



# Pebbles in the Stream

**An Australian saga in several episodes**

**By Graham Price**

**Chapter One**

**The day was as bleak as the gravestone he was looking at. It was a small Victorian country cemetery, not used all that much due to the bustling city close by with its crematorium, but generations of the little town still held plots and wished to be buried in harmony with each other.** It was surrounded by numerous pine trees, in which magpies took their nest. He stood before the granite slab, his great dark blue woollen coat of another age blocking out the biting wind that whistled down from the high mountain plains. He wore a thick white and light blue striped woollen scarf, also from another age. His trousers were slightly frayed at the edges, but his shoes were well kept and blessed with a brilliant polish that reflected the pine trees.

His parents had christened him Thomas Alistair Marshall in 1935. Well, that was 84 years ago and a lot of water under the bridge since then, he reckoned. That was in the same wooden Presbyterian church of the quiet town he had just driven through, thinking of himself as somewhat of a stranger. He'd not been back to Penifeld Creek in over 50 years. When his school pals found out about his second Christian name, he copped it well and truly — his initials spelt it out, TAM, Tammy! A girl's name. These days he probably would have copped Tim Tam.

Why they use grey and black granite for tombstones, he thought, I'm damned if I know. It's so cheerless . . . and why they picked it for her, I'll never know. She was never cheerless, never sad. And now she's gone, this bright young angel who meant so much for so many. If I'd had my way, he thought. I would have changed the colour to pink, or even a light blue. She would have been happy with that. It would reflect her sunny nature and the sheen of her once golden hair. I'm sure she is not content with what they've done for her, obviously not knowing much about her inner core, her depth of feeling, her talent for plumbing the depths of the exotic universe.

There was a rose coloured vase at the foot of the grave . . . empty, except with some smelly stagnant water and long gone remains of some flower stems in it. He reached for it, tipped the putrid water out and went looking for a fresh supply. He found a tap near the cemetery entrance. Returning to the grave he placed the fresh bunch of red roses into the vase and replaced it into its position. He was not a praying man, but as he knelt there the words of the 23rd Psalm came easily to him, and he silently acknowledged every word down to 'And in God's house for evermore, my dwelling-place shall be.'

When he had finished he looked around for some loose earth near the head of the gravestone. There wasn't much choice, there was a ton of surrounding concrete, but at the top right-hand corner some loose earth caught his sight. Slowly, he took from a pocket in the heavy coat, two white pebbles. One had a T carved into it and the other a C. He took out a pocket knife, opened it, and began to dig. A magpie flew across, paused, swung back towards him and hovered for a moment, then flew off. He looked up and watched it settle into one of the blue gums outside the cemetery. It looked down at him. He looked up at it. It began to coral, singing loudly into the quiet grey afternoon air. "I know you!" he laughed, "I know you!" and dug further down into the earth. He slipped the two white pebbles into the hole and covered it up. For a moment he was lost with no thought. He knelt there as if frozen in time. Then, as the magpie flapped its wings and flew off out of sight, he said: "I've come home, Caroline. I've come home." The gravestone's gold etchings reflected back at him — 'In memory of Caroline Louisa Blake 1936-2019, dearly beloved wife of Maxwell Charles Blake. At rest. At peace with her Lord.'

She had smooth skin as white as the pebbles in the stream — the clear water rippling and bubbling around them and over time bleaching their surfaces. He laughed as he ran his fingers up and down her arm.

"You should get more sunshine, Caroline," he said, shaking his unruly blonde hair and looking up at the cloudless blue sky. The magpies were carolling in the blue gums above them. One had dived at Tom earlier that morning, taking his school cap from him and dropping it into the river where it snagged on some tree roots.



He could have jumped in to retrieve it, but was more interested in what Caroline was drawing in her artbook. When he eventually thought that he should look for his cap, it had disappeared. He'd get into trouble for that, he figured. His dad would not be amused — school caps cost money and there was little of that to go around during the war, what with rationing and all. His mum would probably box his ears and then later give him a hug. She was a softie. He reckoned his dad was an okay sort of a bloke, but there were times when the mood changed and it was better to steer clear of him. Jack Thomas Marshall had been in the First World War as a medic and has sustained injuries during the Battle of the Somme and again at Bullecourt. He wanted to sign up again for this Second World War, but was declared medically unfit. Rose Marshall had breathed a thousand sighs of relief at that.

