least, this had been Paul's experience. Had he anticipated the cool reception when he was a reasonable distance away he could have changed his mind and left, just another walker on the beach, a nobody; but he had crossed the line and there was no retreat without an exchange of some kind. A nervous wave accompanied by a pathetic smile was the best he could offer as he continued walking towards her. She remained silent, waiting. Finally, he paused to hover awkwardly in front of her and said: "Hello again. Ben said you might be here. I hope you don't mind me coming. He, Ben that is, gave me the impression you wanted to see me. Well, maybe 'wanted' is a bit strong. Actually, I might have got the wrong end of the stick altogether and..." He groaned and tried to re-align his thoughts. All that did was have him scrabbling for a way out. "Look, I'm sorry about this. It was a mistake. I think I'd better go."

Rosie's pulse quickened. "No, don't," she said, rather too hastily. "Please stay. Ben was right. I hoped you'd come." She watched him, was annoyed with herself for initially harbouring the same attitude that had prompted her hostile reception when they'd first met, glad now that she'd managed to sweep it behind her. At least, she thought she had. "How was Martha?"

The question caught him on the hop and he had to think for a moment. "Martha, yes. Okay, I imagine."

"I thought you were going to phone her." Before she could stop herself, she added: "Or was that just an excuse to get away?"

"Oh, er, I'm sorry if I gave you that impression. I did, truly - have to call her, that is. And I did - um, actually phone..." Paul's cheeks had begun to burn. "Sorry. I'm babbling, aren't I? Martha expects it, but you don't know me. I probably sound like a prize idiot."

Rosie's animosity melted as if it had never been and she was beginning to feel warm inside. "Not to me, and I'm glad you're still wearing the same hat." From the way a hand brushed over his hair coupled with a puzzled frown, he required an explanation. "People who change their approach to suit an agenda worry me. I'm never quite sure if they're being genuine. You don't strike me as one of them. Although..." She hesitated as if unsure whether to say what she did next: "I suspect you aren't as simple as you make out."

Unsure how to take the observation, Paul said: "My bumbling isn't an act, I can assure you. It comes quite naturally. I think it's why Martha takes such an interest - I'm her never-ending challenge."

Her glance back along the beach confirmed they were still alone and the discovery sent a tingle through her because of what she was about to do. It was nothing outrageous or improper, merely a singular expression of friendship, a little more than a hand-shake, far less than intimacy, but intimate nevertheless. "Come on," she said, "You can confess your

innermost secrets to me as we walk." Following a little giggle, she added: "Or not, if you'd prefer." Then she slipped her free hand under his arm and let the fingers rest lightly in the crook of his elbow. Presumably he had frozen to the spot, because she felt resistance as she tried to head off. A gentle tug started him moving.

They strolled in silence for a while, both savouring the closeness in their own ways. For Rosie, holding a man's arm was an important statement, a step up from hand-in-hand with a teenage boy. As she recalled, Wayne had been quick to discontinue the practice as unnecessary once a permanent relationship had been established. Paul, from what she knew of him, seemed on a totally different wave-length. He was unlikely to be irritated or embarrassed by a simple show of platonic affection. The fact that he hadn't broken contact was an indication that he was either too much of a gentleman to hurt her feelings, or he might have been enjoying it.

Paul was actually on cloud nine. Having a heart attack was a distinct possibility because his was bouncing all over his chest. Telling himself that it was nothing and that Rosie probably treated everyone the same way hadn't helped. Maybe it was her touch and the way the pressure of her hand increased each time he moved away, not purposely, but because of the unevenness of the soft sand. It was as if she didn't want to let go of him. Had he the courage, he would have told her that he didn't want her to. It was strange how something as innocent as walking arm-in-arm could transport one to a dream world where vain hopes became a warm reality. Ben had been right - they were meant - at least, it seemed so, and he could imagine a wonderful future if here and now could just continue forever. Then he was recalling it had been that way once with Cheryl - not quite, but something similar - and he was immediately on his guard. He must have stiffened and Rosie had felt the reaction because her grip tightened. She couldn't, of course, know what was in his thoughts, so there was no need to justify it; but the way his mind worked, he was feeling obliged to do just that. The remedy was simple, instinctive really - talk about something else. "The way you speak - you sound to be well-educated..." From the sudden relaxation of her touch, it was obvious she had taken offence and for the moment he couldn't imagine why.

