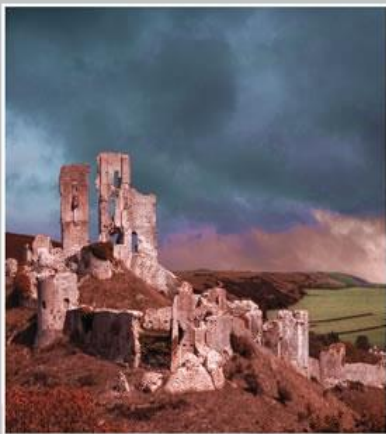


O C A S O P R E S S : A N O V E L

The Madness
of Summer



Colin Holcombe

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by Colin Holcombe

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THE MADNESS OF SUMMER

— A NOVEL —

Colin Holcombe

Chapter One

After the performance I saw my family off and returned to the Buckmayne Community Centre. Chairs had been stacked away, and a crowd pressed round the makeshift bar. Martins brandished our drinks.

‘What was that again?’ I said when we clinked glasses.

‘Whittaker, my dear boy, I was asking about the woman you were avoiding earlier.’

‘Celia.’

Martins pulled out a notebook. ‘Celia the fairy was played by . . . ’

‘Imogen Lawley.’

'Played by Imogen Lawley, who looked ravishing in a lavender-blue number. Any more charmers you know?'

'Penny Lawley. In white over there, talking to the vicar. She was the shepherdess.'

'I do know my Iolanthe. In fact I'll go over to have a word with her now, which will let you get back to the sister.'

'Just wanting an interview.'

'Imogen can ask me any time. But hark, the damsel approaches.'

'Imogen,' I said when she stood in front of us, 'this is Joel Martins, director of Casebook Films. Imogen Lawley, reporter on the Dorset Times.'

She turned to survey the plump figure with its tangled mop of grey hair. 'Doesn't look like a film director to me', she decided, staring up through those extravagant lashes.

'Very true,' conceded Martins, seeing Imogen pose in exasperating innocence. 'But we have to employ the most unlikely types. Even Stephen here is going to be a star of the small screen.'

“History in the Community”. “Time and Tradition”. We haven’t decided on a title yet. Depends on what we find locally. Could be quite rewarding, wouldn’t you think?’

‘I don’t know what you mean, Mr Martins.’

‘I mean you should come for a screen test.’ He gave me a flustered look before turning back to the woman who smiled at him indifferently. ‘With your sister. We need local people.’

‘Which sister, Mr Martins?’

‘Good God, Whittaker. Is the place overrun with talent?’

‘Whole tribe of them’, I said gloomily, wondering if Martins knew what he was taking on.

But in fact Melissa had married and moved away, to Ludlow or somewhere, the smart wife of an accomplished country lawyer. Penny was the left-over, the damaged goods, and only Imogen could be called shameless, the vamp with the pale green eyes and snub nose. ‘Excuse me, you two’, I said. ‘Ought to circulate.’

'Who now?' said Martins, reaching for his notebook.

'Ted Ten Percent. Imogen will explain.' The woman gave me an open stare: Imogen with the tight hold on life, who gives exactly what she promises.

'I shall come over shortly, as soon as I've tied up a screen test with this entrancing damsel.'

You'll be sorry, I thought, threading my way over to a raffish and clearly inebriated Edward Tennant at the drinks table. He surveyed me expectantly, screwing up an eye. 'Dr Whittaker, I believe. The very man.' He turned to the barman. 'I say, could you give us something decent? Johnnie Walker maybe.'

'Thanks, but I'll stick to this.'

'You should accept hospitality when it's offered. Not every day that a patron of the Dorchester art scene is so lavish.' He leant over the table, extracted the bottle from the barman, and topped up his drink. 'Sure?'

'Didn't know you'd moved into the arts.'

'I am a patron of everything worthy in the area.' He ignored my look, and handed the bottle to the barman, who placed it safely out of reach. 'Who's the untidy man in the loud suit?' he said, nodding across the room.

'Joel Martins. Director for the new TV series.'

'You keep strange company, but I expect it was Jill's idea.'

'Eddie, the opportunity grew out of the BBC Time Watch series, as you know. After we made those finds at Leyton.'

'Well, I hope your wife has persuaded you to leave the shabby respectability of academic life. To spread your wings, and perform on the greater stage of life.'

Clearly, he didn't know the situation, and I let him ramble on.

'Now listen, Whittaker. I'm going to bend your ear with something you wouldn't have dreamt of in a million years.'

'Nothing to do with your website, I hope. The local tourism article Phil Duffy drafted and you rewrote, bringing threats of legal action.'

'Nothing like that.'

'And there was the bust-up with Saintly Sandy, remember, after your funny piece about the Church Fete. Not to mention the unpleasantness with the Countryside Association.'

'We are now a responsible, well-informed and forward-looking company.' He swilled his drink, and sniffed thoughtfully.

'So what is it?' I said, seeing the bartender give me a jovial wink.

'You've seen your write-up there?'

'Book on local history, forthcoming TV series? Yes, most satisfactory.' I looked around for someone to join.

'Well, we've added to it', he continued. 'Not that much. Still the smashing photo.'

'The pugilist with the angry freckles? I didn't want you to use that one, Eddie.'

'Now bear with me, Whittaker, old man. You have to look the part.'

'No I don't.'

'As the organiser of the Leyton Rings Festival.' He pushed back a lock of hair and said, 'Good name that, what d'ye know, almost Celtic.'

'Festival? What festival?'

'The Leyton Rings one we're helping you with, Imogen and I.'

'Wait a minute', I said. 'You're organising some event up there. On the Leyton Rings?'

'Not really a rock concert. A celebration of alternative lifestyles.'

'Not on my dig you're not.'

'But it's not your site, is it? More the Stoke Monkton Archaeological Centre's.'

'Which I run.'

'Under the auspices of Bath South University. Isn't that a grand name?'

'Is this going somewhere?'

'Now the farm's been left to the girls and Phil Duffy', he continued, staring into his glass as he emptied it. 'And of course I don't know why. I'm just saying the girls got ninety per cent, but Duffy's is the remaining ten. All of them think the festival is a good idea, a fantastic idea.'

'God almighty, Eddie, have you thought of the consequences, even supposing you got the funds? Or the publicity?'

'That's where you come in, with your TV series.'

'There won't be a series if a rock festival happens.'

'It's not a rock concert, though they'll be a lot of music. Perhaps ancient stuff as well.'

'Not the Pagan Historical Centre? You're not roping them in, are you? The Countryside Association would go ballistic.'

'Everyone is catered for. Quite ecumenical. A multicultural event to put Dorset on the map.'

'Dorset does not need to be put on the map. It's overrun with tourists and second-homers as it is. You should read the letters in the local press.'

'I do. Imogen writes them. Or some of them.' He beamed at my annoyance. 'Whittaker, I just thought I should sound you out before going ahead. Of course you'll get a stall there. Or you could run a tour like the Saturday rambles. Up to you. Everyone's enthusiastic about getting academic kudos.'

'Getting me the sack, more likely.' First came the hours explaining the TV series to Jill, to whom status and respectability were family virtues, and now there would be evasions to my Principal. 'Listen, would you?' I said. 'You can't just barge in and take over. It's taken months, years in fact, to get this TV series going. Endless meetings, screenshots, a whole army of consultants and focus groups.'

'Which will pay off.'

'Jill didn't see me for weeks. You've no idea what trouble that caused.'

'Seems to me you're sunk either way, old man. But you can talk it through with my partner.'

'No thank you.'

'As you like. See my friend here has another drink', he said to the barman, and strode off, the sleek crest of hair flapping as the head lurched forward.

'You're a difficult man to keep up with', said Martins when he emerged, breathless again. 'That was Ted Ten Percent, I take it. Nothing to do with what our fairy told me?'

'No.'

'Whittaker, my dear boy, you're supposed to be showing me around, filling the scene with local colour. Can't just leave it to Imogen, can we?'

'What's she been saying?'

'Something about a Leyton Rings Festival, which you're committed to.'

'On the contrary, I am not in the slightest committed. I've only just heard about it.'

'Well, it would be an almighty spanner in the works. The archetypal market town, a scene

steeped in the past and its ancient customs, slowly adapting to change but keeping its character. Then we learn a whacking great rock festival's arriving. Hardly the thing, is it?

'It's an alternative culture festival, apparently.'

'Call it what you like, but it's not going to wash. Our viewers want to escape into the past, to belong to the unchanging rhythms of rural life.'

'I get the picture.'

'You need to do more than that, my dear boy. You need to kill it off.'

'Phil will see sense, and Penny won't have given her permission. There's another daughter somewhere, too.'

'Melissa. Imogen's spoken to her. Another hopeful who can hear the cash tills ringing.'

'Christ.'

'So I can leave it in your capable hands?'

'All right. I'll start with Penny.'

But the woman wasn't now talking to the vicar, and in pushing through to the far side of the hall I

collided with Neville Barnes, who put a heavy arm across. He was wearing the usual red shirt, which looked ironed for a change. 'Just a moment, Doc', he said.

'Trying to find Penny Lawley. She was around here.'

'You should talk to me.'

'Shortly.'

He settled his weight on the other leg. 'Now what's this I hear about your blocking the Leyton Rings Festival? Tell us it's not true.'

'Look, Ned, I don't want to discuss it now. I can see all kinds of problems, but maybe something toned down will keep everyone happy.'

'What problems?'

Anything involving Barnes caused problems was the truthful answer, but I mumbled something about permission and policing.

'Fascists.'

'Then there's the Countryside Association. They have a lot of influence round here. Courts, local government.'

'Lackeys of the bourgeois dictatorship.'

'I need to see Penny.'

'You won't get anywhere with her.'

Any more than you did with Imogen, I was tempted to remark. Barnes's mooning after the predatory Imogen has been one of the happier topics of conversation for years. 'Ned,' I said, 'let's have this conversation another time.'

'We've always supported you.'

'Lots of volunteers from the Pagan Historical Centre. Yes, most helpful. Can I find Penny now?'

'More than helpful. Without us you'd never have got started.'

'Well we did. Once those finds came to light.'

'Handy, weren't they?' He looked pleased, as he does when the odd thought blunders into that brutish head.

'Now don't be silly.'

'You hadn't thought about that, had you?' He gave me a friendly shove.

In fact I'd been thinking about it a lot, and even Phil admitted they were a puzzle. But you can't ignore evidence, and the dig started.

'You want to know how we did it?'

'If you've been playing games I don't want to know. All right?'

'The Dorset Times, Wiltshire Gazette. Probably the BBC. I mean, would you want to build a whole series around a hoax? Expert fooled by locals. Dr Steven Whittaker was last night shown to have been taken in by a joke perpetrated by the locals of Buckmayne, the town which is to feature in a television series. Doesn't sound too good to me.'

'We found corroborating evidence.'

'Of course you did.' He leered at me.

Was that why the Pagan Historical Centre had been so keen to help? I began to feel uneasy. 'Think I'll go and see Penny.'

'She's on our side.'

‘Not if she’s got any sense,’ I growled, the famous anger beginning to make itself felt, ‘you great Bolshevik lump.’

‘Now see here, Doc. Don’t you start calling me names, or there’s a few things we could say about you.’

But the temper was up. ‘Just get out of my way, would you? You and the pagans, for Christ’s sake.’

‘But at least we don’t have people humping our wives, do we?’

‘Push off, Ned.’

‘Twice a week while hubby is out archaeologizing. The supercool hospital administrator. Bet she’s not so cool then.’

I raised my fist but had it caught in a tight grip. ‘Just remember what we’ve got on you.’

‘Nothing’, I said, feeling the blood swelling the veins and the eyes hurting. I was conscious of people looking as Barnes smiled and ambled away. ‘Not dull here, is it?’ said Martins as he came over. ‘Like to fill me in?’

‘Just a difference of opinion.’

‘Nothing to do with that festival? I do hope not, my dear boy, because I’ve just been talking to, let me see, an Aubrey James. He was surprised to have the news.’

‘Jones. Countryside Association man.’ Yes, Aubrey wouldn’t be pleased.

‘Seemed to intimate there could be serious trouble. Mentioned the pagans.’

‘Joel, go home. I’ll sort this out, and see you in the morning.’

‘No, they sound interesting.’ He made a note with his thick pencil.

‘As you like’, I said. ‘Neville Barnes is over in the corner.’

‘I am hastening there this very moment. But Jones not James? Right, got that.’

He plunged into the crowd, on the far side of which I could now see Jones lifting his eyebrows at me. I waved and intimated I’d be over shortly, while I looked round for Penny. Perhaps she was changing out of her costume, or had gone home.

I fought my way to the exit, smiling at several who wanted to detain me, and, placing the glass on the small table by the door, went through into the night air. Penny was not in the car park, and I was slowly turning to go inside when I saw a figure on a bench near the war memorial.

‘Aren’t you cold like that?’ I said, coming up and draping my jacket round the bare shoulders.

‘You had enough of the celebrations?’

‘You were very good. Everyone said so.’

‘Thank you.’ She turned and gave me that enigmatic smile. ‘But I’m glad it’s over.’

‘You could probably take it on tour. I heard Tessa Jones has plans. Even Yeovil.’

‘What did you want to talk about?’

That was Penny: abrupt, not one for small talk. ‘Well, it doesn’t have to be now, but sometime I would like to discuss the festival. What Eddie and Imogen seem to have cooked up.’

‘Oh, the festival.’

‘As I say, sometime.’ She didn’t respond, but stared across the dark street and down the hill to

where the stone frontage of the Black Swan glowed in the floodlights. A car started up, and there were snatches of conversation behind us from the Community Centre. People were going home, or for a last drink somewhere. 'I think tongues are going to wag,' I said, 'if we sit here too long.' She didn't move and I was uncomfortably aware of how near she was, and shifted a little.

'People always talk', she said, looking up and smiling.

'Well, with the most . . . ' But I couldn't think of the right word, and added, 'Look, it's getting cold. Perhaps we can talk some other time?'

'Imogen said she'd run me, but you can take me back if you like.'

'To Leyton?'

'If Jill doesn't mind.'

It seemed churlish to refuse, though the figure looked fuller in its low-cut dress, the large eyes and hair in loose curls resembling some intaglio

of the Ptolemaic queens long before Cleopatra was thought of. 'Do you need to change?' I said.

She seemed not to hear, and said, 'Is that your car over there, the Rover?'

'I'm arranging something better with Jill shortly.'

We didn't speak for a while, and I tried not to remember Penny as I had first met her: the queen of the county, locals had told me, though that title probably belonged to Melissa.

Penny caught me looking at her, and smiled. 'Like old times', she said.

