

Rosie's Beach



Kathy Sampson

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, sight-unseen, and 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.

6

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.

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 dingy 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.