Rosie had no hesitation enlightening him: "I gather that surprises you," she retorted irritably. "A fisherman's wife in a small town who can string words of more than one syllable together without an expletive or two!"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean..."

"What did you mean?" It was a harsh ultimatum, not the casual response she would have preferred, not what the situation and her true feelings demanded.

Paul stopped walking and faced her. "I only meant that..." He could feel annoyance building, not towards Rosie, but because of his habit of trying to be diplomatic, knowing that he usually achieved the opposite. This was one occasion he could ill afford for that to happen. "Oh, Hell! I can't think properly, so I'm going to just say this. Please let me get it out first - you can slap my face after." He paused to take a deep breath, then continued: "When I first came to see you, it was not of my making. Well, it was... See, there I go again! Anyway, I felt I was being rail-roaded; by Ben, I suppose, but also my conscience. That

irritated me and I needed the motivation to do what was expected of me, then get out. So I formed a picture of this little town with its little ways and you were a part of that assumption. The widow I was going to see would be plain and simple, perhaps somewhat coarse, definitely blunt and to the point, a woman who was born to her lot. She would take one look at me, a hoity-toity university type with more money than sense and resent the fact that I had no idea of what it was like to live in the real world, never mind having to struggle doing it. But you weren't like that at all, you aren't. You are intelligent and have a way with words that puts me to shame. I could picture you as a business woman, you are so like Martha."

Rosie was stumped. Had she just been listening to the real man, the one inside a bumbling exterior, or a well-rehearsed version of some role model he would like to be, one that only materialised under extreme pressure? "I'll take that as a compliment. As for the rest, thank you for being truthful. I wouldn't expect less from you, and it certainly doesn't warrant a thump."

"A thump?"

"You've forgotten already." Rosie chuckled. "Back to the Paul I know - that's comforting." The phrase, the feeling that had instituted it, was almost second nature; and even though she knew nothing of this man, it was as if they had been lifetime friends. She held his gaze, perhaps longer than might have been considered appropriate, then tugged his arm as she started walking again.

They continued along a good stretch of the beach, neither saying a word. Rosie was enjoying that, and he didn't seem to mind. Perhaps he was the kind of man who preferred quiet moments; no talk, just contemplation as opposed to meditation which didn't seem to fit with her assumed profile of him. And here was the point - he had opened up to her, only a little, but that had given her a taste for more. Who was he? What did he truly like or dislike? These things were important for anyone contemplating a relationship. She was doing that, wasn't she - not officially confirmed a widow, yet lining up the next husband? No, she decided - not like that at all. She was simply picking up where she had left off so many years ago, before Wayne had come on the scene and blown her off course. Now, whether others liked it or not, here was an ideal opportunity to dust off the original plan, the one she had been working on in senior high and had intended taking with her to university, except that part hadn't materialised. To throw it away for a second time was, in her mind, stupid and self-destructive; as Paul might be, if he wasn't the person she thought. There was only one way to find out. "I was wondering about Martha," she said softly, trying to make the question sound by-the-way. "She's clearly a big part of your life, but what about your parents?" She flicked him a glance to see if her question was one she ought not have asked. If anything, he hadn't even heard it and seemed to be miles away. "Your Mum and Dad, are they still living?"

"Hmm?" Paul shook himself from his trance, noticed how cold it was and shivered unvoluntarily. "Oh, yes. At least, they were last Christmas - I received their cards, one from Toronto and another from some quaint-sounding village in England. We haven't been together since I started high school. They obviously decided I was old enough to cope and

dropped me off at Martha's on their way to separate lives. I can't say I'm sorry - two people constantly yelling at each other hardly makes for happy families. What about yours, your parents, I mean?"