'So why don't you tell me about the Leyton Rings Festival?' I said, glancing in the rear mirror. 'Everyone else seems to know about it.'

'Do they?'

'I'm only making conversation.'

'You're not uncomfortable with me, are you, Steven?'

'I don't want you to read too much into it.'

'Think Jill will come back?'

'When whatever she's holding out for is satisfied, no doubt. Like most women.' I resented making the comment, and we drove on in silence, turning off on one of the minor roads. 'Wasn't directed at you', I added.

'Do you still want her back?'

'Can we talk about something else? It's just a temporary misunderstanding.'

'Seven years is more than temporary.' She half turned to look at me, but then wound down the window. I could feel the night air with its warm smell of cattle and fields, into which Penny's perfume dissolved, so unlike the metallic scents that Jill prefers, which set her off as someone neatly tailored and in control of things, which of course she is. Abruptly I changed gear as we approached the steep stretch that leads to the Rings, not replying when Penny went on, 'It's still there, you know.'

'The first turning on the left, isn't it?'

'The land of lost content.'

‘Penny, I’m sorry about your marriage, but there it is.’

‘And I’m sorry about yours.’

‘That’s well out of bounds’, I said. What did she expect—a surrender to that dreaming nature that undid my father, made him into the introspective failure, the man who never made a single friend?

‘Steven, I’m talking about something else. When you were at home here. At Leyton where everything has its particular shape and colour. You were more alive then.’

‘Everything comes at a price, doesn’t it? As I keep telling Jill, you can’t run the house, look after Megan, be a university lecturer and TV personality all at the same time.’

‘But you don’t have to be any of those, do you?’

‘Sink into the country yokel, is that what you’re saying?’ Penny was as sensitive as I was to surroundings, but I wasn’t buying into that line.

'You've missed the turning, though I expect it looks different at night.'

'You were talking,' I said as the signpost came up on the right. 'We'll go down to the valley and back by the other route.'

'But you wouldn't sense it.'

I let the remark pass. There was now a moon that lit up the white gash of the road and threw shadows under the wind-bent hedges.

'Don't you feel the night breathing into us?' She wound the window right down. 'Is that better?'

'No, it's cold.' I began to wish I'd not offered the lift, and we now had even more time together.

'You should let life happen. That's what I think.'

I could feel the closeness of the woman, the drowsy happiness in the body, but with the schoolteacher's practised common sense I said, 'So that's how your marriage worked out, is it? Just happened, and then didn't happen.'

'You don't understand.' She looked at me and smoothed down the dress. 'I lost my bearings when I left the area.' The voice was hurt, and I was again annoyed at my words.

We drove up the hill and stopped by the farm entrance, where I got out and unfastened the gate. When I turned, Penny was standing close to me, the look enigmatic and penetrating. 'Unless you want to enter the land of enchantment?' she said.

'I'll leave fairy matters to Imogen.'

'Steven, it's nothing to do with power or spells or history. It's finding out who we are.'

I laughed savagely. 'I can't believe that, not of grown-up people.'

'Come in and talk to me about the festival. I'd like that.'

'Just stop there, will you? It's a madness, however much you or Imogen need the money.'

'We have to survive. Even you.'

'I'm going to say goodnight.' I hoped she wouldn't feel the reluctance in the words, which hung in the air.

'Goodnight Steven.'

I took the hand, finding it warm and inviting, but climbed swiftly back into the Rover, and for some reason wound up the window before swinging the car round. I saw her in the rear mirror make an elaborate curtsey—a strange, vulnerable but entrancing image that stayed in my thoughts the whole drive back to Buckmayne.

Chapter Two

Imogen was late for our meeting the following morning, and I had time over a second half of shandy to think how my Sunday mornings had been spent, a prospect that now seemed strangely far away. Jill would be catching up with paperwork, and I'd be finishing the household chores before collecting the neighbour's kid, and Megan, if she was pestered enough.

'Do you want to come to the park with us this morning or not?' was how I started.

'Only if you're going to spend time with me. Like Uncle David does. Only that's a secret.' She folded a careful smile into that tranquil face.

‘Just make up your mind, if you would, Megan’, I repeated, now tying my running shoes. ‘We’re leaving shortly.’

‘But Mummy’s promised to take me shopping.’

‘Then you’re going shopping, aren’t you?’ How Jill was as a child I didn’t know, but surely not this angelic creature with the hateful tongue.

‘But it’s not fair you take Tim and not me.’

‘Megan, last week, if you remember, we rescheduled the whole weekend round you, and then you decided not to go.’

‘It was raining.’

‘So this weekend we’re going back to the first plan’, I said pleasantly, always pleasantly. ‘It’s the park at nine-thirty, and then you’re free to do what you want.’

‘Only so you can go off on your stupid walks. That’s what Mummy calls them.’ So had my teacher, and half the class, but I had formed the school historical society, and it had gone on to win medals.

Megan hadn't come that last time, and I returned at ten-thirty to find my wife still working at papers on the dining room table. She looked up, annoyed at the question.

'Steven,' she said, clicking shut the laptop as she leant forward, 'we have a perfectly sensible arrangement. I manage the house in addition to my professional duties. All you have to do is look after Megan, and sometimes the boy next door.'

I thought it best not to mention the garden, cooking, cleaning the house, taking Jill on repeated shopping trips to Bath. 'I'm just saying that if you've promised to buy Megan some new shoes or whatever, could you let me know?'

'I haven't promised.'

'That's what she told me. Why she's sulking in her room.'

Jill's expression didn't change—it never does—but there was a reproving weariness in the voice. 'I said we might consider it. She's exaggerating.'

'Like her Uncle David?' I said, seeing myself as the goal-scorer again, battling his way down the field time after time, blonde hair flapping about his ears. Pass, boy, pass, shouted the sports master, but this maestro never would.

'Not again, Steven.'

'Megan keeps talking about an Uncle David who plays with her.' I repeated, enjoying the spectacle of the controlled administrator thoroughly ruffled.

'Are you keeping an eye on her? We don't want her mixing with unsavoury types.'

'She says this David is your friend and it's their secret.' I went on loosening my running shoes, which I left in the centre of the lounge, just to annoy this most tidy of women.

Jill sighed, and took the offending items into the scullery, placing them in a bowl of disinfectant. 'How many times? This isn't the men's changing room.' For a moment I had a picture of Jill striding through, lecturing men in various stages of undress on the need for order

and discipline. 'Just Megan's sense of fun', Jill continued when she was settled again with her papers. 'You know that.'

But I didn't. For weeks I watched Megan carefully, though she stayed the happy child with the venomous tongue, an oddity I mentioned to Phillip Duffy, when we were one day sitting in the converted church which serves as archaeological storeroom.

'Megan is six', I said. 'Must have some grip on reality by now.'

'What do you think of this?' he said, handing over a fragment.

'Beaker ware. Late Iron Age.'

'Yes,' he said, making an entry in the book, 'supports the earlier finds.'

'Penny's finds. Not the previous excavation at Leyton. That was early Iron Age.'

'Happens.'

'Phil, can we get back to the point? My darling daughter intimates that Jill's having an affair.'

'Does she?'

'But I don't think it's true.'

'So there's nothing to worry about.'

'But why make it up? Seems pointless and spiteful, though Jill doesn't think so.'

'Steven, it's no good talking to me. I'm not saying I didn't consider it, but I didn't get married. Not my bailiwick.'

'Not sure it's mine now.' A stupid remark. I picked up a potsherd, turning it round in my fingers.

'Fine-looking woman', said Duffy, taking the piece and putting it back in the tray. 'Not many like her round here.'

'Holds down an excellent job, looks after Megan, runs the house like clockwork. We make the perfect overachieving couple.' Occasionally I'd collect Jill from the hospital if I was taking her shopping, or had some chore to run for her, and staff were always welcoming. Come in, Dr Whittaker. Your wife won't be long. Saw you on the box last night. Really interesting. Can we get

you a coffee? We were famously loyal, two halves of the same coin, as categorical as the test results awaiting collection at the front desk.

‘Shall I tell you something?’ said Duffy. ‘I never thought I’d end up in this dry old place. And you probably saw your life differently.’

‘I’ve never regretted marrying Jill.’

‘I’m not saying you did, laddo.’

‘Could Penny have supported me while I wrote the book? Or helped swing it with the TV people? A career’s important.’

‘Steven, I’m only suggesting you stop setting yourself targets. If you see life as an obstacle course, then I dare say you’ll get through again.’ He peered through his half-frame glasses at another piece of pottery from the tray. ‘What do you think?’

‘I want to talk about Megan.’

‘Well, this is how I’d be seeing it. We have a fragment of late Iron Age ware, which we describe and classify and place in its proper setting. It’s no different from a thousand such

pieces, and we'll write it up the same way in a dry-as-dust paper to help us on our way from lecturer to professor to leading expert. Some living person with his hopes and dreams made this, but we haven't a clue about what mattered to him.'

'It's called science. We only analyse what we can measure.' I put on the schoolmaster's air, but the thought worried me too, even when the dig was going well. If I was a martinet for proper documentation, and didn't allow anything out until its position had been plotted, it was only to prevent such thoughts creeping up unawares. Even at night, with the self-contained figure of Jill lying beside me, I knew better than to probe that dark headland into which you docked for the stipulated time, and then went off on your proper business.

'So perhaps your poor child is trying to tell you something', Duffy was saying. 'She sees her parents drifting apart. Why she's crying out to be noticed, in the way only her imaginary uncle David does.'

‘Of course Megan is loved.’

‘She wants to be part of a real family, not just slotted into routines. Maybe you were too, Steven. That’s what I’m guessing.’

‘I should quit that line of thought right now. I couldn’t be slotted in anywhere.’

‘Like Phil Duffy then, the solitary child. When contemporaries got jobs locally, settled down and got married, I kept thinking there had to be something else. So I came here. Tried a few manual jobs, then museum work. In an abstract way I was closer to the past than the everyday preoccupations round me.’

I’d heard this before, and looked at the rows of cardboard boxes, the long tiers of them. ‘To end up in a tomb like this?’ I said. ‘Is that what you wanted?’

‘Wanted?’ He looked up at me with that disapproving little nose and then tucked it into the note he was writing.

My thoughts returned to the present scene, where the Black Swan was now filling up with its Sunday crowd, still without Imogen. That conversation echoed in my mind, distant but unnerving. Duffy's family had come from the west Riding, and we'd lived in north-west London, but there was the same feeling that Dorchester offered something different.

I knew that immediately in getting off the train, even at that first June interview. Acceptance came by return, but I remember the disappointment the following September, looking round the teacher's common room after the introductions had been made, at such pleasant, decent but ordinary folk. That evening I bought a map, and walked the length of the town, slowly taking the streets in turn, late into the evening, when I phoned Jill to say the school was fine, which it was. After the first shock of teaching on my own, the days went effortlessly. The Head sat in on one class, and I drew him in, getting him to answer questions, which surprised the boys and

made the girls giggle. He took the exercise in good part, but was nettled, I understood from staffroom comments later.

I didn't care, not until I met Imogen, and everything changed. From that trivial encounter followed the events of the next twelve years—my leaving the school, taking up research, writing the book, meeting Penny, and sticking close to Jill. Sensible years, with solid achievements that now returned to haunt me. Perhaps I wasn't even surprised that only two months after my little talk with Duffy, I returned from a meeting to find the house locked against me. Not really surprised, though even our solicitor was apologetic.

'I'm sorry, but Mrs Whittaker believes the marriage has broken down. Irretrievably, in her view.'

'But we've known each other for a while, so surely you can say something off the record.'

'Steven, I've been engaged by Mrs Whittaker, and that is my formal position.'

'I go up to London as a happily married man and then, the very same day, I come back to find the marriage has mysteriously and irretrievably broken down. We had our differences, but nothing like this. Has she found someone else?'

'I can't say anything that would jeopardize my client's claim that your absence from the home and emotional coldness has finally caused her to sue for divorce. Why she's claiming the house and child.'

'Even when she earns more than me?'

'That's all I can say.' He showed me to the door. 'Get decent representation, and you might make a few inquiries at the hospital. Just a thought, and you didn't hear it from me.'

In fact I heard it from Brian Stacey in the Department, in a roundabout fashion, because his son was undergoing treatment. 'I assumed you knew', he said when I followed up a lunchtime conversation with a coffee in the staff canteen. He looked sheepish. 'Sorry, but one tries not to interfere.'

'Does one?'

'Farley doesn't seem a bad guy. He stood in for Jason's paediatrician once.'

'The well-off ladykiller?'

'Steven, can't you leave it at that?'

But everything behind Jill Wooten's figure was needful information, if only to get at that well-groomed entity who was everyone's idea of success in the caring professions. I'm sure we can do something, Mrs. Roberts. If you'll be kind enough to fill out one of these forms, I'll get someone to attend to it straight away. That's what attracted me, the feeling that life would now be ordered and successful. I can storm and rage at Megan, but Jill will simply say, Oh no, drawing out the words and hanging on them, as though puzzled anyone should ask her. Why don't you sit down here while we get a bite to eat? Or Megan dear, show grandma your drawing book. Megan, turn the computer off, it's time for tea. Yes, now if you please, so you can have some of the special cake you wanted.

I looked around at the Black Swan's usual crowd and raised a glass to a couple of regulars who'd befriended me when I'd been forced to take a flat in Buckmayne, on those few occasions when I wasn't keeping myself busy at Leyton. Now even that stratagem had run into the buffers, if Barnes was speaking the truth. I had every reason to be angry, and my temper wasn't improved when Imogen finally appeared in the pub garden around eleven, and minced towards me. She was wearing a short skirt, tight blouse and cork shoes tied with blue bows. I saw her place one foot carefully in front of the other, but kept my eyes on the tables beyond, where people were now turning to look at her.

'Dr Whittaker, I have kept you waiting. I am sorry.'

'You have.' The professional putdown, which I indulgently softened with, 'But I suppose I should get you a drink.'

‘Spritzer. And make sure they don’t add ice, please.’

‘As madam wishes.’ I could afford to be unbending to someone who was still a schoolgirl, whatever the rumpus she caused among the farming set.

Imogen was sat at another rustic table when I returned, still in sight of a group of local jobs, to whom she presented an aloof profile and knowing smile—as she had when I took her for history that first term. Every teacher learns to spot trouble, and she would be mine I knew from the moment she put her hand up. No, I told her promptly. I’d prefer you to address me as sir or Mr Whittaker, if you would . . . what’s your name? Imogen what? That gained a half-hour’s peace, but soon she was angling that body at the boys again, just as she was here, though now a good deal more developed and provocative.