On that Saturday afternoon, Tom and Caroline were sitting on the edge of the river bank where the earth came down almost like a sandy beach. Further down the narrow river, particularly where his cap had been snagged, the banks were deep, but here he could reach down and pull some of the pebbles out of the water. Tom had always been intrigued by the colour of Caroline's hair, almost white — certainly blonder than blonde and far lighter than his. Sometimes, while walking through the town's streets, other kids shouted out. "Here comes the town's blonde bombshells, Tammy and Cammy!" He'd got into a couple of fights over that, but later on no one cared much and everyone had become good friends. After all, small towns people had to stick together. The nearby city was beginning to take away skilled labour. Tom's parents owned, or rather leased, the town's grocery store, and Tom was obliged to do his share of work when he wasn't at school. That was where he had met Caroline's parents, Samuel and Daisy Allsworth, who owned the town's grain silos, the local pub, and a number of houses. It took him some months to realise that these were Caroline's parents.

She doesn't seem the type, he thought. Her parents were pretty snooty, filthy rich, and always grizzling about a half-penny so-called discrepancy on the grocery bill. He didn't like them much. Sure, his arithmetic wasn't all that good but he could add, subtract, multiply, and all that without any problem. It was the fractions that had him tossed, and that new algebra totally confused him. But he liked geography, history, and English, in fact the English teacher Miss Julie Adams, had commented on his compositions and told the class she wanted more of that. But no, Caroline wasn't snooty, and Caroline preferred his company to any of the other boys in class. Caroline was his first love.

Then there was Caroline's elder brother by three years, Harcourt. There was something really mean about him, thought Tom. He was the sort of kid who would shoot rabbits with his .22 and simply leave them there to die, rotting in the fields, and stick pins into butterflies and moths simply for the joy of it. "Mad bugger," thought Tom, when he saw Harcourt shoot a magpie one day. That ratbag'll kill some person one day, for sure.

He scooped up a couple of pebbles from the water. "Look at these," he said to Caroline. "They're sort of like you and me, light and bright. What if you keep one and me the other, sort of like something for us to remember each other for the rest of our lives?"

She stopped drawing in her art book. "Just because I kissed you this morning, doesn't mean to say we are going to be with each other for ever."

Tom blushed. "Well, I thought . . . you and me . . . we kind of hit it off, don't we? C'mon, Caroline, I really love you."

"Sure, Tom. But we're just kids. I love you too, but you know . . . people grow up . . . people change."

"But, you'll always love me, even if you do change?"

Yes, Tom. I'll always love you, whatever happens." She leant forward and their lips met. It was 1945 and they were both 10 and 9 years respectively.

Tom took out his pocket knife. "I think I can cut our initials into two of these pebbles. I can carve a T which I will give to you, and a C which I will keep, forever. How's that? Brilliant, aye?"

"Crazy! Everywhere I go Tom, I'll take it with me. Forever! Yes, love you."

"Forever," he said. "Our love, forever!" And they touched lips again.

The Reverend Miles Robert McLean strode speedily from the vestry into the tiny St. Andrew's church as the crowded congregation stood. He entered the pulpit with a flourish of his black robes and said without as much of a breath: "Let us worship God. The hymn is number 562, O God of Bethel by whose hand, Thy people still are fed." Miles was a bachelor, not yet 30 and much admired by the teenage female congregation for his dark good looks. Mothers found that it wasn't much trouble to get their daughters into church after the Reverend McLean came to town. Many of them knew why, but chose not to mention that in public They found in their new preacher, a man with a very good tenor voice who



led the congregation smoothly, along with Miss Jennifer Higginson who played the pipe organ donated by the Allsworth family. The new preacher was a man with strong views about the war, strong views about teenage morality, and strong views about bringing new ideas into worship. So many items in Penifeld were new these days, which seemed rather incongruous considering the war that was still going on, but the clever Presbyterians of Penifeld knew that their God was a wise God and a progressive God. Old Reverend Stuart McDonald had served them well, now buried out in their tiny cemetery, but surely he didn't have the power of God behind him that this new minister exuded from the very depths of his being. But, McDonald's widow, Catherine, said little, helped out with the Presbyterian Women's Missionary Union and the Country Women's Association, with her slightly disabled daughter, Gladys. She'd held back on commenting when other mother's asked her opinion of the new preacher, somewhat enthused as they were. Some fathers were not so sure.

At their favourite spot by the river after lunch, Caroline and Tom lay back upon the grass, relishing the warmth of the sun. Caroline had her art book with her and Tom his harmonica. He'd been playing *You are my Sunshine, my only Sunshine* with Caroline tapping her hand on the grass in accompaniment. She laughed. "A bit off note there, Tom. Have to get Miss Higginson to give you some lessons, ha ha."