"Still alive, still together," she replied in a tone that suggested the subject annoyed her, which it did because she was only interested in hearing about his life, not in talking about her own. "I haven't seen much of them since I married Wayne. They didn't approve of him, especially as they considered he was instrumental in cutting short what should have been my promising career. They only showed up at the wedding for my benefit; then moved to live in New Zealand shortly after. I doubt they'll even bother coming back for the funeral, assuming there is one."

"Surely there will be...?" Rosie's hand on his arm tightened as if likelihood of the formality came as a shock, or the mere thought of it was odious to her. This was dangerous ground, thought Paul. The way her step had faltered briefly during her explanation, picking up again once she had delivered it; this seemed to declare the matter closed. Anyone with sense would avoid rubbing salt in a wound that was clearly painful. But the cue was there for the taking and the opportunity to find out if there was any future for him with Rosie was too convenient to pass up. He decided her hand on his arm would be his litmus test - if she withdrew it completely, in particular the way she did, would indicate her level of disapproval, even alienation; starting to take it away, then changing her mind ought to mean he had pushed the boundaries but not quite stepped over them yet; anything else of a more positive nature was the ideal reaction, one that would have his head spinning. Should he be that lucky, he would have to resort to babbling, because he definitely wouldn't be able to think straight. Crossing mental fingers, he said: "Do you think there's a possibility Wayne might be found alive?" He felt her stiffen, but the hand stayed put. "Sorry, that was insensitive. Forget I asked."

Suddenly, Rosie's was the head that was muzzy. The truth had always been there, more so since Wayne's disappearance, one she had delayed facing, probably because it would paint her as cold-hearted in the eyes of others. She had lived in fear of what everyone else thought, never the way she herself wanted. She was the daughter who had disappointed her parents; the wife who feigned loyalty and continually found fault; the mother who had tried to be a good one, but not hard enough it would seem; and the member of a community which had taken her for granted, as they did any woman, and now waited to see if she was worthy of their respect. Until that moment, she had little reason to decide how she felt, what she would do, whom she would disappoint further. The conclusion she had come to was that none of it really mattered, and the world could go to Hell.

Yet, out of the blue, here was one who seemed to care, actually wanted to, and instinct told her that a wrong move, an incautious word could see him sailing away forever. For him, nothing but the real truth would do. She knew what that was, that it could put right all of those things that had gone wrong for her, but the saying of it would, she thought, be the hardest thing she had ever done and she had to do it with eyes closed. "I don't love Wayne. I'm not sure I ever did, not properly. And I don't want him back. I wouldn't say this to anyone

else," She hesitated as her heart stopped momentarily. "I don't honestly know why I'm telling you, a relative stranger, but I think I can trust you, and I need to say this to someone." Rosie looked up, slowly, her eyes tired and filled with pain. "I hope he is dead. I honestly do. Does that make me a terrible person?"

It was the kind of question a priest or a psychiatrist might have a comforting answer for. Being neither, Paul remained silent; although he was presumably about to say something because his mouth had dropped open. He slammed it shut and began shaking his head, a rag doll in the hands of an agitated child. As usual, words were hard to come by, and he spilled them exactly as they came to mind: "Oh, no, no - anything but. It's delayed shock, of course it is. You're just preparing yourself for the worst, in case they don't find him, or his body, or what's left of it... Oh, sorry, I didn't mean to..."

With that, the pair of them became a frozen tableau. Glancing seaward, Rosie watched a small boat heading north, running parallel to the coast. Anyone on board might have looked back to shore, seen the two of them and assumed them to be just any couple enjoying each other's company, exchanging pleasantries. The thought prompted a warm tingle because that was exactly how she wanted them to be seen - friends, or perhaps a little more than that. Then the feeling vanished: there was much to do before any kind of relationship would be acceptable, either by others, certainly by Rosie. But what about Paul - was he interested in her at all, except as a means of closure: a kind word from her to wash away his doubts, enabling him to leave the recent events and her behind, guilt-free? Maybe it was the wrong thing to do, but she did it anyway. As she turned to face him, she took both of his hands in hers and focused her eyes on his. They were wavering, embarrassed perhaps, frightened even and flickered side to side as if searching for an escape. Rosie waited until his momentary panic subsided and his eyes were still. "I need you to know why I said what I did."