I continued in my schoolmaster style, but was brought up short when she leant across, stubbed out a cigarette, and said, ‘Steven, can we be friends?’ Two of the lads I could see were

listening in, and there was a round of guffaws at some comment I didn't catch. 'You wanted an interview. We could go somewhere.'

'I'm afraid I have to be in Dorchester later.'

'Big make up with Jill, is it?'

'Imogen, have you brought your reporter's pad?' I said gently, as though giving a mischievous terrier some leeway before reigning it in.

She opened the small handbag and looked in. 'Possibly.'

'So let's get started.' We had an audience now, and I was determined to be the model subject, listening politely to each question before selecting the correct answer.

She put her hands on the table and smiled with a professional coolness. 'How are you getting on in Buckmayne?' she asked.

'The series is shaping up well, though Casebook Films is still looking for extras.'

'And you personally?'

'There has been a good deal of interest in the film series, and many kind offers of help. People have been most generous with their time and ideas.'

She looked at me and laughed, that contrived laugh which is so irritating. 'Overwhelmed with help, would you say?'

I thought of the previous night's conversations, and said, 'Not overwhelmed exactly, no.'

Imogen drew out a slim notebook and said as she wrote, 'Dr Whittaker agreed that he had not been exactly overwhelmed with offers of help.'

'That's it. Interview over.'

'Steven,' she said, slipping the gold pencil back into its case, 'it is not an interview. It is an offer of help.'

'I can see that, especially with the latest plans.'

'Which I will tell you about, but not here.' She raised an eyebrow.

'Not likely', I said. The whole get-up was a ruse to attract the poor stumbling male, just as I

drew my students on with graphic evocations of events.

'Afraid what Jill will think?' When I ignored the remark, she added, 'Or is it Penny?'

I thought how different Penny was to her sister: good-natured and placid, with the warm blue eyes of summer, as one of the locals had put it: the woman I had snubbed last night. The memory annoyed me. 'Why should I care what your sister thinks?' I said crossly. 'Probably in it together, the two of you, to wind up the poor schoolteacher.'

'You think that?' She lolled her head and said, 'Penny is interested, I can tell you, though I'd be more fun.'

'Trouble more like.'

'The person who took the trouble was my sister', continued Imogen. 'All that illustration work, which you took for granted.'

'We paid commercial rates.' When she shook her head, I added, 'And Penny was going out with someone else. Married him, I seem to remember.'

'Only when you ditched her.'

'I did not ditch her. There was nothing between us, and I was engaged to Jill. It was unfortunate, but life moves on.'

'Life moves on', repeated Imogen, mimicking my expression. 'Come on, let's pick up some sandwiches and go for a drive. I've already made them.'

'You seem pretty sure of yourself.'

She smiled in getting to her feet, and stood there with the small knuckles tucked into the hip. 'My car's parked near yours. I'll drop you back.'

Imogen was gone a good half-hour and I thought of getting out to press the doorbell to her flat when she appeared, now changed into jeans and carrying a large bag. She looked sensible and matter of fact, and I felt relieved when she swung the bag onto the back seat and settled next to me.

'Sorry, that was Eddie phoning. But I told him we'd make better progress with just the two of us.'

'You're still seeing Edward Tennant?' I began after a while, when we were motoring down to Weymouth. How calmly that profile leaned forward, absorbing the brightly painted bungalows and boarding houses that lined the coast road.

'Only professionally.' She laughed. 'As a business partner.'

'Is that wise, do you think? He's still in trouble with the Inland Revenue for dodgy records. And there's that girl on the Radford Estates. Father's threatened to shoot him on sight.'

She placed a finger on my arm. 'Steven, I know all about Eddie.'

'Of course you do', I said, wondering what the two got up to—a thought I shut out as Imogen sat back and poked her neat toes from the sandals.

'But you can ask me what you like. I always tell the truth.'

I reflected she probably did, but wasn't pleased at the thought. 'So where are we going?' I said when we were nearing Weymouth.

'There's a nice stretch of beach down by Bowleaze. You know it.'

I ignored the reminder, and twenty minutes later was carrying the bag down towards the cove. Imogen tripped on ahead. Nine years had passed since I picnicked here with Penny. She had married and divorced and returned to Dorchester. I had worked on, supporting Jill who supported me: the pact we had made on those long weekends, an endless number of them, where I got on with the book and she did whatever a well-bred young woman did in Chester: played tennis, or went to dances. I never asked her. She showed no interest in my book, and I never questioned how she spent her time. With Mrs Wooten so quick to stress her daughter was a prize that few could aspire to, it seemed hardly wise to try, though there were invitations I remember being left casually for my inspection by the telephone or on the table in the entrance hall.

'What have you got in this?' I said when we finally got to the place, and lay out on the sands,

some distance from the other holidaymakers.
'Seems mighty heavy.'

'Do you want to go for a swim first? I brought Eddie's old togs for you.'

'I'm not wearing Eddie's things', I said, vexed at the thought.

'Steven,' she said, swinging round to face me, 'don't be such a spoilsport. If you were the soul of decency with Penny, you're not going to try it with me, are you? Just hold the towel, and don't look so outraged. Then you can go into contortions getting into Eddie's trunks, or I'll hold the towel for you.'

'If you want.'

'You don't look very pleased. Most men would give a month's salary for this. Race you to the water.'

Afterwards we spread towels on the hot sand and lay out. Imogen took off her top and applied suntan lotion. Then onto the slim legs.

'Rub some into my back, would you?'

'We can't be too long. I'm meeting Jill later.'

'You can do better than that. Rub it in properly.'

The body was soft and yielding, so different from the controlled stiffness that is Jill's. Of course we have our jokes and shared opinions, but Jill would never have let me intrude in the way Imogen demanded, an exploration that led the fingers to imagine the airy structure of the lungs and the soft anatomy of those more female parts.

'Now I'll do yours. Just lie out.' That privacy was returned, and I had the feeling Imogen was making her own sensory conquests. But there was nothing to lose, as I'd almost told my mother at her nursing home at Cheltenham, where I dutifully visited once a month.

'All right. Turn over.'

I rolled round to see her hanging over me and smiling. Perhaps my embarrassment showed, as she hummed, 'You can look but you'd better not touch.'

'Could you stop being such a tease?'

'If I want someone I will let them know.'

'Then I'm out of practice.'

'Should hope so. You never did this with anyone else?' She smiled archly at my surprise. 'But you didn't marry her.'

'That's enough, Imogen. Anyway, the girl was already married.'

'You're a dark horse, Steven.'

But I wasn't, only a raw student whose brief tangles with women on campus were no preparation for the mischievous Kaja, who was a wonder, more giving than anyone before or since. Not the slow rhythms I remembered, but the quiet acceptance as I became more confident and closer to her. What was she doing now, dear Kaja, in that Warsaw flat of hers?

'Were you sorry when she left? More than with Jill now?'

Those Tuesdays kept me going, through the lecture halls, the commuting to cheap digs, the pointless weekly essay. They were the inside glow, the pilot light that gave comfort whenever I

thought of her, something that no one else had. 'It was different,' I said. 'Jill takes away a whole life.'

'Poor you.' She rested her head on my shoulder and put an arm round. 'Why don't you tell your friend here?'

'And half of Dorchester? No thank you. Besides, it's not fair to Jill.'

'Penny will hear of it, and no one else.'

'Better add Melissa, since you're so thick together.' Somehow I didn't want Penny to know.

'We don't see Melissa now. She's sold out.'

'Heard she'd married well.'

'Detached house, swimming pool, kids at public school. But not happily, not if she comes over to see us every year, even in that big Bentley of hers.'

The superb Melissa whom I had met only once, so like Penny but more regal and unapproachable. That a rundown place like Leyton could breed such creatures seemed wildly improbable. 'Is she coming over at midsummer,

do you think? Penny invited me. Or perhaps she did.'

'Yes, you'd be right for her.' Imogen laughed. 'Of course we know. So do men, but they suppose it's just sex.'

Perhaps there was something else, beyond the responsibilities that loomed up with Jill the moment I invited her out to a restaurant I couldn't afford. She was polite and detached, volunteering little about herself, and it was out of annoyance, to get some response from this most superior of creatures, that I asked to see her again. Later, much later, in the following year when we became an unlikely item, I got to meet her girlfriends who came from what my mother would have called the better end of town. Jill's affairs were no concern of theirs, though I formed the impression they thought her interests lay elsewhere, that I was useful company, provided no more than border civilities were expected.

'No they don't.'

Perhaps the irritation showed, as Imogen came back with, 'What's wrong with deciding who we will have, and when we will bring the drawbridge up?'

'So Penny said.'

'You snubbed her. Said you'd leave fairy matters to me. They're not fairy matters, and you made her wonder about you.'

'All right. Crass of me, but I didn't want to complicate matters.'

That was equally presumptuous, but Imogen said, 'There's nothing to complicate. You won't surrender to that sense of body, which is hers far more than mine, though you sense it now.'

'Only because you're flaunting yourself,' I said, making my way to firmer ground.

'I'm not doing anything of the sort. I'm showing what you already know. The Lawleys will take what they want, and after that we will throw you out.'

'Like your dad.'

‘He wasn’t murdered. He just stopped living with his wife properly, and it made him angry or careless. Just as you are.’

‘Jill hasn’t behaved too well.’

‘Nor have you. You married the wrong girl, deliberately, for status or material advancement.’

At this I was furious, but kept my mouth closed.

‘That’s what you’re going to talk to Jill about, isn’t it? How you can get it back, the marriage and the TV series.’

‘Of course I’m going to talk about the film series’, I said. ‘Which you and Eddie are dropping an almighty spanner in, to quote my director.’

‘Because it won’t help you. You’re not a TV personality, or a bureaucrat.’

‘You can be more than a teacher, can’t you?’

‘Steven, you were a fantastic teacher. That’s why I’m doing this. Because you helped me grow up, get a degree and a decent job. Only you don’t believe that.’

'Was only at the school for a couple of terms, until that wretched field trip.' I could remember the Head Teacher lecturing me as I stood there, rigid with suppressed anger. No, Mr Whittaker. You will learn one lesson in this job. You don't blame the pupils. You're in charge, and if things go wrong, you're the guilty party. No one else. Are you listening . . . ? Even then I knew I'd taken a wrong turning. Later would come the meeting with her sister, but the Lawleys were not the shapings of adolescent fantasy, but warm-blooded women, as urgent as Kaja, and far more dangerous.

Imogen was still looking at me. 'As you'll see,' she said, placing a finger on my nose, 'I can still be bloody-minded when I have to be.'

'Imogen, you were actually the most difficult pupil I've ever had. It was a torment having you in the class. And that field trip we don't need to talk about.'

'You did better for yourself. You got the Stokes Monkton job.'

'When the book came out. Before that I was someone to be quickly exchanged with a teacher from another school. Didn't you realize that?'

'Of course. I was delighted I had these powers.'

'Expect you were', I said, thinking back to those difficult months. Jill was away and I had no friends in the district. Some of my fellow teachers invited me round for dinner occasionally, and there were out-of-school activities, which I threw myself into. They didn't assuage the longing, or soften the sharp sense of danger, and it was the need to do something else that got me started on the history trails.

Phillip Duffy appeared when I was taking photographs of a round barrow, or rather waiting for the sun to go down and throw a shadow over the enclosing ditch. A thin man in jeans and tweed cap trotted up to ask if I knew what I was looking at. Archaeology attracts its fair share of crackpots, and I was guarded until the little leprechaun with its round face danced about the site pointing out the setting and the symmetry of the outer ditch, when I agreed to a quick drink at a local pub.

‘You should write this down’, I told him later, when I dropped him off at his Dorchester flat. ‘I have, he said. ‘I’ll show you sometime, if you’re interested.’

I thought no more of Duffy until I ran into him at the Dorchester Museum. He invited me through. ‘If you can call it an office’, he added as we found ourselves in a small alcove awash with papers and archaeology journals.

‘You work here?’

‘Would it have made any difference? I’d still be one of those self-taught amateurs who make a nuisance of themselves.’

‘I wouldn’t put it that way’, I said, going up to a map fastened to one wall, several sheets sellotaped together and yellowing. ‘Is this yours?’

‘History trails. How you can see monuments with the least possible effort.’ He ran his fingers through the untidy patch of hair that formed a sharp point to the little head. ‘Now isn’t that a good idea?’

'But that'll be what, twelve, fifteen miles at least. And you haven't got a car, so it's a major investment, even to get out there.'

'Bus takes you most of the way, and you can think on the journey back. Sometimes best to be on your own.'

'As you like, though I'd be happy to run you out occasionally.'

'Maybe when the summer holidays are on us.' He opened those evasive eyes and grinned. 'Myself, I've nothing against teachers. Bit snooty when they come round the museum, but it's a responsibility, the little darlings being what they are.'

'The girls can be.' I mentioned some of my recent experiences.

'That'll be one of the Lawleys.'

'Ah yes, you know them.'

'Smashers.'

'Nothing a good teacher can't handle.'

An optimistic remark as Imogen was continuing with, 'Powers I shall use if you do something silly. Like taking up with Jill again.'

'That's outrageous', I said placidly, not believing the conversation.

She stopped and looked surprised. 'Right. So are you coming in properly now?' She tugged off the swimsuit bottom and stared at me with barefaced impudence.

'No', I said.

'Please yourself.'

There weren't many people around, but when she returned a few minutes later and stood in front of me, her body dark against the back-lighting of the midday sun, my eyes were dazzled by the light or something else. 'Do you have to show yourself like this?' I said, turning away angrily. No doubt I should have adopted the schoolmaster's pose of tired annoyance and stared indifferently at her, as Jill would have done, and any sensible adult. But I was back as the adolescent on his last holiday with parents,

when he chafes at the restrictions of sensible clothes and occupations, feeling in the girls around him another dimension to life, far more uplifting than the clouds that billow out across the bay, or the water sparkling with a devious brightness.

‘Hold the towel higher, can’t you?’

‘These have tuna and tomato’, she said after I’d dressed and she’d dried her hair a little. ‘Or there’s egg. Try them.’

‘Can we talk about the festival? If you’re planning something on the Leyton Rings, I ought to know.’

‘Do you really want to talk about the past?’

‘Imogen, you’re an attractive woman, and this is not being fair, is it?’

‘You do like me?’ She tilted her head and gave a bewitching smile. ‘All right, I will talk to you, but not here. Are you free Tuesday night? I’m inviting you to dinner. It’ll be perfectly respectable.’

‘Just the two of us?’

'I'm not bringing Penny in until you've reformed. It'll be more fun anyway, won't it?' She smiled and reached into the bag.

'Reformed? Imogen, I'm not going on a date with you.'

'I'll be outside the flat at eight-thirty. There's another beer. Want it?'

