

Janet Quin-Harkin

Janet Quin-Harkin is better known these days as *New York Times* bestselling author Rhys Bowen, writer of the historical *Molly Murphy* and *Royal Spyness* mystery series. She has won the Agatha Best Novel Award and was nominated for the Edgar Best Novel. In the eighties, when this series was written, she was dubbed by one newspaper as “the Queen of Teen Romance.” Janet/Rhys is a transplanted Brit who now divides her time between California and Arizona. You can visit her website at www.rhysbowen.com

JANET QUIN-HARKIN

Heartbreak
= *Café* =
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1989

Chapter One

I remember the first time I saw the Heartbreak Café – really noticed it, I mean. I must have driven past it a thousand times on my way to the beach with my friends. But on this particular fall day, Grant – my boyfriend – had taken me out in his new sports car, which had been a seventeenth birthday present. After a thrilling drive along the clifftop road, we ended up at Rockley Beach. Grant suggested we get a soda or something to celebrate his car, but it was Sunday and all the trendy beachfront cafés were full of middle-aged people who'd come out from the city. There were even people waiting for tables, and Grant hates to wait for anything. So do I, for that matter.

After we had tried every café and given up in disgust, we headed back to Grant's car, which was parked at least three blocks away because of the Sunday traffic. That's when we saw the Heartbreak. It was nestled in behind the ritzy, beachfront boutiques, among a bunch of old fishermen's cottages. It must have once been a fisherman's cottage itself because it still looked like one – wooden front porch and all – but a neon sign in the window said Heartbreak Café, and there was loud music coming from inside. Grant took in the café's peeling paint, the music, and the motorcycles and beat-up cars with surfboards strapped to their roofs parked around it.

“This isn’t our sort of place,” he said, and firmly took my hand and led me back to the car.

I didn’t give much thought to Rockley Beach or the Heartbreak for a while after that. Little matters like my junior year in school, with tons of chemistry and trig homework, plus a leading role in our school production of *Bye Bye Birdie*, kept me more than occupied all winter anyway. The boys just said it was no fun to surf in cold water, but secretly I think they were scared of the gigantic waves that came after each storm. You had to be brave or crazy, or both, to want to ride those waves, and my friends were all pretty sane and sensible – when it came to surfing, at least.

The second time I noticed the Heartbreak, one afternoon in late April, I hadn’t actually intended to drive down to Rockley at all. I had been heading for the Hillsdale Mall for some major shopping-therapy, but my head was still so full of the fight I’d just had with my mother that I missed my turning. Before I knew it I was driving down the winding, narrow canyon that led to the beach. It’s impossible to turn round on that road, so I just kept on going. Then, when I saw the sun glistening on the ocean, I decided a walk on the beach might not be such a bad idea. It sure was cheaper than the mall, which was a definite plus now that I could no longer count on an allowance from either one of my parents.

Recollecting my present poverty brought back all the details of my fight with Mom earlier that afternoon. Before the divorce we hardly ever had fights at home. My parents were the sort of people who liked to reason things through. “Now, Debbie, let’s just sit down and approach this in a mature

fashion ...," they'd begin. It used to infuriate me at times. They were always so calm and rational. I guess that's why the split up came as a complete surprise. Other kids knew months beforehand that something was wrong because of all the yelling and stomping out of the house. I didn't know anything until the day my father moved out. But to be fair to my folks, I don't think they were even sure they were getting a divorce until Dad moved out.

I was generally pretty happy with the way things were, and I assumed my parents were, too. But it turned out that my father hadn't been happy for some time. At least that's what he said in the letter he wrote me after he left. He'd always dreamed of being a writer, he wrote, and his life with us left him no time and space to be himself. So now he was off, being himself presumably, and Mom and I were still wondering what had happened to us.

I thought my mother took it very well, considering that one day she was June Cleaver and the next she was a single parent. She was still calm and controlled when she spoke to me about our future.

I tried to be calm and controlled too, at first, but it just didn't work. My parents decided to sell our house and split the profits so that they both could have something to live on until my mom got a job and my dad started selling his screenplays. It didn't take a genius to realize that we'd be living somewhere pretty crummy if they wanted the money from the house as profits and not as a new house. I hadn't seen the artists' settlement where Dad was living. Mom and I moved into a disgusting condo. I mean, it wasn't literally disgusting:

it didn't have roaches all over the floor or anything. But it was in a big condo project – "The Oaks, A Planned Community for Today's Family". The planning consisted of an imaginative arrangement of lookalike condos in stick-straight rows. Only the fake Spanish beams round the windows and the circles of artfully-placed junipers and rocks prevented it from looking like a planned prison.