"Well, I try. Anyway, you *are* my sunshine, Caroline." And he began to sing "*When skies are grey . . .*"

She let him finish the song. "You know, Tom. You have a beautiful voice. I over-heard the choirmaster, Mr. Jones, talking to your mother the other day. He said something about you joining the choir when your voice broke. Don't know how you'd go with a broken voice, though."

"Ha ha. It's to do with puberty, or something like that. Dad told me that when we become men our voice changes from soprano to perhaps tenor, or whatever."

"Tenor sounds fine. I don't think you could be bass, you're too skinny for that."

"Watch it, I'll chuck this mouth organ at you!"

"Yeh? You'll get a handful of sand in your face!"

He rolled over onto his stomach, rested his head on his arms, turned his face toward her. "You're even more beautiful when you're annoyed . . . so, what are you drawing today?"

"Not you, that's for sure."

"C'mon, don't keep it a secret!"

"I'm waiting for the Rosella's to come by."

"Should've got 'em yesterday. There were about six of them here."

"I'm hoping there will be more today. So far, nothing but magpies, starlings."

Tom rested his chin on an elbow. "You know that hymn in church this morning, O God of Bethel?"

"Sure, what about it?"

"Well, I was thinking, there's something wrong with it."

"Don't know what you mean."

He raised himself a little higher off the grass. "Well it goes, sort of near the end 'And Thou shalt be our chosen God.'"

She shrugged. "So?"

"Well, if you can choose your God, there must be more of them."

"Better not let the Reverend McLean hear you say that!"

"Yeh, but, it definitely says you can choose your God, so there must be more than one, otherwise why would we sing it?"

"You're mad . . . you're bonkers, Tommy," and she broke out into laughter.

He blew a couple of notes in his harmonica. "All the same, I'm serious. I'll ask mum, she'll know."

"S'pose so, but I think you're a bit bonkers."

He smiled, taking in her long golden hair, full of admiration for the vision of loveliness that was before him. How lucky he was. Of all the boys in the town, she had chosen him for her regular companion. And yes, they were similar in looks, two peas in a pod, he thought. Will she stay with me forever? She had given him that indication, taken the pebble he had carved with a T, and he in his pocket had the one carved with C.

"Have you got your pebble with you?"

Her face softened. She blinked several times. "Of course, Tom. It will never leave me."

"Promise?"



“I promise.”

A flock of Rosella’s swept through the blue sky and nestled in the branches of the blue gums above them. Their chattering turned the young boy and girl’s thinking away from themselves.

“I knew they’d come,” said Caroline. “Just knew it.” She opened her art book and took out her coloured pencils.

“Beautiful, so many of them,” said Tom, looking up with his hand across his brow to block out the sun. “Wouldn’t mind one for a pet.”

Caroline shook her head. She glared at him “They’re free birds, Tom. They don’t wish to be caged up.”

“Neither do I,” he said. “Hey, will you do a portrait of me, Caroline, so that wherever I might wander I can take it with me . . . or perhaps, you could keep it to remember me if I have to go away anywhere for a time.”

She stopped pencilling-in the outline of the tree. “None of us have to leave Penifield, Tom, besides where would you go?”

“Oh, you know . . . one day the army might come along and grab me.”

“But the war’s almost over. There will be peace, lots of it. There won’t be any more wars.”

“But will you . . . will you . . . you’re so good at drawing and painting. One day you’ll be famous and probably leave us all for the big cities, and who knows . . . London, Paris!”

“Don’t be daft!” she said as she began to apply colour to the blue gums. “I’m not going anywhere, and neither are you.”

He knelt there, at the edge of the granite tombstone for some time. The magpie had come back and settled in one of the pine trees close to the edge of the cemetery. It began to carol again, warbling strongly into the grey of the day. Blessed bird, he thought. I hope she is now as free as you are, if any of us can ever be free. Perhaps her spirit now lives in you, beautiful bird. Yes, she would have liked that . . . to be as free as a bird . . . to be given wings to soar so far into the heavens. He stared up at the bird. She painted you, you know. She painted you and your like and some of those paintings, so life-like, now bless some of the most prestigious private galleries in the world. Some of your ancestors, my lovely bird, are there for all eternity. Such a destiny fulfilled.

