

The Country Singer - Extract ...

(Chapter 5 – Other Septembers)

Declan stands in the doorway of the room behind the garage – the accommodation Meg Halloran has so generously offered – and surveys the worn floor covering and unmade bed. There are threadbare patches in the carpet and a large oil stain near his feet.

Sadly the furniture looks as though it's seen better days. The torn blue-and-white ticking on the mattress stares back at him accusingly and he thinks that the room is not so much different from the one he's stayed in the night before, and the night before that. Closing the screen door behind Meg Halloran, he walks across the room, placing his suitcase and guitar on the laminex table.

What's he going to do in this place for a week? How will he fill time? He already knows what kind of town this is, without asking. Obviously there's no television in a place this remote, and no picture theatre. He hasn't even brought a book to read.

'Damn!' he mutters softly to himself.

He's not a man of explosive temper, rather there's a quiet building up of frustration inside him, an air of annoyance. He'd rather be on the road than standing in this rarely-used room with the worn and stained reminders of other people's lives. Too long he's been living like this, he acknowledges. Perhaps its time he settled down again, found a place of his own. Maybe he's been too long on the road.

There's a musty smell to the room, the stale odour of disuse. Dispirited, he throws open the window, letting the torn and grubby curtain billow inwards with the breeze. Then he lies on the bed, hands under his head as he stares up towards the ceiling.

The paint is peeling there, flakes hanging suspended above him. He imagines it falling on him as he sleeps, layering itself across his eyes and nose until his face is covered and he is no longer visible. He could suffocate, he thinks, and then he checks himself. Too long he's lived the solitary life, immersed in his own weird imaginings. Paint flakes? Really! He needs to get out more, spend less time in lonely rooms like these.

To the right, a spider's webs loops its way across one corner of the room, linking the two walls with lacy filigree, the carcasses of several flies caught in its mass. Of the spider there is no sign.

In the distance, he hears a car stutter into life, and in the trees outside a cicada begins its shrill call. A desultory breeze blows in through the open window, bringing with it the scent of freshly-mown grass. He closes his eyes, thinking of other rooms, other towns, other Septembers.

It had been September when he'd first met Susan, a day not so unlike today. Her father had owned the local pub and he'd arrived in town, dusty from the day's travel. She'd shown him to his room. Up the stairs she'd gone, in front of him, and as he walked behind her he'd noticed the swing of her hips and the way her dark auburn hair fell down past her shoulders, draping across them like a cape. Then, at the doorway, she'd turned and smiled, and he'd known with sudden clarity that all his life he'd been searching for her, and that somehow their futures would be entwined as surely as the links on the gold chain that circled her neck.

It had been Susan who had nick-named him 'the country singer'. She'd said it first in a lilting teasing voice, dusky with desire the first night he'd taken her to his bed.

'All my life I've been waiting for you,' she'd added, kissing him hard until he thought his body might melt and dissolve with hers, so fully had she encompassed him, both physically and spiritually. 'Why did you take so long to find me?'

He hadn't known how to reply.

Why indeed?

Surely there should have been a path, distinct and clear, leading him to her, but it seemed he had stumbled upon her accidentally, and love had come suddenly and swiftly, without warning, catching him up in its force and carrying him along, a not-unwilling participant.

'I have nothing to give you,' he'd said, pressing her hand against his mouth. 'I have no home, no regular job. Being on the road is a nomadic life.'

'Just give me yourself,' she'd replied. 'That's all I need.'

'I love you,' he'd whispered later, after their passion had been spent and they lay amongst the rumpled sheets, arms and legs and hearts entwined. He'd run his mouth along the length of her neck, taking in the sweet smell of her. Even now, years later, he still imagines he can taste her skin. 'With all my heart, I love you.'

And he'd known it was true.

It had been the following spring before they'd married. By that time she'd accompanied him halfway across the state, taking the loneliness from his life and showing him a love he'd never imagined possible. His hotel rooms had become more companionable, like a home of sorts, and she waited for him at the front of the stage while he performed. From his

vantage point, his eyes always sought her out in the semi-dark and he felt calm and peaceful, knowing she was there.