Chapter Three

Ours was exactly like the other houses on the Winterton Estate: upmarket and anonymous. Each had kempt lawns, flowers coming into bloom, and an air of expensive neatness. On the drive stood a car, and there was probably another in the garage, both newer than the Rover in which I arrived shortly after three. I'd thought Jill would show some apprehension in opening the door, but she was just as ever, the tailored businesswoman now wearing a smart sweater and slacks. She took me through to the lounge, which had been rearranged.

'If you're looking for Megan, she's on a school trip.' Jill motioned me to sit down.

'On a Sunday?'

'Don't make difficulties, Steven. There was a school swimming course, and I thought we should talk on our own. She'll be back later.'

I felt the annoyance tightening in my jaw, but managed to smile. Better not move to battle stations immediately, it seemed, though the plan was already faltering. Who knew what went on inside that cool head?

'Perhaps we'd better start', I said as my wife crossed those long legs again. 'Well, I understand from Jenkins that you want a divorce. Why that is, I don't know. Coldness and absence from home were the reasons given me, but perhaps that's lawyers' talk.' The warm brown eyes were steady, perhaps not kindly at all. I took a deep breath. 'I also understand that you have found someone else, a paediatrician at Dorchester General. A David Farley.' Not part of the plan, which was to give her space to explain, to open out a territory

where I could deploy my forces, but again there was no movement. 'So we had better be adult about this, and not indulge in. . . .' I was going to say accusations of blame, but settled on, 'feelings. You want the house and custody of Megan, I understand. Perhaps that's a bargaining position, and while I haven't taken legal advice yet, it does seem to me . . . unreasonable.' I could feel a growing outrage at the injustice, of being asked to apologize for what wasn't my fault.

'Steven, you have been misinformed. There has been no impropriety between David and me.'

That was the first chink in the armour, but I hesitated. 'So he's just a friend?' I said.

'Someone I have been able to talk to.'

'There is me, you know.' I said, finding the words difficult.

'You are never home. When you're not in London, you're locked in your study or leading those history walks.'

What did we talk about when we were together, or your hospital friends came round? I

felt like saying, but contented myself with, 'Only in the summer.'

'When you could be at the conferences Professor Hampton organizes. Or with Megan. Taking her out is the least you could do.'

Reconciliation was the aim, I remembered, an appeal to common sense. 'The summer is the only time I get to myself', I said. 'When I really become an historian again.'

'It is simply a matter of priorities. Everyone has to do what they don't enjoy. If you have your difficulties with Miles Hampton, there is no need to take them out on Megan.'

'Hampton has nothing to do with Megan.'

'He has everything to do with your bad temper. Just learn to be a bit more diplomatic. Don't attack Hampton at the faculty meetings, and he won't be so demanding.'

How dare Jill give me advice? It took some hard swallowing to continue. 'I haven't said anything against him for years. Not since the paper.'

'That was a silly thing to do. You can be extremely childish at times.'

'Entirely his fault. What did he think? "Alert Settlements: a Deconstructive Approach to Environmental Studies". Couldn't be anything else but a joke.'

'You made him look foolish.'

'Only because he took over and signed himself up as the senior author. Just luck the reviewers threw it out.'

'You didn't apologize.'

'How about him apologizing for stealing my work, and turning a spoof into a resigning issue? What about that?' I stared angrily at her, as no doubt I can at committee meetings.

'If you're going to be wilfully combative it's no wonder he's on your tail all the time. You should move.'

'I like this part of the world.' Time now to turn the tables, illustrate how selfish Jill can be. 'You wouldn't go to Strathclyde.'

'We talked about that. There was no position for me, and Megan has friends here. It's not a time to uproot her on some whim or misunderstanding you managed to create. I said I would reconsider later.'

'I didn't want to go up there on my own', I said, adding, 'it wouldn't have been much of a marriage.' At this blunder I thought Jill would start on our poor sex life, but she stopped and looked at me as at the child that has finally blurted out a confession. She let the look sink in. 'Very well, I'll bring the tea in if you're going to be reasonable for once.'

Things were not going well, but perhaps she'd relent. Or the affair with David Farley was only talk. No one could double-guess Jill. I remembered visiting Wing Commander Wooten and his wife for the first time in their place outside Chester, immaculate as the conversation: pleasant, detached, and weighing me up. I formed a distinct impression when I left that Sunday night of having failed, though they were too nice to show it. Would my career be more

rewarding later? How did I see the question of standards in education? I was cautious, but then got annoyed, making openings that were not followed up. A pause, and the inquisition would start again. I played tennis of course. Did I ride? Jill had lessons until she was fourteen. It crossed my mind to say that my parent's place was ablaze with Gymkhana trophies, or that my aunt had been a bareback rider at the Russian state circus, but a warning glance from Jill brought me back to the role of humble suitor, and I said that ours was an intellectual family, which was far from true.

Perhaps we are all escaping something, but in Jill's case it was a definite someone, whom Mrs Wooten made a point of mentioning. You could take him to the club. Tommy won't be there. And I've moved the photos. Your friend won't want to look at Tommy's portrait, will he? Who was the man? I finally asked, but Jill simply said, Someone who was keen on me once. Oh, much more than that, Jill dear, said her mother. Worshipped the ground she walked on. Didn't he, Jim? The wing commander wouldn't be drawn, and only gave me

a conspiratorial wink occasionally, the RAF manner hiding a good deal of shrewdness, but I doubt he was any more taken with me.

Perhaps Jill had been marking time, hoping the fabled Tommy would come back. Certainly she was not keen to shorten the engagement, and the work I poured into my book represented the three weekends out of four I spent away from her, while she was getting her PhD in Birmingham. As you'd expect of someone with Jill's potential, said her mother, though probably without malice. By then they'd got used to the once-a-month fiancé. I was never called Steven, as far as I can recall: only, he, your friend, that rather unfortunate young man you seem to have picked up.

Why expect a change now? I reflected as Jill came back with the tray. 'So what is the news with the filming?' she said after pouring the tea.

'Still busy with the initial shoots. More to the film business than I'd realized.'

'And you've been down to Weymouth.'

'All over the place', I said, wondering how she'd heard. 'And of course interviews with experts.'

'Colleagues?'

'You know how it is. Voice-overs, multiple perspectives.' She didn't know, and had never wanted to.

'You will find the contacts useful.'

'Genuine, helpful and at the viewer's level is how Martins puts it.' But I was talking to an expert on communication, and let the matter drop. There was a long pause. 'So you'd not want to move over there, with Megan?'

'Over where?'

'He's married, I expect.'

'Steven, we're not here to discuss my friends.'

'No,' I said, 'of course we're not.' Jill was now upset, as well she ought to be.

'So are you going to explain yourself?' she continued, looking at me with those clear brown eyes, that seemed placid and somewhere else.

'Explain what, Jill? One week I'm a normal married man, and the next my wife is suing for divorce. Nothing's changed on my side.'

'That is the trouble. You're still seeing matters from your own point of view. You were always an absent father, as I said to Richard Jenkins. It's never been a full marriage.'

I paused. None of the obvious rejoinders seemed helpful, and it wasn't kind to press her further. I wasn't here to win battles, and tried something conciliatory. 'What are you saying? We should go to counselling or something?'

She gave me a withering look. 'Steven, we're both grown-up people who are perfectly able to sort out their own affairs. All I'm asking for is a little more consideration. Is that too much to ask?'

I could afford to let that go, and say, 'So what is it I'm doing? Or not doing?'

'You are putting yourself first.'

I felt the jaw muscles tighten.

'I'm not saying give up the Buckmayne Field Centre,' she continued, 'if that's what interests

you, but within reason. It's not going to make you into a top academic, is it?'

That was the lead I wanted, and now I put real warmth into the voice, feeding myself into the situation, as I do when teaching. Jill was no different, predictable in her way. 'Archaeology doesn't win you the Nobel Prize,' I said, 'but it's respectable. Might even get me into Oxbridge, for all I know.'

'But you should know.'

So there was some common ground, after the unfortunate opening. I just had to give some friendly encouragement, and smiled again, giving the tea a brisk stir.

'But you have to be serious, and not waste time with people who'll only hurt your career. Phil Duffy, for example.'

'Phil gave me all his field notes', I said reasonably. 'The book is mostly his work. Thirty years of it.'

'Which you shaped, organized and got printed. He owes you a lot.'

Duffy wasn't a great asset on the social side, but he was local, and brought me whatever popularity I had in the town. 'Got me the lectureship, you know. Couldn't have done without him.'

'But now you can. Town and gown don't mix. You know who I'm talking about.'

'Edward Tennant?'

'Tennant, Barnes. All the other riff-raff.'

She wasn't far off with Barnes, and even in the DIY store, supposing he was still there, the man blundered about like a blinded Cyclops.

'Including the Lawley girls you have taken a shine to.'

Jill wouldn't have heard about today's picnic, and I could afford an injured tone of self-righteousness. 'It's their farm', I said. 'I have to keep in with them if only for that.' In fact I could do more: prepare the ground, spike the guns before news got to her. 'That's why I'm going with them to see the bank manager for a loan. Next

week', I said, stretching my legs in the way that annoys Jill. Then I got up.

'What's it to do with you, Steven?' she said, turning her head to follow me as I stared out of the window. 'It's purely a farm management matter.'

Jill can go cavorting with her doctor friend, but our Steven can't even return favours. I sat down again and appeared reasonableness itself, opening my hands in a gesture of amazement. 'They've been pretty decent to me, and maybe the TV presenter bit will impress the bank manager. You never know. Everyone wants a slice of the action.'

'Steven, you have to choose. Either you become a TV personality or a career academic. You can't be both. Academics do not like their subject being popularised.'

Jill had been thinking, but I simply nodded.

'So what is the most important opportunity now? Academically?'

‘The Leyton Rings dig. Undoubtedly. That’s why I’m helping the Lawleys.’

‘Leave personalities out of it. Concentrate on the future.’

Perhaps she was right, but I wasn’t taking instruction in my own field. ‘We need funding to proceed further’, I said. ‘That’s where the film comes in.’

Jill didn’t say anything for a while. Not a victory but a reassessment, I thought. ‘You’re sure?’ she said, arranging a small plate of biscuits, the custard creams I’ve never liked. ‘You have this properly worked out?’

‘Eight programmes first off, with the possibility of a second series. Here or in Brittany. Perhaps southern Europe. The BBC is excited at the prospect.’

‘They have promised funding?’

‘Of course. We’ve only put a few trenches across. The whole southern half is unexplored.’

‘How much are they talking about?’

I didn't know, and got to my feet again as I launched out on the finds so far. 'It's a pretty spectacular mix of cultures. Could be really big. There's stuff there that suggests Mediterranean contacts. And the Saxon sceats could be repeated settlement.'

'Spare me the lecture. I just want to know you're developing this properly.'

'If it goes on being this good everyone will want to be involved. Might even get a paper into Antiquity.'

'Who'd be the co-author.'

'Duffy.'

'Get someone influential. Some professor where you want to go.'

'Go where?'

'You can't stay in this backwater. Isn't there some specialization you could use?'

'Provenience, perhaps. Yes, that would sort out the contamination issue.' I stopped. Contamination wasn't something I wanted to talk about, but Jill

had missed the point. 'Or add another layer of certainty', I added.

'So replace Phil Duffy. You don't need him.'

I returned to the sofa and stared at the carpet, the Chinese one that Jill chose to go with the whitewood furniture, which needs constant cleaning and is too much of the woman's boudoir for my taste. 'Jill,' I said, 'this is my dig, and my town. You have to accept that sometimes I know what I'm doing.'

'It is also our marriage. If you behave responsibly then perhaps we can come to some arrangement. Play a proper part in the marriage, decide on a sensible career path, and I'm prepared to overlook some of the past.'

'That's something', I said, pleased at the turn of events.

'Your unfaithfulness for a start.'

I stared at her, suddenly vexed. 'What unfaithfulness?'

'You know perfectly well what I'm talking about. Which I won't hesitate to use if necessary.'

‘Some names would help.’

‘Don’t be stupid. First one Lawley girl and now the other.’

This was to be a conciliation, and so I paused, took a deep breath and played the anxious husband. ‘Look, there’s nothing going on. Imogen is interviewing me, and Penny is just an old friend. She did the illustrations for the book, which was years ago.’

‘Please do not treat me like a fool. What you get up to with them is for your own conscience, but it is not reflecting well on me. You will stop if you want this marriage to support you.’

‘I’d like us to get back together, yes of course.’ I was biting my tongue, and now wanted to shake this silly woman. The word unnerved me. Jill is self-important, controlling and a dozen other things that help her career, but I’d never thought her silly before.

‘Then you know what to do. Stop consorting with the undesirables of Buckmayne, and hand

over the field centre to someone else. Being adult means making choices.'

I didn't speak until the anger had subsided. 'I'll think about it, Jill, if you're serious about getting back together again.'

'You'll do more than think. You'll give me your solemn promise now.'

I leant back and hugged my knees. 'For Christ's sake. You're not the injured party.'

'That's my last offer. I'm not going to bandy words with you. If you don't want a messy divorce, and I'm supposing you don't, not of you want the TV series to go ahead, then you'll grow up and do the sensible thing. If not for me, for Megan's sake.'

'You're mad', I said. 'Trying to blackmail me or something?'

'Then I'll ask you to leave the house.'

'Not before I've seen Megan. I'm going to stay right here till she gets back, whenever that is. You understand me?' I went over to the table and picked up the vase. 'These need changing. I don't expect you to show the usual courtesies to a

mere husband, but you could at least keep the place tidy.' I took the flowers out to the kitchen and flung them in the bin.

'Steven, I want you out of my house now.'

'It's our house, in case you've forgotten.'

'You'll leave now unless you want trouble.'
She walked over to the telephone. 'Steven?'

I put the vase back on the table, spilling some water, which she could clear up for once. 'That's probably Megan now', I said as a coach appeared in the window.

Jill dialled a number. 'Is that the police centre? Yes, I wish to report a domestic disturbance at 5 Houndswell Place. The Winterton Estate. Would you please send an officer immediately. I have asked my ex-husband to leave the house but he refuses to go. Yes, definitely threatening.'

'Give that thing to me. Police? Yes, I am the husband, not the ex-husband. I have simply asked to see my child. No, there's not a court order, and I'm not being abusive or threatening.'

Would you mind putting the station chief on the line?’

‘You do seem rather upset’, said the voice. ‘Perhaps it would be better if you left now.’

‘I’m doing no such thing. Megan is my child as well and . . . she’s at the door, I think. Just tell my wife to calm down. She’s being wildly unreasonable.’

‘I think you should leave now, sir.’