He fished inside the deep pocket of his coat and withdrew the small pocket tape recorder. It was a recording from long ago, and on it he’d recorded several magpies bursting into song. He set it down on the granite surface and thought to himself. My deep regret, my darling, was not to be here for your laying to rest . . . but then, would I have wanted to be . . . with all those people around, some I knew who would be old and perhaps miserable, though many not. What would it have served if I’d been there with such a crowd? Now, it is only the two of us, as it was once upon a time.

The carolling of the magpies on the tape had attracted the attention of the lone magpie in the pine tree. It swooped down and rested on the railings of a nearby grave, its sharp eyes turned to him. Tom nodded to it. “You know, don’t you? Of course you know.”

The tape wound on. The carolling ceased and in its place began, what Tom could only have reasoned as a fitting remembrance to Caroline, his Caroline. It was an old recording of Handel’s Largo, which he had sung as a solo in their church some time after his voice broke. She had been correct, he had become a tenor, and he did join the choir of that small Presbyterian Church. *Ombra mai fu* . . . and as the richness of his solo voice pierced the air, he was thankful that he was so far from the town . . . that it was only between him and Caroline, a sacred time of parting, and all other bodies, spirits, ghosts or whatever, were far, far away. Other men had possessed her body, but only he had possessed her soul, only he had merged with the beauty within her, had taken her to the heights. And no one could take that away from him. His voice ended the refrain *cara ed amabile, soave pie* — dearer and more lovely, or more sweet. And so, he had arranged it — his personal tribute to Caroline. And the recording he had taken at her 21st birthday party, now finally dubbed into the tape, was almost as clear as the day it was sung, continued in her contralto voice. “*My love is like a red, red rose . . .*” At which she had looked at him with a smile to overrule all the smiles on the face of the earth. Pebbles in the stream, he mused. Pebbles as a commitment, so . . . so long ago. Pebbles which they both had kept. He looked at the bunch of red roses, sitting upright in the rose tinted vase, and nodded. Pebbles, red roses, deep remembrance. Yes, it was a deep remembrance, more than he had ever felt before. And where was the perfect eulogy for her? They could have done that for her . . . at the very least they could have engraved some words worth remembering. After all, she had lived an extraordinary life. He felt the tears swell in his eyes and drop on the red roses. He gave a sob, then another, the nuances of which choked in his throat. But it was fitting, he thought, that his tears should mingle with the velvet leaves of the red roses, as if falling deeply into her bosom. The tears came again, so unlike him, something so long ago to be



unburdened . . . decades of his unconscious dedication to a love so precious. His teeth savaged his upper lip. I would have given her a decent eulogy. Came too late . . . too damn late.

And it was late there in the cemetery. The sun was falling towards the horizon and he knew he must move, but how could he leave? If I die here, he thought, it will be a blessing. It will be a complete denouement of a life well lived. He picked up the tape recorder and returned it to his pocket. It was beginning to get cold; wouldn't do his arthritis much good to be out here so late. A light wind had sprung up, ruffling the edges of the roses and he was aware of the magpie up in the pines caroling again. He turned and looked up. The lone bird had been joined by another and it seemed that they were calling to each other.

So free, he thought. Free from all the worries of the world. He took one last look at where his beloved lay, gripped his walking stick, and slowly walked away to the Mercedes Benz. It was showing its age, much like him, but he wasn't interested in something modern with all those gadgets and GPS direction finders. They're not invulnerable, he thought. You add all the extras, the more to break down.

The small motel where he had booked a night was of recent years, only there because of the main highway. In his day there had been Allsworth's hotel where sometimes commercial travellers stayed and the odd itinerant farm worker. The young motel manager had asked for his iPhone . . . just scan along here, Covid regs, you know . . . he shook his head, didn't even have a mobile. The world was rushing by too bloody fast, he'd said. The man just smiled, said nothing, asked for his driving licence. Tom could see the hint in the pale blue eyes, should you be driving at your age? He'd laughed at that. Come out on the race track some time, young fellow. I could teach you a few lessons, even with old Betsy out there.