He wrote prolifically, songs that both publicly and privately declared his love for her. The words surged into his head in flowing snatches when he least expected, while driving the truck between gigs or in the dead of night when nothing stirred and Susan lay beside him, sleeping. There was a passion in his voice then, an intensity that often brought him perilously close to tears.

After a year, he gave up the road and they settled in Perth, and the night-time silence of the bush was replaced by the muted roar of traffic. He worked nights in a small bar. The wages were lousy but he earned good tips. They bought a small cottage by the river and Susan hoped for a baby to make their relationship complete, but month after month he'd seen the hope die, replaced by a despondency in her eyes, her face.

'Never mind,' he'd reassured her. 'Relax. It'll happen when the time's right.'

He'd seen her look longingly at women pushing prams, or their bellies huge with child, and knew he was really powerless to comfort her. His words couldn't erase that awful longing inside her. It ate away at her, at him, causing little niggles and fractures. *Why us?* he'd wanted to scream at the night sky, casting the question to the God he believed watched over them. *Why us?*

All Susan had wanted was a baby. At the time it had seemed such a minor request.

One night, after his shift in the bar was over, a man had come up and introduced himself. He was a manager, he said, of several local singers, and he'd liked what he'd seen, and heard, that night. 'You've got a certain style,' he'd said. 'And the songs are good. Who writes them?'

'I do.'

The man nodded. 'Very impressive. Perhaps you'd like to put together a demo tape. I might have some interested backers.'

The rest happened so quickly. Suddenly Declan was offered a generous record deal. Pledges were made by executives in plush city offices. His future, and Susan's, looked promising. The Susan was given the bad news and everything came crashing down. His career was suddenly unimportant.

September, he thinks now, the word causing a shudder to run across his shoulders as he tries to push the memory back into the dark recesses of himself, and fails. It rises up inside him, insistent, demanding he pay it proper attention. For too long he's kept it buried.

It had also been September, three years after their marriage, when he'd laid her in the damp ground. It had been a day of bleak rain and unseasonable cold, the chill wind echoing the aching misery in his heart. As suddenly as she'd come into his life, three years earlier, she'd gone, leaving a hole too big to ever fill. After the graveside service had ended and the few mourners gone back to their warm homes, he'd sat on the ground next to her grave, unable to take himself from her side, beyond even tears.

Declan draws a deep breath, remembering, the pain still raw inside him even after all this time. Susan: dark auburn hair and smiling mouth, freckles bridging across her nose. Breasts round and full, enough flesh to cup his palms around. It had been five years now since that rainy day, but God! he still missed her.

He'd taken to the road with his guitar again, after she'd gone, walking away from the record deal, and the memories. The plans he'd made had been for Susan's future, as much as his own, and they no longer had importance.

Instead, he'd found moderate success in small local halls in towns like this one; towns where the population was starved for music, for culture.

He'd stayed close to the coast at first, not venturing far inland. Then as the months, then years, had passed, he'd travelled further out, into the more remote areas, like this one. Back through the mining areas he'd once visited with Susan – such as Tom Price and Wittenoom –, and towns with Aboriginal names whose spelling ended in the letters 'ing' or 'up': Katanning. Gnowengerup. Manjinup. Koolyanobbing.

But the old songs he'd written for Susan, had deserted him. Now he sang other people's words and music. Songs he'd heard on the radio. Songs that had no personal meaning. All the tunes he'd written for her, back in his happy days, he stored away, unable to bring himself to voice them again.

Meanwhile, between the gigs and the travelling, he knows he can't escape the memories of her, though he's tried long and hard to, and one day he's going to have to stop running. Even now the anger and frustration burn away inside him. Anger at a God who has taken the one person he'd loved, and frustration that he'd been unable to stop the cancer that had eaten away at her, reducing her to tired bones.