‘The hell I will. I’ve not spoken to Megan for eight weeks and . . . what’s that? No, we’re not separated, and . . . all right send a car. You can take my wife away in a straight-jacket. She’s clearly out of her mind.’

‘Just vacate the building, if you would, sir.’

‘Changed all the locks. I ask you, does that sound like the action of a reasonable woman?’

‘The car has now left, sir. I would advise you to leave the premises please.’

‘Don’t forget the medics for my wife’, I said and slammed down the phone as Megan appeared.

'Come here immediately', said Jill.

Megan looked at me from the doorway. 'You're not supposed to be here, daddy.'

She came up and stood with arms crossed. Then she frowned and said, 'Mummy says you left us.'

'No, Megan, that's not true. Sometimes grown-ups fall out.'

'Mummy says you don't care for us.'

How dare my superior wife say such a thing? I was incensed and took a deep breath before starting quietly, 'No, we had a row, that's all.' Jill walked up and down the room but Megan's eyes were on me, and for the first time I began to like my daughter, who seemed only confused and wanting to think the best. 'You do understand, don't you, Megan?' I was quite overwhelmed with the thought, and wondered how to continue, not helped by the police siren. They'd certainly not wasted time. 'But we'll get together shortly, of course', I said, folding her fingers into my hand.'

The siren stopped and two officers came into the house. One was now bending down beside me, talking to Megan. 'You all right, little lady?' she said.

'Daddy's not supposed to be here.'

'If you'd like to come with us', said the other officer.

'Whatever for?' I shouted as I was bundled into the car, where I sat while Jill gave her version of events. Then the woman officer came out of the house and joined me in the back-seat. 'Where are you staying sir? We'll follow you home.'

'What about Megan? She's my daughter as well. This is outrageous.'

'Something will be sorted out, I'm sure. If you'll go quietly we'll see the situation doesn't escalate.'

'Not before I've given a statement.'

'That's not necessary. Buckmayne is it?'

'I'd like to give one anyway, so you know what's going on.'

The male officer flipped open a notebook. Dr Steven Whittaker, he wrote. 'Address? Telephone number?'

'What about a statement?'

'All in good time. We'll contact you if we need more information. You're not planning to leave Buckmayne, are you?'

'I'm not planning to leave Dorset, my wife, or any routine in my life she's doing her best to disrupt. You hear me?'

The officers exchanged glances, and the notebook was folded away. 'My advice,' said the male officer, 'is not to attempt to contact your wife or child for the time being. Whether the matter will be taken further, I cannot say, but another episode like this would not be viewed favourably, especially if the case came to court. You could find yourself facing a restraining order.'

'Steven,' said the female officer, 'just call it a day. Get yourself legal representation and follow the rules. All right?'

'We'll follow you back', said her colleague. 'Unless you want to be put in handcuffs? Is that clear?'

I watched them in the rear mirror, keeping their distance but not falling away until I came to a halt outside my small flat in Buckmayne.

Better to have stayed with Imogen, I told myself as I went in and threw myself into the one arm chair. A beer didn't improve my temper, and I was extracting a half pizza from the fridge when the pastry broke in my fingers. A large piece fell on the floor, the topping sticking to the tiles. Perhaps I could get something on the journey out, a sandwich at one of the usual eating places, I thought, scraping the pizza into the waste-bin.

Chapter Four

'Not a good meeting?' said Stacey when I got there later that evening, the old Rover needing a little fiddling with the ignition to help it over the last few miles.

'Called the police on me', I said. We were sitting in his cottage lounge, smaller than I remembered it, barely furnished with sofa, two chairs and Afghan carpet. 'Can you imagine that, Brian? My own wife.'

'Must have been pretty sore with you.'

'Bloody-minded. If I don't quit the Buckmayne Centre and become some chiselling academic then it's curtains to the marriage. More than that, it's going to be a messy divorce.'

'You must have done something, if she's got a lawyer working for her.'

'But he mentioned Farley, or someone at the hospital, so people do know the score.'

'Steven, I told you that. He stood in for my paediatrician when Jason had to go in suddenly.'

'Again?'

'He's always in and out. You know how it is.'

I gave him a sympathetic grimace. 'Prognosis no better?' I ventured, for want of anything better.

'May get to adolescence, or may not.' He paused and added, 'Look, you haven't seen next year's schedules our good Principal has drawn up, have you? He's moving you. Wants to take over Leyton.'

'Hapless Hampton hasn't been on a dig in his life.'

'Expect it's something to do with the TV series.'

'So he can bask in reflected glory? No film director is going to let him within a mile of the set. God almighty, just the image contemporary academia does not want to project.'

'I do know your director has seen him. Martins, isn't it?'

Had he? Perhaps I should go more carefully. I shook out the creases in my trousers, and said, 'Be background information on the Department. Probably a courtesy call.'

'I wouldn't be so sure. There's talk about you running field trips in York and the Viking settlements.'

'We do that every year.' I could feel the apprehension turning into something sharper.

'Attaching you to the Department up there. Visiting lecturer.'

'Give up Buckmayne? Why the hell should I? Worked damned hard up there.' I had to take several breaths to cool down. Who did they think they were, these academics who didn't know the first thing about excavation or illustration of finds?

'A bit off and on, wasn't it?' Stacey was saying. 'There were complaints.'

'Always get a few.'

'If the truth be told, Steven, I hope you don't go. You're the only one who stands up to Hampton at meetings. Frayne is worried about tenure, and, frankly, I am too. Our Principal wants a Department of yes men.'

'And I found Leyton Rings, didn't I?'

'The girl more, wasn't it? Daughter of the farm owner.'

'Penny Lawley came forward with a late Iron Age piece. Which may have been left over from the '74 dig.'

'And you have some strange people as volunteers', continued Stacey. 'Not too reliable, perhaps.'

The man was never alarmist, and I had to stand back from my annoyance. 'You think Miles Hampton's got hold of this?'

'He's not a fool, especially where his Department is concerned. If he spoke to Joel Martins about the problems, well, no one wants to make a dodgy excavation the centrepiece of a TV series.'

'It's not dodgy, just confusing.'

'I'm only acting as devil's advocate, guessing what the opposition might say. But if Hampton wants you out, you're giving him excellent ammunition.'

'Why is everyone ganging up on me? I never wanted to be an academic.'

'And that's the problem. You're a teacher, not a researcher. You do everything conscientiously, but your heart's not in it.'

'Seems rather dry and remote. All those papers that start "The Leyton Rings site, an early Neolithic hill fort characterised by a univalent ring structure, was further excavated in the 2006 field season." Hardly gripping, is it?'

'It is to them, the proper academics. But you're the spell-binder, why they don't like being shown up. I've been to one of your performances. The whole class wakes up. Everyone wants to get out and find some unknown culture. It's magic.'

'Not always.'

'Why you left the first school. You did tell me.'

'Actually I'm seeing one of the girls. Turned out quite well in the end.'

'Seeing her?'

'Not in that sense. No, of course not. She works for the local rag, which is covering the TV series. Interviews and so forth.'

Stacey frowned. 'Do you think you should? Nothing to do with me, and I'm probably going to make you mad, but you have a marriage on the edge of break-up, a dig that's looking doubtful, a Principal who wants you out, and now these dubious meetings. Just think what the opposition could make of it. I should play a straight bat if I were you.'

'We had a picnic, that's all.'

'Steven, you got into trouble at the comprehensive, and people are mighty suspicious of you here. You don't notice it, but you're the pied piper. When you're in full flood the students would follow you anywhere. That's why they all get through with fantastic degrees. But you're not popular for it, not among the staff.'

'I've never done anything underhand.'

'What about this picnic girl. Reliable, open-hearted sort, is she?'

'Entirely devious, I should think.'

'You're kidding.'

Yes, it could be difficult. 'But I know her', I added as Stacey stared, his glasses lopsided and giving him a peevish air. 'Her sister did most of the drawings for the book.'

'The Lawley girls? It gets worse.'

'Only in your Machiavellian mind.'

'Steven, for the love of God. Somehow you've got yourself in a tangle, with everyone pulling different ways, with agendas you're flattered enough to play along with.'

'It's not like that.'

'Steven, I didn't want to say this, but perhaps I should. My impression was that Jill is happy with David Farley. Just a feeling, but she was laughing at lot, being girlish, you know how it is with women. Jill's cool and collected, efficient, but then she seemed like a schoolgirl on a first date.'

I've no idea if it's going to last, but I've never seen her like that with you. Never. I'd worry about that, I really would.'

'Thank you very much', I said. Had I seen Jill lose her composure? Only occasionally. I thought back to the tennis club we attended before matters got serious, when I was just that unfortunate young man. Of course I registered the change, and how closed Jill seemed for a few minutes afterwards, an attitude I ignored until her manners returned and I was treated properly again. Vexing, and more because Stacey hadn't a malicious bone in his body.

'Listen, I know where people want me to go. I know how to do it. And if I want something badly enough I will get it. I've never lost a battle yet.'

I was digging in, and Stacey looked impressed. 'Sounds more like it', he said.

'Only I'm not always so keen on it myself.'

'Everyone feels that. Part of the human condition.'

'Then why do they cheapen themselves?' I asked, warming to Stacey's reply.

'Because they make choices and take the consequences. They learn how the world is, and they grow up. They have to.'

'I just think sometimes there's another way of living, if we had more courage and faith in ourselves.' Perhaps the meeting with Jill was getting to me: I'd never mentioned this to anyone.

'You've got a home, a family and an outstanding career. Not everyone can say that. Don't throw it away.'

'I've made a success of what I've willed myself to do. But I've lost the person in the process.'

'Of course you have. We all do. You know what I wanted to be? A musician. Got my doting parents to spend a fortune on lessons. Appeared at local recitals. Even London once. But I didn't really have it. Good, but not good enough, said the academy jury, and they were right. That was the biggest blow in my life. Far worse than having Jason. Where I failed myself.'

'You don't want more children, to have another go, I mean?'

'Barbara can't.' Stacey got to his feet. 'She sends her best regards, by the way. It's her WI night.'

'She does get out sometimes?'

'They pick her up. Have to, of course, but people are very good round here.' He smiled, and came to stand over me. 'Steven, please understand I'm just trying to get you to wise up. This is not the time to go native or rethink your life. Make the best of it, build on what you've got.'

'That's what everyone says.'

'So you can stay around if you like, but I have and see to Jason.'

'Won't keep you. But you must understand this is not a mid-life crisis or a sudden break-up with Jill. It's two people living in separate worlds. Just as yours was in music.'

'It's a world I was thrown out of. Look, it's gone eight, so come through and we can talk more, if you've got the stomach. It's a messy business.'

I stared at the boy who squirmed in the high chair while Stacey removed the oxygen mask, and tried to ignore the fingers that clawed at the table. The face leered at us, but the expression was also one of helplessness and overwhelming love. Stacey was a saint. I'd never seen anyone look at me like that: not Jill, not Penny. I felt the tears pricking my eyes, and hid my confusion by tidying the oxygen feed and placing the bottle by the wall.

'What were you saying?' continued Stacey.

'Suppose you had a gift for music and no one else heard it. You were sent into raptures by what seemed to everyone else completely irrelevant. You lived in a world of sound that no one else heard.'

'I've got the point. Just hold the plate, will you? Of course I understand, well, I suppose I understand. Oh God, he's choking. Now's my little man.'

'It's not music of course, but it's as though the whole world was alive and somehow in tune with itself. It's real to me.'

'Why don't you try marriage guidance or whatever they call it these days? Now that's better.'

'Because they won't understand, any more than you do.'

'Of course I don't. I'm not a psychologist or moral philosopher, just someone who teaches Tudor history. With none of your gifts.' He wiped the boy's mouth, and picked him up, smiling and stroking his hair. 'Of course I can imagine the past, sometimes, on my own in some building, but it's never really there. Not like your prehistory. What do you see?'

'I don't see anything.'

'Nothing?'

'I sense things, a continuance of life, of men moving on, fighting for a place in the sun. Only I don't see it of course. Just a presence, a benign presence sometimes. Or very sad.'

'You've lost me. Steven, I'm not really up to this discussion.'

'No one is.' I tried not to sound ungrateful, but Stacey's incomprehension was why I said so little about the gift, if gift it was. My father would have understood, but I'd walked by on the other side, even if I'd always imagined a hoard of Roman silver or mediaeval coins waiting to be found in the garden. Perhaps that's what started me on the history trail, why I would spend hours on the patio, digging at builder's rubble with a garden trowel.

'Couldn't you join some group, or new age society. Just to talk these matters through?' said Stacey.

'Dance round naked in some pagan rite?' Imogen's dark body came to mind. I bit my tongue.

'Do they?'

'I don't know. But I'm not making a bloody fool of myself.' Perhaps I had already, I thought, feeling

like the south sea missionary who must preach abstinence to his lustfully happy flock.

‘Then you’ll have to find something else, won’t you? Avoid the Lawley girls if you want to come out alive. It’s a hard world, and you’ll go under if you don’t take the usual precautions.’

‘I’ve always taken those, and I’m still no nearer.’ All around me other existences were crowding in, shadows of a prehistoric past that were now extending into women’s legs and their febrile wants.

‘Me,’ he was saying, ‘I’m much too timid, but I’ve known colleagues go off the rails completely. Seems wonderful for a few months, and then the girl goes off, and they end up in some dead-end job hating every moment left them.’

‘That’s what my father did. He went back to his wife, but it was never the same.’ I didn’t have the details, but it wasn’t weakness my mother hated, not after that open day at the water company. Even his workmates turned a cold shoulder, and while other families formed groups and immersed

themselves in anecdotes, we sat embarrassed and quiet with our paper cups and plates in the staff canteen.

‘So just be careful.’

‘Of course’ I said, though Stacey wasn’t listening. ‘Thanks for the chat.’

I let myself out, angry at saying so much. It was now eight-thirty and not yet dark, but I switched on the headlights to drive slowly up the road from Portesham. Behind me, the setting sun flooded its crimson on the Hardy Monument, which rose in the distance above the conifer plantation. On impulse, I took a minor road, and stopped where the land sloped down to Dorchester, giving a view of Maiden Castle, now ribbed in dark shadows. On the far edge of town was the Winterton Estate, where Jill had no doubt put Megan to bed, and was ticking off the day’s chores.

I got out, and walked over to lean on a gate, suddenly remembering how Penny would tease me on our picnics together, tickling me in the ear

if I fell asleep after we'd eaten sandwiches or gone for a swim. Penny who had married someone else when Jill came down to claim her own.

I knew what Penny represented. Even if the wretched Imogen hadn't warned me, that introduction a year earlier wasn't needed.

'This is my sister', she said, mincing in, trim legs stepping out from a tight skirt. 'Penelope, but everyone calls her Penny.'