He lugged his small suitcase into the room. It was an en-suite, with a small bar refrigerator and a wide-screen TV. Twin beds. Faded green curtains, an off-pink sickly wall colour. He wondered how long it had been here since the pub closed down about ten years ago. And the church? Not used anymore, but still standing just off the main road . . . everyone gone to worship at the Uniting Church in the city close by, that is, what was left of them in the town. All gone to the new style happy clappy services, almost Pentecostal. What does that achieve, he wondered. The long droughts had knocked the living daylights out of the town. Sure, there were some families still farming, scratching a living, but the halcyon days were gone. Religion was gone, the Saturday night dances were gone, mothers and daughters baking scones and cakes for stalls were gone. He lifted the case onto one of the beds and a pain shot through his chest like a serrated knife blade. Better sit, he thought, and lowered himself beside the case. The pain gradually decreased. Doesn't matter if I go now, he thought, I've made my peace. He pushed the suitcase aside and lay back on the bed. Need to rest; it's been a long day. And tomorrow, he'd need to get back Melbourne . . . a long drive ahead of him and a meeting with his publisher. He'd finalised his novel *On the Raven's Wing* last week and Jerome wanted it for his editorial staff this coming week. Needling old bugger, thought Tom, he'd pushed me for a revision, almost had me delete a whole chapter. Is it him, or is it me? Have I lost my touch? Nah, it was all about a gender problem . . . these publishers are getting scared; you can't say this, you can't write that. Bloody wimps. The world's gone weak. What are they teaching in the schools and universities these days . . . perhaps I should go and find out.

He'd slept badly, struggling with the strange bed. The sheets seemed too stiff and the pillow too soft. He'd taken the pillow from the other bed and propped it up behind. But nothing seemed to work. A greyish morning light eventually seeped through the window curtains, barely illuminating the room. Better get on with it, he thought, switching on the bed lamp. He'd showered, shaved and dressed when there was a knock on the door. "Breakfast!"

The tray contained a pot of hot tea, milk, with sugar, salt and pepper in tiny packets; a small packet of Corn Flakes, some toast with jam and butter in plastic containers and when he lifted the lid on the plate, were two poached eggs, sausages and a slice of bacon. He smiled. Not much has changed! Some sunshine cracked into the room as he began to tuck into the food. Well, might be a brighter day, after all. When he had re-packed his suitcase he made for the door, turned for a last look at the room and wondered how many people had been there before him. How much sex had taken place on those beds and perhaps some young people had been conceived there. Such is the way of the world . . . opportunity and survival. Hotels, motels, guest houses the world over had been, and still would be, the breeding grounds for much of humanity. Don't forget the tents and caravans, he mused, as he closed the door. The bright young manager welcomed him with a smile. Sleep well? No, he didn't. He flashed his Visa card across a terminal, nodded to the young man and headed for the car. "Your receipt!" He kept on walking.



Betsy turned over instantly. Engine's still in good shape, he thought, even though she's seen better days. Can't beat good old fashioned German technology. The 1991 330E swung out of the motel grounds, whispering pale fumes behind it. 24 valve, 6-cyl auto, he'd bought it with the proceeds of his sixth novel *Ice Terror*. Wouldn't get much for it these days, he thought, even though some were still bringing good prices. He was thinking about the Chinese rubbish now on the the roads — they won't last. They don't have that pure steel for their bodies, for a start. They're only here for a short time. Quick buy, short life, quick sell. Turnover, that's what it's all about . . . nothing made to last. He switched the radio on. Just past 9.00 a.m., 3AW Melbourne. The familiar voice of Neil Mitchell came over, seemed to be conversing with a caller about Covid-19 and not getting much headway. Conspiracy, all of it, said the caller . . . and those vaccination needles are the world government's way of injecting another disease that will kill off much of the population. It's all cleverly designed to keep populations down. Tom laughed. Conspiracies! Where would we be without them? No good books, that's for sure. No best sellers without all the conspiracies!

The old St. Andrew's Church came into view and the hall at the rear where he and Caroline had danced the nights away in younger days. He was going to drive past, when he saw the front entrance door to the church was ajar. Might take a peek, just for old times' sake. The Merc came to a halt and he slowly climbed out, took his walking stick from the back seat. How long was it? He couldn't remember. It all seemed so long ago. There had been marriages here, almost his at one time, but that was another story.

The door creaked, and he stopped. He knew the face that stared down at him from near the pulpit. The woman was dusting, making it her business it seemed, to keep alive that which was long dead. Unless of course, there was the invisible world still here . . . the long gone spirits of Penifeld, and perhaps an angel or two still watching over the last remnants of a worshipful place. Her eyebrows rose at the sight of him. An aged woman, perhaps much the same vintage as himself. He struggled with a name as he walked with his stick toward her. All the furnishings were still in place as they had been that Saturday as he sat in the rear pew watching a wedding take place, which he thought should not be. A forbidding day, with storm clouds on the horizon. The day he left the town for good.

"Fran . . . Frances . . . Franny!"