His last living memory of her slides towards him now: Susan lying on the hospital bed. Her skin is the same bleached colour as the sheets. Her hair is fanned out like a bloodied halo on the pillow. 'Hold me,' she whispers and in his mind's eye he threads his arms through the tangle of tubes that nourish her ravaged body and dull the pain. Through the

coarse fabric of the hospital gown, he can feel the bones jutting from under her ribs.

'Hold me,' she whispers again, her voice so faint that he wonders if she has actually spoken or he has imagined the words, so tired is he from sitting beside her day and night, not daring to leave for any long stretch of time in case the unspeakable happens. She raises her hand to his and he catches her fingers within his own. *Birdlike, fleshless*, he thinks, and his heart overflows towards her, wishing that some miracle could let him assume her pain, to spare her this agonising death.

'I am holding you,' he replies.

He wonders if she can, in fact, feel his embrace, and his voice sounds inordinately loud in that hospital room, bouncing off white sterile walls and reverberating back at him from what seems like a hundred different angles. He imagines the words sliding under the closed door that affords them a little privacy, and floating down the hospital hallway, able to be heard by everyone who passes.

'I love you. I need you,' he reassures her. 'Please don't leave me. We can make it together, you and me. What about the children we're going to have. All those little babies...'

And while he sits there, that last time, his arms wrapped carefully around her emancipated body, whispering his words of love and need and hope, the life ebbs from her. One long shudder, one drawn-out rasping breath, and she lies still.

'Susan,' he whispers, his voice old as centuries. Then: '*Susan!*'

Dear Lord! He can't believe she's gone, isn't ready (will he ever be?) for her passing. Instead he wants to shake her, to judder the life back into her.

Consciously he wills her to breathe, draws back and searches her face for a sign of life, but her features have slackened and her eyes are closed. Sensibility tells him to lay her back on the bed and release her from his hold.

He sits for what seems like a long time, clasping her hand. Sobs shudder through his body as he watches her, his mind taking in a thousand single snapshot memories that will have to carry him through a lifetime. Eventually a nurse comes and unfolds his hand from hers. An orderly follows, lifting Susan easily onto a white-sheeted trolley, and takes her away, away to the damp ground.

Now, remembering but not wanting to, Declan rolls over and buries his face in the pillow, pressing his grief back into that dark place inside him. That had been five years ago, and he's been travelling and running from the memories ever since. In that time he's seen the inside of too many dimly-lit and acoustically-bereft local halls, and too many bars. There

have been too many lonely motel rooms, rooms like this one. He lets his eyes travel the walls and furniture and he wishes, not for the first time, that there had been a child during those three years he and Susan had shared, some enduring reminder of their love, some continuation of her.

A scratching noise at the screen door catches his attention and he levers himself into an upright position on the edge of the mattress, searching with his feet for the floor. When he finally opens the door, a cat sits there, staring at him.

Its grey, the cat, with yellow eyes and a scar on one ear. 'Hello,' he says, bending down to scratch the underside of its chin. The cat purrs loudly and winds itself around his legs. 'Where do you belong?'

As he says the words, he glances across at the building towards which the woman – Meg Halloran, she had introduced herself – had gone earlier. The house is a square box-like structure, similar to the houses in many of the country towns he's seen, with a verandah all around and the western side shaded by a stand of bonewood. As he watches, he sees her come around the corner of the house, a basket of washing balanced on her hip. She places the basket on the ground and proceeds to hang the wet garments on the line.

She moves, he thinks, like the cat, all languid and fluid and graceful. He can see the vague outline of her breasts as she extends herself towards the line, arms outstretched. Then she straightens and, as though aware of his scrutiny, or maybe even his presence at the doorway, she glances in his direction.

Declan knows she cannot possibly see him through the netting on the screen door, yet he pulls back, positioning himself so he can no longer see her. And when he looks again, seconds later, she is gone, and all that is left to show she has ever been there is the washing slapping happily in the breeze.

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