I tried not to stare, and perhaps asked her to sit down, or she did anyway out of kindness as I felt only a sharp flash of light and a constricting pain in the chest. She probably had to repeat herself.

'Mr. Whittaker, I have brought some drawings because Phil Duffy thinks you may be able to use them.'

I didn't trust myself to handle the portfolio, and asked her to turn the pages. Perhaps I hoped they would be amateurish, and I could put the

visit aside, like some dreadful nightmare that never reoccurs, but they were professional, sharply drawn and intelligent. Penny handed over a CV.

‘I’ve some experience in illustration work. As you can see.’

It was an effort to talk, but I said carefully, ‘I don’t need the CV’, and looked up to find the blue eyes searching my face. No doubt it was the anxiety in them that gave me the strength to go on. ‘I don’t need it because I can see for myself. They’re excellent. Absolutely first rate.’

‘You haven’t seen them all.’

‘I don’t have to.’ Both the woman and her drawings were astonishing, though I couldn’t connect the two. ‘How many of these can you turn out?’ some voice was saying.

‘As many as you like. Each one takes about a day, once the photos and preliminary sketches are complete.’

'Then why don't we arrange a meeting with Phil shortly, when we can draw up a detailed list of requirements.'

'You really like them?'

'Miss Lawley, I would go to the ends of the earth to get work like this.'

No doubt I'd overdone the compliments, as she flushed and said, 'Thank you. But you should call me Penny.'

'Then I hope we'll meet again, and shortly, Penny.'

'With or without the sister', said Imogen, who suddenly came back into focus. She took Penny by the arm and pulled her out of the chair. 'Goodbye, Mr. Teacher.' Penny gave me an uncertain smile and followed her sister out.

I can't remember doing much for the rest of the morning, and was still distracted at lunchtime, when sat over a pint with Duffy.

'It's all right', he said. 'Always have that effect. Just remember they're intelligent, and can be devious. Both of them.'

I never found Penny devious, though she certainly had a mind of her own. Also a sense of where the limits lay, which I was never tempted to cross, though perhaps I should have done. She was the storm that blew up over the Dorset landscape of ten years ago, and I thought of those Paul Nash paintings with their surreal and brooding mystery. That's what I used to feel with Penny, motoring home from our extended picnics, when it was a joy to be with someone who breathed life into the hills and wind-bent trees.

Not that I was alone in this, I remembered, thinking of those pagan walks, which I was not going to write up, whatever Duffy suggested. Why didn't Barnes get out a few books from the library? Even my father who had wandered around the countryside on some fool's errand of sensibility had bothered to make himself knowledgeable. He wouldn't have disrupted one of my history rambles.

'That is folk-lore', I said when Barnes had finished. 'The country dweller's attempt to make

sense of events, to find some kinship with the past.'

'Sort of natural, isn't it?' said a regular as the oaf stood there, blocking the path.

'Yes, but the aim of science is not to help us feel at home in the world, but to observe and measure and describe objectively.' I didn't like this schoolmasterly tone, but Barnes hadn't been asked to take over.

'Why they put churches at sacred places, isn't it?' he said.

'Places sacred or magical or the resort of local deities', I added. 'Yes they did.' What did the fool see there, apart from the mocking Imogen? I gave him the floor for a few more minutes, and moved the party on, just as I was now moving through a landscape darkening before my eyes.

I went back to the car and turned the ignition, and then again. I rolled up my sleeves, and, after some fumbling with connections, had to call on the mobile, which promised an officer within the

hour. Several cars passed, one kindly stopping. 'It's all right, thanks', I shouted. 'AA's on its way.'

I sat on the grass verge, annoyed at the wait, and more at the questions that pressed out of the darkness. That year with Penny had been a torment. She closed off that extra world that gave me my sanity. I never explained those feelings to her, but she must surely have understood my stay in Dorset was temporary, perhaps no more vital than Jill's, and that we couldn't be expected to stop now, when we'd made so many sacrifices.

'Ah, it's Dr Whittaker', said the patrolman when he arrived. 'Big fan of yours. Is that the car? I thought the BBC paid decent wages.'

'The wife's', I said recklessly, forgetting that Jill was just as well known. 'Old run-around I happen to be using.'

'Right you are. Let's have a look.' He laid the torch on the chassis and put the gloves on. 'That's it', he said a few minutes later. 'Nothing serious. Dirty contacts, and one of the wires had worked loose.'

'That would be me. Thank you, officer.'

Chapter Five

As I'd agreed to go over the proposal before the meeting, Penny invited me to breakfast. Around nine I pressed the bell marked Enquiries and drove through into the yard.

The woman was several minutes coming to the door, and smiled apologetically as I looked at the tattered sweater and jeans. 'Don't worry, I'll be changing for the big event. The dining room's this way.'

'Didn't know you had one.'

'With guests half-board? Didn't you read the proposal?'

'Of course', I said, still not connecting them with a Penny who seemed more womanly and approachable.

'Then you ought to see what you're supporting. I've made some changes.'

She led me through the whitewashed entrance hall, past a small lounge with flowered armchairs, to a dining room laid out with small tables and red-check tablecloths.

'Rather nice', I said. 'Cottage-like but professional. Are those prints of Leyton?'

'Phil found them in Dorchester, at one of the antiquarian booksellers. Do you want the full menu?'

'Anything. Whatever you're having.'

'I ate a while back, but I'll join you for a cup of tea.' When I expressed surprise, she added, 'I do this every day of my life. Better than waitressing in Dorchester, isn't it?'

'You haven't given up the illustration work?'

'It doesn't pay.'

'Guess not,' I said, remembering her draw those firm strokes that brought the scene to life. She would pause, glance at the photo, and then sketch in the ruined arch or standing stone, each stroke precisely positioned. I don't know how you do that, I'd once said to her. Practice was the reply, a language you learn. But it was more than that, and I'd wanted her to illustrate our wedding invitations, as she'd offered to do. I'd wanted that more than anything else in the world, more than the standard menus that Jill had decided on, casting a stern eye over what her parents could reasonably afford.

'Steven, you paid fair rates, and I got a lot of work from it afterwards.'

'Be more computer graphics now.'

'I do that as well, but I'll show you later. Help yourself to fruit juice or cereals. The cooked breakfast will be ready in six minutes.'

'Good Lord', I said when a large plate arrived. 'Two eggs, four rashers of bacon. Sausages. I can't get through all that.'

'Eat what you can.' She smiled when I pulled a face. 'It's a pleasure to cook for you. Once in a while anyway.'

'Breakfast without the bed.' I stopped as she stared at me. 'Sorry, that was stupid.' I wanted to take her hand, but felt the blood pricking my face.

'Going back to Jill, our modern woman?'

'I happen to be married to her.'

'You are', said Penny, and frowned before looking away.

'She wants me to go back, only there are certain things I have to do. People I have to associate with. People I can't.'

'What do you expect? In Jill's world you make choices. You have to, and, I will tell you now, anyone I marry will also have choices, far harder than Jill's.'

'That I do know.'

'No you don't. That's what drives her mad. She's made her decisions, but you still keep looking over the fence. Ever thought she might be

disappointed too? Of course Imogen talks,' she added, 'but it's nothing I haven't guessed.'

'Very likely.'

'Imogen's never been married. For her it's just getting the bull into the field and shutting the gate, if you'll pardon country manners.'

'You did invite me in after the pageant. Or I thought you did.'

Again I felt the embarrassment pricking the skin. 'Right,' I said, 'making an absolute idiot of myself again.' I got up and walked around for a while, and then drew up a chair beside her. 'Don't know why. Sorry.'

'Don't be.' She put her arms round, and kissed me on the forehead. 'You weren't far out. I get lonely here. Or sometimes I do.'

'Why tell Steven Whittaker? He's been lonely all his life, seeing things other sensible people can't.'

'Is that a hardship?'

'Makes the world rather hollow.' I took Penny's hand. Somewhere in the confusion was what I wanted to tell her, but the words didn't come.

'Other people feel that too, you know.'

'My father did, but it didn't help. Even I didn't know what he was thinking. I'd do well at school, and he'd be pleased. I'd win the school debating trophy, and he'd smile. I'd come first in local ballroom dancing competitions, and he'd nod his head. That's all. He didn't communicate anything.'

'I didn't know you were a soft-shoe maestro.'

'Just nothing there. If we went to a pub he was never served. He worked for the water board for twenty-eight years, and not a soul came to the funeral.'

'You can't keep making up for that now.'

'He distanced himself from it all. Desperately lonely, I expect. Married my mother for refuge, because she was so confident and outgoing, but he couldn't explain himself to her either. He did his job, worked in the garden, and withdrew into his weekly library book on spiritualism.'

'You don't think someone could understand that?' said Penny, taking her hand away. 'Steven, you've wrecked two lives, to be brutally frank, and will go on wrecking lives until you accept yourself.'

'Penny, I didn't mean to. You were beautiful. Couldn't believe it.'

'So why didn't you ask me?'

'Because I wanted a career. No, that's not true. I was in love with you. Completely in love with you.'

'You didn't say so, and there were a hundred and one chances.'

'Do I have to spell it out? If I had to hurt anyone it wasn't going to be you, who were kind and unassuming, where Jill was forever showing me how better groomed, better educated, better everything she was.'

'Perhaps you don't value yourself enough. I didn't want for suitors, or Jill either, I imagine.'

'It's not that. Life starts for me when I've won, when I meet people on my terms.'

'You married Jill to teach her a lesson? Is that what you're saying?'

'Maybe.'

Penny got up and started clearing the table. 'Why don't you look at the illustrations while I do the washing-up? I was going to take you round the farm, but I don't think there's much point now.'

'Penny, I'm trying to be honest with you.'

'I hope to God you're not, or I'm wasting my time.' She seemed close to tears, and snatched up the napkin and side plate.

I tried to take her arm, but she shook me off. 'At least you've been warned', I said, and went cold at hearing myself.

'Go away.'

'Please understand', I said, releasing my grip and turning her round. She smacked my face, hard, and would have done so again if I hadn't caught her arm. 'What's that for?' I said, my eyes watering.

'Get out.'

I raced after her into the kitchen, and ducked when she hurled something. 'Penny, please listen.'

'Go away!' She reached for another cup.

'Don't do that. It's a beautiful place. Don't wreck it.'

'Why should you care? Get out!'

'Of course I care. Anything you do I care about. Spent half my life in Dorchester thinking about you. Who you're talking to. What you're saying. You're dearer to me than anything else in the world.'

'You're not wanted here.'

'I don't care. I want you.' I took her into my arms, though she struggled, and was then crying as she pummelled my chest. Eventually she put her arms round and I felt the warmth of that heavy body. 'What is it you want?' she said again.

'Why not take me round the farm? Perhaps I'll understand you more. Or feel closer.'

She wiped a hand across her nose and thrust back a strand of hair. 'I have to get cleaned up.'

'Not for me you don't. If you looked only like this, I'd love you for the rest of my life. For the rest of the life to come, probably, if we have one.'

'You're using words on me, Steven Whittaker. I shouldn't be listening.'

'Tell me about the lithograph on the dining room wall. It doesn't look like Leyton now.'

'It's Leyton in the nineteenth century. When the Churches had it.'

She shook her head to dislodge the tears. The expression softened. 'You're going to need some attention', she said.

'I don't care. Let's see the illustrations.'

I'm not having Phil find us like this. Or your students. What's the time?'

'Phil won't be here for another hour or so, and the students are old enough to look after themselves.'

'They'll see the car in the yard.'

'Only if they come down here, which they probably won't. And in fact I don't care.'

'Then you'll have the reputation without the goods, won't you?'

'I shan't mind if you don't. Probably envy, anyway.'

'No it isn't.' She looked embarrassed but took my arm. 'Maybe you should have a careful selection of the Lawleys' transgressions.'

We went through to the lounge, the dining room, and the private quarters of the house. 'So you see the farm hasn't always been in our possession', she said. 'Not directly. And it hasn't brought happiness.'

'They weren't all apostates, or spendthrifts or whatever.'

'Cut-throats, womanisers, traitors. Lucky to have a clean execution sometimes.'

'I did know.'

'So we're not exactly respectable. Not for Dorset folk, who have long memories. Even of how we got hold of the property again. Steven, you're supposed to be the historian. Why do you

think they pulled down the house and built the barn instead?’

‘It wasn’t serving any purpose.’

‘The Churches destroyed the old Elizabethan manor because it was already a ruin, but Adam Lawley pulled down the Victorian property because it reminded him his mother had been in service there. Illegitimate. The Churches, that family of good works and bible missions in India, had only one descendent, and he was killed on active service. Not even that. He died of fever in the Sudan War. The old boy left the house to the serving maid, who’d been more than a pretty face, so to speak.’

‘Have you always been such stunners?’

‘I could show you the photos. That’s about our only achievement. Estate management, service to the community, keeping the peace—all disasters. But good looks you could always count on. Just happens.’

‘Must have annoyed the others round here.’

'More than annoyed, but that's enough for one day.' She took me over to the window. 'You should see yourself.'

'Cleared the air.'

'No it hasn't.' She hung her arms round. 'Listen, I don't blame you, but I think this time you may not win. Or I may not be there when you do.' The blue eyes were still watching me, but there was a wariness in them when she said, 'Why don't you check on the dig? Or go through the proposal again. We have to be word-perfect.'

I took her into my arms and gave her a soft kiss, which blotted out everything else for a while.

We were a team, or almost so, when we went in at twelve thirty, and saw the bank manager, who was younger than expected. Careful Paul Ansell had a good grasp of farming finance, to judge by the questions he put to Penny when alternatives to the guest house business came up.

'But you'd have the outhouses converted to no good purpose. And the farm isn't suited to third-party management', he said.

'We hope that won't happen. It's only a fall back measure, if all else fails.'

'I'm rather thinking of you, Miss Lawley. The bank can call its loan in any time, of course, but you might then be forced to sell, which would be a pity with something that's been in the family for generations.'

'We ran it successfully when my father died, and could do so again. We'd have to hire field hands and machinery, but that's in the proposal. Appendix Three.'

'I looked at them last night. They're nicely laid out, but your figures for machinery are a bit light, and you've missed out benefits payable to agricultural workers. That brings the cash flows down rather.'

'It would still be viable', said Penny.'

'But not much margin for error.'

'They're only estimates', said Duffy. 'Conservative figures, I'd be thinking. We wouldn't know precisely until we tried.'

'So you might consider expanding both at the same time, the accommodation business and the farming. That would give you something to go on.'

'Is that a precondition?'

'Not at all, Miss Lawley. We don't tell people how to run their business. We try to be helpful, and offer advice based on the experience we pick up every day, from hundreds of businesses over the years.'