"Oh my Lord . . . surely, it can't be? Tom . . . Oh Tom!"

She dropped the duster. She beamed as he walked towards her. "Oh Tom, where have you been? What have you been doing? It's been so long."

They embraced. He held her for some time, as she nestled her head into his neck. He smelt a perfume from decades ago . . . what was it now? Hartnells? She kissed him on his cheek. "Tom, you're a bad lad. You never wrote. Come, sit and talk with me."

They sat on the front pew directly forward to the pulpit, a place he had never sat, never wanted to sit. She placed her hand on his thigh and looked at him. "The world's bashed you around a bit, hey, Tom Marshall. But I've read some of your books. They're good, but you put too much of yourself in them. I can read between the lines." He stared at her with a half smile on his face. He could see the early beauty still there behind some wrinkles and the grey of what was once an auburn shock of hair. She'd aged well. Figure still curvaceous. Good pair of legs. Her lustrous brown eyes were still the same, and the lightly curved eyebrows. How many times had he kissed those delicate ears? They'd had their time, but it was always in fun. He'd had no serious thoughts about Frances and nor she, and then one day, he was gone.

"You know," she said, running her hand down his cheek. "I've still got that book you gave me for my 19th." Surprised, he said "Oh, Franny and Zooey!"

"I think Salinger influenced you in your own writing, did he not? You know, *Catcher in the Rye* and all that. There was something about you that was Holden Caulfield."

He laughed. "That stirrer! Not sure," he said. "Tell me, what are you doing here in this deserted building? It's all gone, Frances. Hymns, prayers, sermons, all gone."

"Is it? For all your worldly knowledge, Tom, you're still missing something. This is where I still find my strength, and I have to give something back. That's why I am here dusting, cleaning, keeping things together. You, perhaps, only see a vacant old building, but I see these aged timbers impregnated with all the good that was ever created here. There is another world, you should know that. Nothing is ever lost, and the time will return when wonderful things will occur."



“Huh, you sound like some ancient seer of old testament days. But you’re probably right. Without a belief in the infinite we are all lost. I have struggled with that in my novels, struggled to make the people in it, though human, at the same time aware that they are part of something so vast, so stimulating, so . . . so unpredictable.”

She had the smile that all the young lads would have killed for back in the old days, and the way she pulled a beer in that pub was kind of sexy in itself. “So, you’re not such an old atheist, after all, eh? I suppose you’ve been out there, to see where she is?”

His breathing was rapid. “Yes. Had a little ceremony all by myself.”

Frances’s eyes were moist. “She would have liked that. You bugged it all up, didn’t you! What did you do? She was yours for the keeping!”

He grunted. “Old age together, sitting by the TV? That’s not what she would have had. We weren’t made for that.”

“But you were so well matched. You were so in love. Was it because you were too bloody selfish to give up a part of your career for her?”

“There was more to it than that, you know it.”

Her lips were tight. Her brown eyes wide.

“So,” he continued. “What does the ex-barmaid of Allworth’s do with the remainder of her life now that Harcourt is no longer around?”

“You remember Gemma, the youngest?”

He nodded.

“She married somewhat late, to a lovely feller from Ararat, a career air force officer. Smart devil, too. Managed a diplomatic posting to London, then Berlin. They made some good investments over the years and bought a hobby farm down by Warragul, semi-retired now. I’m grandmother to three lovely little girls. Well, not so little now, all in their early twenties, waiting for some mongrel lads to come along and pounce. I go down often. Still drive my little Corolla.”

“Long drive.”

“Sure, but I take my dog Chrissy with me for company. Poodle.”

“Lonely?”

“No more than usual. What about you?”

“My work keeps that well away from me. Another book almost finished.”

“I heard about Stephanie. London, wasn’t it? If I’d known where to send it, I would have sent a card.”

“Sorry. Steph was the correspondent, not me. I thought she would have had your address, and vice versa.”

Frances shook her head. Her eyes were still moist. He knew she was trying to hold it back and he wrapped his arm around her shoulders. “They caught the bastard who ran her down, but he only got two years inside. Drugs.”

He could feel her shaking. “It’s all right,” he said. “We had a good marriage, we were close, but not all that close. More or less a pleasant convenience, wouldn’t you say? Much like yours.”

She looked up at him. “Harcourt! There were times when I could’ve wished him to hell, but what’s the point? No use keeping grudges.”

“Is he buried here?”

She stared at the timber floor. “No. He wasn’t wanted here, never here . . . not after what he did.” •

*To be continued.*

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