It was obvious he was about to interrupt, probably with some platitude intended to comfort and exonerate her. She squeezed his hands gently, a sign that she preferred his silence. "Please, Paul. Just listen." Following a second or two to gather her thoughts, she continued: "I tried being a good wife to Wayne. Although he suspected it at times, I never cheated on him. I sometimes wondered if I didn't just to spite him, a kind-of holier-than-thou attitude; but I like to think it was because it wouldn't have been right. I made a vow when we married and I honoured that faithfully. I put up with the abuse, the denegration, his drunken behaviour and insults, and his..." She hesitated, her cheeks flushing red. "...his sexual demands. It wasn't easy, but I was to him what I thought a wife should be to a husband. I would never have left him, but now that it seems he has left me, I don't want him back. If, by some cruel twist of fate they find him alive, I think I would rather die than go through all of that again."

Paul was in a fog. He was vaguely aware that his face was rigid as if set in plaster, incapable of expressing any feelings. Momentarily, he had reverted to the scientist, sifting through the data, weighing the true value before deciding on its relevancy. Did he require more to reach a conclusion, or had she said too much already? He felt her release his hands and panicked at the thought that she was about to pull away. The scientist fled, replaced by

the forlorn - dare he think it: lover? - and he tightened his grip, refusing to let her go. Her eyes flew wide as she gasped. "Oh, sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you."

"You didn't." Rosie's tender smile said what her lips were afraid to: that the only pain he could inflict would be his rejection of her. "I don't believe you ever could."

CHAPTER FOUR The Lookout

1

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

"Later you might," he suggested.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"So why do it now...?"

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

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

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

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

"Paul?"

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

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

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

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

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

2

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rosie glared at the attendant and demanded stonily: "Remove the cover, please." She was as unprepared for what she saw as she was for her reaction to it. Spinning away, she

slapped a hand to her mouth and gagged. Head swimming, she could feel a faint coming on and opened eyes wide, determined to stay on her feet this time. Forcing herself to look at the gory head one last time she hunted for features, but there were none remaining that could help with her identification. Staring at the tattoo again, she said: "I think it's Wayne, but I can't say for sure."

3

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tears were welling, trickling down his cheeks, and his nose was beginning to run. He sniffed, sighed. The sounds were barely audible; nevertheless, Rosie was suddenly aware of another presence. She turned in time to see him leaving and called out his name. He

halted, but remained facing away from her, shoulders heaving rhythmically in time with his sobbing. She advanced across the clearing a few steps, intending to embrace and comfort him as she had always done in the past. Then she stopped. Would he want contact of any kind, now or ever again?

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

4

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

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

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

corroborate his assurance that he had done everything humanly possible to at least try helping a sailor in distress.

But how could he resolve that issue – give Jackson two tapes and hope he had the means and knowhow to play them simultaneously and in sync? Even if he did manage it, there was a strong possibility that the policeman would suspect one or both tapes had been doctored. The only way was to have one recording superimposed over the other. Paul had actually discussed the need for equipment to achieve this with his grandmother, particularly for the benefit of the Foundation when he eventually submitted his research; if he ever did. Martha had quashed the idea: *“You know how confused you get, dear. Let’s just keep it simple.”* Thus, simple was all he had. The best he could come up with was unlikely to find favour with a doubting police sergeant; but it was worth a try.