'So we could go ahead on the bed and breakfast side, and consider farming later?' said Penny.

'Based on results', added Duffy.

'Farmland neglected is expensive to bring back into production. Your plan supposes the outhouses converted in six months, and full occupancy within a year. I think you'll find there's a glut of holiday accommodation here, particularly at Weymouth and Bridport, except in the holiday

season. Think about it. Some of your guests might prefer to stay there out of season, when rates are quite low. There are more eating places, and entertainment facilities. At least that's competition you should consider.'

'I don't think even the cheaper hotels will be offering a hundred pounds a week half-board', I said, weighing in for the first time. 'And the TV series will put Leyton on the map. Many people are interested in local history nowadays.'

'Yes,' said Ansell, smiling with aloof politeness, 'if the series does go ahead. And attracts the right people.'

'It's picturesque up there', I said.

'Yes, it is. I had a good look round when I took over. A beautiful setting, but it is rather isolated. And that TV series has run into trouble, I understand. Something about a rock festival.'

'Just talk', I said. 'It would never get planning permission. The Countryside Association would kill it dead.'

'Sensibly managed, I'm not so sure. At any rate you'd have trouble, which could delay permission, perhaps for years. You'd have borrowed money without being able to repay it.'

'Which you'd be reluctant to lend?' said Duffy.

'I think you should come back when the picture is clearer. For your own sakes. Any investment is a gamble, but the odds are not wholly in your favour at present, are they?'

'When?' said Penny.

'Whenever you like. We're always open to new plans and ideas. Perhaps in six months.'

'Six months?' said Penny.

'Or a year. When the plan has more going for it.'

'Back to the drawing board', said Duffy.'

'I'm sure something will come to you,' said Ansell, getting up to open the door. 'For me it's been a great pleasure, and I look forward to our doing business at some other time.'

None of us spoke until we sat in a nearby pub where Duffy insisted on getting the drinks. 'Sorry, folks', he said. 'Didn't help much.'

'Wouldn't have made any difference', said Penny, who looked ruffled and out of sorts. 'He'd weighed up the plan long before we opened our mouths. Mum was right. Don't get into hock with the bank.'

'We didn't talk to the Countryside Association first', said Duffy, looking pointedly at me. 'You know Aubrey's wife, don't you?'

'I know what they want. Anything but a rock festival at Leyton, or anywhere else in Dorset. Bridport they hate, and Weymouth is the end. Trent on Sea they call it. Of course they do look after the land, and I don't blame them for being snobbish, but there's a limit to preserving every little corner of our native isle. Look at the old postcards. Everything's changed already.'

'Doesn't your film director realize that?' said Penny.

'Martins is horrified about the festival. He's made it my job to get all parties to see sense. That's why I'm down here, rather than up at the dig, where I should be now.'

'I'll get up there shortly', said Duffy. 'Drop Penny off, and check our happy band of volunteers is behaving itself. You should take up your tea invitation.'

'I'm going over on Sunday, after I've had another go at Imogen. That's right,' I said, seeing Penny's frown, 'I've been blackmailed into taking her out again, for an evening this time. To see what she and Edward Tennant are cooking up. If that's all right with everyone?'

Duffy nodded.

'There's nothing in it, Penny. You could come too.'

'You didn't mention it earlier.'

'It's only a business meeting.'

'In the evening?'

'All I'm trying to do is to get people to see sense. Find some compromise for this damned festival. Which isn't my idea, I'll remind you.'

'No need to fly off the handle', said Duffy.

'Everyone's making my life extremely difficult. Now I've got to take Imogen out, no doubt at my

expense, to resolve the idiocies of something which should never have been dreamt up in the first place.'

'You didn't have to take her out', said Penny. 'You could have just talked to her about the presentations.'

'Martins has offered her a job?'

'He may do. She came out well in the screen test, and it's just a possibility.'

'If I don't make it, you mean?' I stared at them, doubly vexed.

'Now don't take it badly', said Duffy. 'Martins is just covering his bases. In case something goes wrong and they can't use the dig.'

'Don't you think you might have mentioned this before?'

'Steven,' said Penny after a pause, 'this may not be the best time, but we have a confession to make.' The blue eyes searched my face, and then looked down. 'Well, the truth is, we got the dig begun on false pretences, Phil and I did. Just to get you started.'

'The finds? The late Iron Age pottery?'

'I was sure there was something there.'

'You planted evidence to get a dig going, is that what you're saying?'

'You're not angry?'

'I'm furious. I'm more furious than I can find words for. I can't believe it. You were in on this as well?' I said, turning to Duffy.

'But it paid off, didn't it, laddo? We've found a good deal more than the '74 excavation.'

'That's not the point. It's unbelievable. Not what you expect of grown-up people. Christ almighty.'

'Now there are Saxon finds as well. It's getting interesting.'

'It's becoming a nightmare. There's no independent photographic record for the Samian ware find, incidentally.'

'The camera shot got deleted.'

'Neville Barnes doesn't think so. Dropped all kinds of hints the other night.'

Penny looked to Duffy. 'Likes to make himself important', she said. 'You know Ned.'

'And you don't have to write up the inconsistencies', added Duffy.

'Inconsistencies? Is that what you call them? Don't you understand that the Department's money has gone into the project. Hampton gave me a grilling, which will be nothing to what I'll get when he hears about this.'

'Then we're really sorry', said Penny. 'It was meant to help you.'

'Was it?' I said, almost incandescent with fury. 'To help you and Leyton Farm, more likely.'

'What are you going to do?' said Penny. 'Hand us over to the police?'

'Or have you two been hedging your bets? If the TV series fails you still get the rock festival. Tell me you haven't thought of that.'

'Frankly,' said Duffy, 'I'd prefer the TV series. As everyone would.'

'Except Eddie Tennant and Imogen. You don't think they've been messing up my chances, contaminating the site?'

'Shouldn't think so', said Duffy. 'It's not guarded night and day, and we don't run security checks on our volunteers, but I can't see much point in making trouble, can you?'

'Imogen Lawley?' I said.

'Don't keep accusing my sister.'

'She's an ambitious young woman. Not to mention the enticing looks. I don't think she intends to settle for domestic obscurity somewhere in Dorset. Probably dreams of PR work, in London at least.'

'She tried that', said Penny. 'Got a job in film publicity. Soho. But she didn't stick at it. I'm not going to say why, but there was someone else involved.'

'So the girl's got a heart after all.'

'Imogen is more complicated than you think', put in Duffy. 'She's not a tease. She does tell the truth.'

'Then some of us had better look out, hadn't we?'

'Who's that?' said Penny

'Now don't get me wrong. I like Imogen, and you, of course. I just don't always understand your machinations, that's all.'

'Like?'

'Reckon we should be getting back', said Duffy. 'Penny, can I give you a lift?'

'I want Steven to explain himself. Why do I have to look out?'

'Stop it. Phil, tell Penny not to be so melodramatic. I'm not getting mixed up in some family feud.'

'Penny,' said Duffy, 'time to go. Steven doesn't mean anything.' He gave me an angry look. 'We've all had a disappointing day.'

Chapter Six

I had good intentions, sound in retrospect, of playing down my evening with Imogen. Open-neck shirt and slacks should have underlined that this was only a working meeting at a convenient place, but of course I was wrong-footed at the start. The Imogen I collected from her place was turned out in jeans and blouse, but the hair had been waved in short curls to set off the green studs of earrings and give her a touch of mischievous glamour. I know how Jill can dress to kill, and Imogen's was a good deal more

accomplished. 'Like it?' she said as she slid into the front passenger seat.

She looked unbuttoned and dangerous, but I only said, 'Yes, you've changed the hair.'

'For you.' She looked at me expectantly, and smiled. It was not the look, or the revealing blouse that made her so captivating, but something in the smoky shadows of the eyes, half-teasing and seductive, that caused me to wonder if I'd been reading the cards correctly.

'Thought we could go somewhere cheap', I started. 'Perhaps a country pub. Somewhere outside Dorchester.'

'Good thinking, Mr Teacher. We don't want folk jumping to the wrong conclusions, do we?'

'Call me Steven, would you, or Dr Whittaker.'

'Not sir?' Imogen laughed and tapped me on the nose. 'Don't be so po-faced, Steven. I'm not going to eat you. We're off to enjoy ourselves.'

'Isn't that for me to decide? It's my invitation.'

'Of course it's not. It's my treat. We're going to one of my special places because you were so nice to me on the picnic. A perfect gentleman.'

In truth I'd suffered suppressed longings since the sunbathing episode, and to see that body comfortable in its blouse gave an air of intimacy to our meeting, a shared confidence that drew us together—far more, I realized, than had ever been the case with Jill. 'So where?' I said, glancing in the rear mirror.

'The Quayside.'

'Weymouth? Bit pricey down there.'

'It's going on expenses, which is only reasonable when I get the big exclusive from you. Local TV series presenter tells all.'

'No hope. We're going to talk about plans for the rock festival, and nothing else.'

'So we shall. They'll be a small outdoor stage, and a band brought down from London.'

'What band?'

'We haven't decided yet', said Imogen. 'Like to recommend one?'

'Well, let me tell you now, without the wining and dining treatment, that you're not. Absolutely no hope. You can save the expenses right now.'

'Steven, just be a sweetie, would you, and drive?'

'All right. It's your money, or the Times's I suppose. You must have the editor eating out of your hand for this little caper.'

'Just keep your eyes on the road. It's left here.'

'I do know the way', I said, spreading my hands further on the steering wheel.

'Am I making you nervous? It's one of my best tactics.'

I snatched at the obvious. 'Work on Edward Tennant, does it?'

'That was ages ago, and Eddie's far too conceited to take any notice of anyone but himself. It has to be someone sensitive to people. Which you are, aren't you, Steven?'

'Aren't you?' I said.

She seemed not to hear, but brought that snub nose a few inches from my face. 'Not as much as

you. You're more like Penny, only you keep your feelings in. You won't let yourself go.'

'Just as well with someone like you.'

'Does that mean you're falling for me? Just a little? Please say you are.'

'I am not.'

'After all these years I finally get noticed by the dishy teacher.'

'Can we put that behind us?'

'You don't know how I used to dream of you. Every night. All the girls did. We had bets to see who the Blonde Warrior would smile at most.'

'You wouldn't have done too well then.'

'Beastly you were. Only person I couldn't succeed with.'

'I was just trying to keep order.' Repeatedly I would think of ways of ignoring Imogen, starting with a change in duties. Only the Head Teacher would have been on to it immediately. Is there someone in particular you feel uncomfortable with, Mr Whittaker, or is it the inexperience of dealing with sixth-form pupils? I even took to

keeping a mental count of the number of advances from the forward little Imogen Lawley, advances which kept me awake at night, which thoughts of Jill did not relieve. I suggested going up to see my reluctant girlfriend more often, but she seemed distinctly cool to the idea. I thought of finding temporary solace in one of the teachers, a good sporty type who was never going to make inroads on my affections, but told myself it wasn't fair to anyone.

'I respected you for that. Why I worked so hard, though you didn't notice.'

'You did settle down in time.' I couldn't remember her doing so, but I did weigh up her exercise books more carefully, though they were no better or worse than anyone else's. I imagined the hands tracing the words, and could almost hear her voice in them.

'I worked my little heart out for you, and you didn't give a damn.'

'What's this,' I said, to steer the thoughts elsewhere, 'a belated crush on teacher?'

'The school trip was. I thought if I showed off some of the you-know-what, you'd pay more attention to me. But it didn't work. Poor little Imogen, she was so upset.'

'Well there you are.'

'I was the best developed in the class, except Monica Selsdon, and she was a fat lump. You didn't notice that?'

'Clearly not.'

'Steven, you're a hopeless liar.' She laughed. 'When you caught up with the Amazon army you refused to look at me. You looked at all the other girls but kept your eyes off me. You were embarrassed, I could see that. You were really a sweetie. I could have kissed you.'

'Imogen, it caused no end of trouble. Some of the parents complained, and I had a carpeting from the Head Teacher. Something about keeping proper discipline, protecting the school's reputation, avoiding legal action. You can imagine what was said.'

'Hypocrites. The school had the highest rate of schoolgirl pregnancies in the county.'

'I know that, but I still had to move on.'

'You holding that against me?'

'Imogen, I get very cross when I think about it. Cross at myself.'

'You shouldn't. No one stands up to our charms.'

'That's not what I meant.' We turned on to the coast road, and I concentrated on overtaking a tourist coach.

'Say more, Steven. You're being mysterious.'

'The truth is that you were difficult and attractive at the same time. I should have treated you like any other pupil, but I couldn't. Perhaps it was someone else there, but I was harder on you than I should have been. I was protecting myself.'

'You were.'

'That's all I can say, and it was a long time ago. We've both had time to grow up.'

'But not to change. Say you haven't. Please.'

'Imogen you are still attractive. Only more so, of course. Despite everything.'

'Despite your marriage and kid and respectable position.'

'Everything.'

'Steven, I think we're making progress. You are a lovely man.'

I thought Imogen would kiss me, but she placed hands on lap and settled down with a contented smile. 'Where on the Quayside?' I said half an hour later as we approached the tall backs of houses that fronted the beach at Weymouth.

'Better park in there', she said, pointing to the municipal car park. 'Only three quid for four hours.'

'Four hours? Have I got you for that long?'

'Steven you could have my company for ever. I need friends.'

'Just friends?'

'Oh you're hoping too much from this, aren't you?' She gave my arm a quick squeeze. 'Don't be disappointed. I can be a fantastic friend.'

‘Expect you can.’

‘And I’ll tell you why. Look, we take the exit over there, and then it’s a short walk over.’

‘Part of a regular routine?’

‘We’re going to my favourite place, where I only invite people I really, really like.’ She took my hand. ‘Is this going to compromise you? With your wife, I mean?’

‘If anyone sees us, yes it will.’

‘Then we won’t.’

‘Actually, I don’t care. You look smashing, and I’m happy, and the rest of the world can go hang.’

‘Then put your arm round, and we’ll be like everyone else. It’s a beautiful evening.’

We dawdled to Vaughan’s which advertised a Les Routiers sign and prices that made me stare. ‘Not cheap, is it?’ I said.

‘Most expensive on the front. But worth it. Let’s go in.’

‘Do you have a booking, sir?’ said one of the waiters who immediately strolled up.

'Whittaker,' said Imogen.

'Let me see. Ah yes. If you'd like a drink perhaps? It'll only be a few minutes.'

We sat at the small bar, Imogen with her Spritzer, while I took in the surroundings. Some were casually dressed, but most were the well-healed middle-class type with tie and jacket. 'Think I'd better insist on paying my way', I said after a pause. 'Especially with these prices. Don't want to get you fired.'