When I objected my mother claimed it was perfectly adequate for the two of us and she liked knowing that the place was patrolled by security guards. Then she gave me another speech about "making the best of things". It wasn't as if I had to change schools or anything, she said. And the place had a pool and tennis courts, not so different from the country club we'd always belonged to. Although her arguments weren't convincing, I tried to stop complaining. It wasn't really my mother's fault that we were there, and she probably felt bad about it, too, inside.

So life went on. My dad told me I could come over and visit him any time, once he got settled, and my mom said that was fine with her, so I guessed I was pretty lucky – as lucky as a person can be who has just moved out of a big, beautiful house, lost her country club membership, and sold all her matching bedroom furniture – including the canopy bed – because her new bedroom is too small for anything other than a hideous teak module.

My life was still full of school and after-school activities, and, best of all, dates with my boyfriend Grant. Even after a year together, I still couldn't get over Grant. I still didn't really understand why one of the best-looking, most outstanding

guys in the whole school had noticed me at the cast party after last year's play. Having a boyfriend who was a popular senior was one of the few things that had really gone right for me the whole year. I'd be going to senior ball and all sorts of good stuff - if we could still afford to buy me a prom dress, that is!

So having Grant around and looking forward to all the pre-graduation events kept me going. Meanwhile, my mother got dressed up in a suit every day and started looking for a job, circling ads in the paper and making the rounds of employment agencies. I thought it would only be a matter of time before she became Mrs Modern Executive, earning the same sort of salary my father had, and things returned to normal again. So I was hardly prepared for what happened on that April afternoon. I had just poured myself a glass of juice when my mother came in, waving a letter at me.

"Deborah," she said, "this came today and we have to talk about it."

I opened the envelope. "What is it?" I asked, trying to make sense of the columns of figures.

"It's your bill for your car insurance."

"Oh." I stared at it, wondering what I was supposed to say next. "What am I supposed to do with it?" I asked finally.

"Someone's got to pay it," she said.

I looked at it again. "It's six hundred dollars," I said with a laugh. This had to be a joke.

"Right," Mom said. She was not smiling.

"I don't have six hundred dollars."

"Neither do I."

"So what do we do?" I asked.

She sighed. "I wish I knew," she said. "Any suggestions?"

"How should I know what to do?" I asked. I could feel my face getting hot because I wasn't sure what she was getting at.

She looked at me steadily. She had the "Let's be mature and reasonable" look on her face. "Deborah, up to now your father and I have always shielded you from the unpleasant things in life," she said. "Now you are going to have to face facts. It costs money to run a car. I can hardly afford to pay for my own car. Yours is a luxury we might have to do without."

"*WE* might have to do without?" I asked, my voice rising dangerously. "I notice you are not the one volunteering to do without a car."

"Be reasonable," she said. "I need a car if I'm going to get a job."

"And I don't need a car to go to school? There isn't exactly a good public transportation system round here, you know. You want me to hitchhike to school, is that it?"

"Deborah, when I was your age—" she began.

I interrupted her. "Great. Now I'm going to get the speech about how you had to walk five miles to school in the snow, uphill both ways . . ."

She didn't smile.

I could feel a lump form at the back of my throat.

"How can I pay for it?" I demanded. "You bought me a car as a present. You didn't mention anything about having to pay for its upkeep then . . ."

"Things have changed . . ."

"You can say that again!" I shouted. "I get my house taken away, my father taken away, my bedroom set taken away, and now you want to take my car, too!"

"Do you think I'm having a picnic?" my mother demanded. She was beginning to yell, too, and my mother *never* yelled. "You think it's just fine and dandy going to interviews with twenty-three-year-old girls who fling my resume back in my face and tell me I don't have any experience? I am not exactly thrilled about getting a job, but I'm looking for one. Maybe you should, too!"

"You want me to get a job, is that what you're saying?" I yelled. "You don't care suddenly about my school work or plays or the debate club or anything, right?"

"Of course I care," she said, her voice cracking, "but we can't always have what we want, can we?" Her face was all screwed up and angry, like I'd never seen it before. "I'm just saying you're going to have to share some of the responsibilities round here because right now I've got too many!"

I started to walk towards the door. "Fine, if that's what you want, I'll get a job. I'll go out and look for one right now. I'm sure they need people on the night shift in the mines. Or maybe I can find myself a job at the Playboy Club - that doesn't conflict with school hours."

Then I ran out of the front door and jumped into my car before I started crying. I put my foot down and drove fast after that, heading, as I usually did when I was depressed, to the shopping mall. I don't know what I'd intended to buy with my rapidly-dwindling bank balance. But I guess my eyes

were more fuzzy with tears than I thought because I was halfway down the canyon before I noticed I had missed my turning and was heading towards destiny in the form of the Heartbreak Café.