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

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

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

Naturally, it didn’t. He tossed and turned; got up and prowled the deck; then went back to his bunk. So it dragged on: a night of turbulent thoughts; and all centred on a woman he barely knew. If his play-acting at the bow rail wasn’t bad enough, he continued going over and over the possibilities like a love-struck teenager pulling petals from a flower – she loves

me, she loves me not; I go to her, I see her not. At some point he had even considered just hauling up the anchor and leaving. Unfortunately, this simple remedy was not an option: Sergeant Jackson had made that abundantly clear - until he was satisfied that his prime witness had fulfilled his legal obligations, Paul was to stay put.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

On their way back to Rosie's they passed a few people in the streets and Paul was very aware of the looks of disapproval speared in their direction. Rosie must have noticed too, but she made no comment except for parrying the animosity with a visual statement by

hugging his arm a little closer. By the time they were approaching the house, Paul still hadn't managed to broach the complication of Cheryl. They had talked mainly about Robert and how deeply his feelings for his father apparently ran. "I didn't realise until now. It always seemed a strained relationship," she explained hesitatingly, "Their personalities were very different preventing them from getting really close."

It sounded like a parody of his failed marriage. "Did Wayne not spend some quality time with him; maybe take him out on the boat, just the two of them?"

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

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

"That's a new one," she drawled sarcastically, knowingly.

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

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

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

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

Footsteps were approaching along the hallway; just his mother’s: he recognised her pace. What about him, Paul the usurper of his father’s crown? Was he being cautious, wary of intruding, fearful even? That was good, him believing he was at a disadvantage. Robert stayed within his sanctuary.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It’s okay. I understand.” The sound of whistling began to build as the kettle boiled. Rosie ignored it and continued to gaze at the door to her son’s room. “Would you prefer I left?” he asked. “My being here just seems to be making matters worse.” It was one of those tentative questions, passing the buck really: soliciting a positive answer that would keep him in Rosie’s company while hoping for the opposite, a chance to escape with self-esteem

almost intact. Whatever transpired next hinged on Rosie, so he waited; praying for the best, expecting the worst.

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

6

Conversation across the kitchen table was, perhaps, too well-considered. Paul had kept his voice quiet, reasoning that whatever they said might be overheard by Robert, his room being just across the hallway. Rosie too was wary and tried for a while to make casual small talk; but the walls seemed to be closing in on her, and the atmosphere was becoming increasingly uncomfortable. Her answer was simple: "Let's get some fresh air."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rosie extended a sardonic smile. "Liar."

"You know me too well."

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

“And that is...?”

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

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

“No, but we do seem to be from very different worlds.” She gazed in silence for a few moments at the ocean before continuing: “Yours is so vast and uncomplicated. I can only imagine what it would be like to experience freedom on that scale, to be surrounded by it and nothing else.”

“You never went out with Wayne?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The house was his first port of call, a bad decision as it turned out. There were too many memories of the way things used to be. The hall table was empty now, his mother having cleared off her little creations for safety's sake after his Dad had trashed one in a fit of anger. This was the last time he had seen his father; not to share his company or speak with, but to watch secretly as he stormed off.

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

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

Whatever his intentions might have been were blown away by a sight that tugged at his heart strings. There was another vessel at what had been his father's mooring. Changing direction, he thumped angrily along the jetty to where Old Ben was sitting on his crate and demanded to know why, and who had the right. "It's usual practice," explained Ben, focusing on the rope in his hands to avoid the animosity radiating from the boy's face. "Moorings aren't easily come by, and Steve Malloy fancied it for his ski boat. There was nothing personal..." The last comment was wasted: Robert had taken off and was heading for the beach. Ben watched him stutter to a halt by Paul's dinghy. Following a brief hesitation, he pulled up the sand anchor, tossed it into the craft which he pushed into the water and started the outboard motor. It seemed at first the boy was going to do something to Malloy's boat,

perhaps untie it and let it drift; but within metres he changed course for Copernicus. Breathing a weary sigh, Ben went back to splicing his rope, glancing up occasionally to monitor the lad's actions just in case he did something overly rash.

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

Wandering the main deck provided no answer. With the exception of the capstan for the anchor cable, the equipment was nothing like that on his father's fishing boat and was presumably to do with scientific research. His Mum had attempted to endear him to Paul by telling how his was a gentle occupation, a caring one. At the time, Robert had refused to be swayed; now, however, and with the evidence before him, it did seem that this stranger, an interloper though he might be, meant no harm to anyone. Robert ground his teeth, annoyed with himself for even considering that it was possibly true. His mother certainly believed so, and that didn't sit well with him either. In the blink of an eye, Robert was back to hating everyone and anything; and Paul was top of the list.

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

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

The two desk drawers were unlocked and contained mainly paperwork, but no key. Leaning back in the chair, he stared momentarily across the cabin, then down to the equipment sitting at the back of the desk in front of him. Here was more electronic gadgetry that he didn't have a clue about; but on one side was something he was familiar with – a portable cassette player. Noticing there was a tape already loaded, Robert sighed and

pressed the play button, fully expecting to hear music of the highbrow kind. Instead he found himself listening to the dual recording Paul had made earlier.

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

Robert's next few minutes were heartbreaking. What he could hear were Paul's vain attempts to communicate with his father; a man who, by all reports, was too drunk to accept that help was at hand. Then came the explosion. The boy gasped and jerked back in the chair. If anything more played on the tape, Robert was too shocked to assimilate it. All he knew was that he had just listened to a recording of his father's death. Misadventure; a silly mistake; bad luck; or was it deliberate? Despite being a mere schoolboy, Robert had been very aware of his family's financial difficulties, and the strain it caused both of his parents was plain to see. But surely there would have been a way out? This was too drastic, too final. Almost convinced this was his father's terrible and ultimate solution, tears trickled as Robert appealed in a whisper: "I was always here for you, Dad. Why did you leave me?"

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

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

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

CHAPTER FIVE Dismissed

1

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

through chattering teeth: "Er...um... I think I should be going. If Robert comes back it wouldn't look good."

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

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

"And I'm not!?"

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

Rosie's heartbeat kicked. "Promise?"

Paul nodded. "Promise."

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

2

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Malloy?”

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

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

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

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

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

hearing the sounds of his father's final moments. He would have been devastated. This explained why he had been in such a rush and had avoided Paul like the plague.

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

3

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What, rub salt into the wounds?"

"No, Rosie..."

"What, then?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

5

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nearing the police station Paul considered going in to see if the Sergeant was there. With luck he would have concluded his investigation, at least the part involving Paul; then he would be able to leave. The problem was that he didn't particularly wish to, no doubt still

harbouring thoughts of a reconciliation with Rosie. As long as he was bound by law to stay, that option might still be open; so he decided to leave it in the lap of the gods and hurried on before he could change his mind.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Aren't you being a tad overdramatic?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It’s not like that,” Paul tried to explain, adding: “I’ll be back shortly.”

Malloy produced a derisive snort and tossed some coins on the bar. “Don’t bother. Have this one on me. Then you can leave; and I don’t just mean the pub. The town can do without your sort. We take care of our own here; and that includes our women, Rosie in particular.” His tone was quiet yet sneering and provocative. “Maybe you thought she was a soft touch after you watched her husband blow himself up – convenient that – but you were dead wrong...”

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

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

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

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

“I said quit!” The voice was familiar, authoritative and definitely timely. Sergeant Les Jackson was perhaps the only man capable of defusing such a volatile situation by his mere presence; but to ensure the belligerence went no further he warned: “And that means you, Steve; unless you want to spend a night in the lockup.” Two paces brought him to where

Paul lay. Stooping, he reached down to help the fallen man up. “Are you okay, Mr Longstreet? Do you need a doctor?”

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

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

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

“Already sorted,” drawled Les. “I’ve cleared it with Don Gray. See Ben when you’re ready.”

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

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

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

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

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

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 Paul 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 re-fuelling; 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 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, insisting 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 back-stabber." 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."

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 while 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 dinghy 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 dinghy 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 mass, 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 see 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 slid them into a back 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?"

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 dinghy, 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 *I* 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 dinghy 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 dinghy. 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 dinghy, 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 dinghy 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 dinghy. 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 dinghy, 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 dinghy 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 dinghy 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 dinghy 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 dinghy 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



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