'I wish to God they would, only it would cost them of course, the mean sods.'

'You want to leave the Times?'

'I'll tell you later, if you promise to keep a secret.'

'Expect I can guess.'

'No you can't. It's got nothing to do with working on the filmset. And don't look at me that way. You'd have found out tomorrow, if Penny hasn't told you, as I expect she has. Anyway, the table's ready.'

'You're a wonder', I said after we'd given our orders and were looking through the small window-panes at the yachts moored behind cars lining the quayside. 'Anyone with sense would keep quiet on that.'

'No they wouldn't. Listen, you think I'm after your job on the film series.'

'It had crossed my mind', I said, wondering what was coming next.

'Well I am.'

'What?' I felt a sharp pulse of alarm.

'Now don't go off the deep end. If you don't get the series, I want the chance. That's what I told Joel Martins when he asked.'

'He's asked you to step in?' I said with simulated unconcern.

'He's made me production assistant.'

'Right. I was getting the wires crossed.'

Imogen broke off a piece of bread. 'Which means I'll have a chance if you turn the presenter's job down.' She put the bread in her mouth, smiling mischievously for my benefit.

'It's already agreed on', I said. What was she thinking of? 'Shooting's tomorrow.'

'If you don't step down.'

'Why the hell should I?' The vehemence surprised me. 'I've been working on this for a whole year', I continued in a more level tone.

'You may have to.'

'Like to tell me why?' I said steadily, though I could feel the evening turning into something different.

'Steven, can't you drop that I'm in charge manner, and be honest? There are irregularities at the dig, and your Principal wants to send you up to York. Of course I know. I'm a reporter.'

'That doesn't explain anything.'

'I'm not going to name sources, but that's what most people think you'll do.'

'My decision', I said, and studied the wine list the waiter brought. 'Early days anyway.'

'Steven, I hope you don't. I think it would be a disaster. You'd have to go back to your wife, but

only in name, because she'd stay on in Dorchester.'

'I don't want to talk about Jill.'

'Well I do. I want you to leave Jill, and your bastard daughter. To do the right thing.'

'Megan can be difficult, but you shouldn't call her a bastard.'

'Isn't she?'

'That's pretty nasty.' I glared at Imogen, and then into the distance, as though seeing a long tunnel of deception, which now took on the muscular dimensions of Jill's anatomy.

'You could check. DNA testing isn't expensive.'

'David Farley?' I said, angrily closing my mind to the possibility, but also seeing further deceptions. So much for the unyielding nature of Jill's body, and the imposing respectability of the Wooten residence.

'So you ought to lodge a paternity suit before you make any settlement', Imogen was saying.

'Jill wouldn't do that to me', I said, but knew instinctively she might.

Imogen was watching me carefully. 'I'm not making any accusations, or blaming Jill, who'd make a fine wife for most men. Except you, of course.'

The pain was real. 'Have you gone into the marriage guidance business, or something? It's offensive. I haven't asked you to poke your nose into my affairs, any more than I'd intrude into your doings.'

'Steven, I'm going to put my cards on the table if you will do the same. Why I want the presenter's job.'

'I thought you didn't. Couldn't you be consistent?'

'Don't talk so loud. I brought you here so you wouldn't go into one of your great rages. Listen, will you?'

'Why is everyone giving me advice, which I don't need and don't ask for?'

'Because they like you.'

She put her knife down and stretched a hand across, but I could feel my brows contracting and

a deep pain in the jaw. 'No they don't', I said, withdrawing my arm. 'I've just heard a popularity poll in my Department. Most lecturers do not like me, one little bit.'

'You're not the typical academic. What's your steak like?'

'I don't want to talk about my steak.'

'Well, calm down. You're off the scale. I just want to talk about you and me, and what we have to do.'

'Who's the we? You've just told me there's nothing between us.'

'I want us to be friends.'

'After you've stolen my job. Or whatever standing in for me amounts to.' I paused. 'Imogen, this is an unfriendly conversation. I haven't always been kind to you, that's true, but I've never purposely done you in.'

'After I've explained about the festival', she said, ignoring the remark.

'So we're going back to that, at long last. Right. There is no festival. Got that? There can't

be.’ I realized I was pointing the knife at her, and put the implement down.

I was about to add more when she said, ‘Steven, why do you make it so difficult? Just when we were getting on so well. Weren’t we?’

She looked ravishing, and opened those translucent green eyes, astonished that anyone could resist her. ‘You were just softening me up’, I said.

‘When have I ever told you a lie?’ She smiled and slowly tilted her head.

‘Well, I don’t know. Perhaps you haven’t.’

‘You know I haven’t.’ She reached across and took my hand now, resting a finger on the knuckles a moment. ‘Listen, I’m trying to make you do something sensible so I can have the life I want.’

‘Which doesn’t include me?’ The words came out unexpectedly, and I felt my skin tighten. ‘Just ignore that, would you?’

'Steven, you'd not be happy with me. You're in love with Penny, if you weren't so pigheaded not to see.'

'Penny is an enigma. I can't talk to her.'

Imogen shook her head slowly. 'Yes you can. Anyway, I'm in love with someone else.'

'I thought that was over.'

'It's not even started. Look, are you going to talk to me properly? Yes or no.'

'Suppose so.'

'Right, now listen. My life's a mess. I'm in love with a married man in London who won't leave his wife. He's told me that, and I know it's true.'

'Imogen, what are you going to do? Sounds hopeless. Not at all like you.'

'What do you expect? I'm going to make my own career, and have him as a lover. Not be a kept woman, which he offered, but on my own terms.'

'Lucky man.' Yes, I could say that truthfully. Make a friend of Imogen, and perhaps that would be enough.

'Is he? Having to meet in secret, lie to his wife, pretend what he doesn't feel?'

'So why can't he leave his wife?'

'Scandal. She's got all the money, and maybe he doesn't have the guts.'

'Perhaps he's not being straight with you.' Of a sudden I felt protective.

'Very possibly. But his wife's successful in publishing, and he only falls for managing types.'

'Is that why you want the presenter's job?'

'Why I'm going to get it.'

'You're supposing a lot. I don't usually give up without a fight', I said with a show of strength, though feeling the case was more complicated than I'd have believed possible. How could a small creature cause so much trouble?

'I'm going to fight you every inch of the way. I want that man, and I want that job.'

'Why are you telling me this?'

'In the hope, in the small unrealistic hope that you might understand, and settle for something else. Which would save a lot of heartache.'

'My marriage, is that?'

'The school trip. I'm going to use it if I have to.'

'Ancient history.'

'Listen to me carefully. I'm writing a piece on teacher-pupil trust, and I've already done some interviews. Including the parents of those girls.'

'You set that off. We had a perfectly sensible history lesson at Maiden Castle, and you persuaded the girls to be ancient Britons and strip down to their knickers. The boys were Romans, and you were the wild termagants hurling yourselves at them. Out of my sight for ten minutes, and all hell breaks out.'

'You know that, and I know that, but you were moved on, and the matter was hushed up. That doesn't look good.'

'You're resorting to blackmail? You invited me here to explain that?'

'So you understand why I'm doing it. Or will do it unless you see sense, and let the festival go ahead.'

'If there's a festival they'll not be any TV series. No job for you. You're not thinking, Imogen.'

'They'll be a TV series, but not based on Leyton Rings. They'll feature Dorchester. Roman walls. Picturesque streets. Hardy associations. Visits to Maiden Castle, Leyton, Bradbury Rings, Glastonbury. Makes much more sense, as Martin agrees.'

'He hasn't said anything to me.'

'He's hoping you'll be sensible and step down. He doesn't want to make Leyton the centrepiece if there's some scandal involving the dig.'

'A few anomalies, that's all.'

'More than that.' She rested chin on hands, and gazed at me. 'Listen. Ned does anything I want. Plants finds, erases photos. What do you expect?'

'That's criminal. Imogen you can't be saying this. I put a lot of effort in.'

'When you weren't running errands for Jill.'

'We share the household chores.'

'That's very decent and noble, but you're ignoring one basic fact. Jill doesn't care for you. She's a calculating career woman who'll probably dump David Farley once she's extracted what she wants. Everyone can see that except you.'

'Jill has an excellent reputation at the hospital.'

'She's a cold-hearted, ambitious woman that for some unknown reason you married, even though she was wrong for you.' Imogen put her hands on the table, and leant forward. 'Don't you understand? When Penny has you I can go to London. But not until.'

'Can't the woman speak for herself?'

'She has, and you won't listen. Why do you think I organized the picnic?'

'To make trouble. Pretty successfully.'

'To see if there was anything wrong with you. But there wasn't.'

‘So if I’d jumped on you, which is what any self-respecting male would have done, you’d have obliged, would you?’

‘I’d have cried blue murder. I haven’t slept with my friend in London, and I certainly wouldn’t with you.’

‘Then I don’t understand.’

‘You’re priceless. Did you really see us going at it like a couple of rabbits?’

‘You were pretty alluring. Phenomenal.’

‘It’s not the same. There was no person there for you. Your senses told you that.’

‘I could have been wrong.’

‘Not at thirty-four. Listen, Penny’s made matters obvious enough, not to mention hurting herself in a silly marriage when you turned her down.’

‘I did not turn her down. I was engaged to Jill. There was nothing I could do.’

‘You could have stopped being such a coward. Penny cares for you. Jill never did and never will. It was just your stupid need to win all the tricks, to

succeed in willing yourself to do something. Underneath you're different, and that's going to take you down, if you don't go willingly yourself.'

'What do you mean, take me down?'

'You're living a false life. Pretending to want something when you don't. You're not sane sometimes. You talk to yourself, stare at things that aren't there.'

'So I'm going mad. Right.'

'You're already mad. You're someone desperately hanging on to being normal like the rest of us poor mechanical beings. You're brilliant. When you teach you come alive, and so does everyone in the classroom. But you don't trust the insight or whatever it is. It distracts you, prevents you being the go-getter that Jill needs.'

'Thanks for the analysis.'

'Think of it as a start on your new life. Didn't they teach you anything in your anthropology lectures?'

'I took archaeology.'

'You have to be a shaman to interpret the past, which means leaving the rational world for a while.'

'Can we not have this nonsense?'

'But you won't. Jill won't surrender her identity, and you won't surrender to her. You keep pushing her off. That's why she's so self-contained and cold to you.'

'I can do without the amateur psychology, thank you.'

'Steven, I'm trying to explain why you feel so uncomfortable with me. Why you can't surrender to the feelings you have.'

I stared at her angrily.

'Maybe I don't like Jill, but you're being as heartless as she can't help being with you. When's it going to be enough for the two of you?'

'Imogen, all I'm registering is that you want my job, and will do anything to get it.'

'Then you haven't been listening. I do want your job, but I also want you to be happy. I'd love to be your friend, Steven. Really be your friend.'

'But you'd write this silly piece about the field trip if you have to?'

'It's already written. Just have to hand it in.'

'You'd be sued.'

'Everything has been double-checked. We're professionals. Please, Steven, let it go.'

'You'd do this? Cause all this trouble?'

'I'll finish your career if I have to, yes.' She toyed with the dessert spoon. 'Though it's the last thing I'd want to do.'

'Then you're the one who's mad.'

'Why don't you see Penny? The rock festival is not going to be so bad. There's already one near Stonehenge. Larmer Tree Gardens or whatever they call the place. Ours will be a small, well-managed event that gives young people something to look forward to. It's dull enough down here.'

'Traffic jams, and crowds of unwashed drop-outs, with an expensive clean-up operation afterwards. A hostile farming community, and an

even less friendly police force when their leave is cancelled.'

'No it won't. It's not another Glastonbury. Just talk to Phil Duffy.' She paused and smiled again. 'Steven, don't fight me. I'd love to have the dishy schoolmaster on my side. Someone to talk to, confide in. Why don't you want that?'

'I'm not going to be dictated to.'

'Suppose I said it was unavoidable? That we had special powers, Penny and I. That we could prove it to you.'

'I'd say we ought to go home. Here's thirty towards the meal.'

'If you agree to stop off somewhere. Supposing you're man enough.'

'Imogen, the last time caused no end of trouble. Even Jill got to hear of it.'

'She won't tonight. They'll just be you and me and the elements.' She motioned to a waiter. 'Steven, all we're going to do is have a swim and then sit on the beach to dry off.'

'Whatever for?'

Half wondering and more in annoyance, I picked up the car and we drove on past Ferrybridge and Southwell to a deserted area of quarrying near the Portland Lighthouse. From here we took the undulating cliff-path, the wind blowing hard in our faces until I finally said, 'Imogen, are you sure you know where we're going?'

'Our secret place', she said, taking my hand. 'Only another mile or so.'

Must be insane, I thought, but Imogen started running, dragging me along behind her, half stumbling along the track that gleamed between the untidy grass. Then we went down a sloping stretch to a tumble of boulders under a high limestone cliff. I fell over twice, and had a stitch, before we were picking our way round a small headland. The sea surged between the boulders, and broke on the projecting ledge, sending plumes of spray into the air. Then we were there: not a cave but a hollow under the cliffs and hemmed in by fallen limestone stacks. 'We're not diving off that, are we?' I said in alarm, looking at

the sea that boiled against the grey and white bands of rock.

‘There, Mr Teacher.’ She pointed to a rock flat that shelved into the water. ‘Ideal, isn’t it?’

‘Don’t think so.’

She didn’t reply, but immediately stripped off. Reluctantly I followed, and found her laughing at me. ‘You’re not keeping your underpants on, are you? Come on, no one’s going to see us.’

‘I’m preserving a fitting modesty, unlike a certain shameless other person.’ Imogen made a grab at them, until, with little dignity, I was standing as she was, feeling the wind chilling my stomach and private parts. ‘Run,’ she said, ‘it’ll be easier.’

Perhaps it was, though the rock bruised my feet as I pounded after her down the shelf and plunged into the sea, a cold sea that hit me with the sharp smack of brine. I reached for the bottom, but couldn’t find it, and was treading water until I threw myself into the swimming, turning over to see where Imogen had got to. I

was already some distance from the cliffs, and remembered the tide-races for which Portland is notorious. There was a strong current, I now realized, and struck out for the cliffs, first steadily and then more energetically as the distance only increased. My body was numb with cold, my arms ached, and my lungs seemed to wheeze with pain. She wouldn't, I said to myself, but soon had no time for anything but concentration. Half an hour later, and near exhaustion, I made it back to the ledge, and hung there as the waves lifted and pressed me against the rock. Slowly I clambered to my feet, and saw Imogen as I rounded the side of a large boulder. She was sitting cross-legged in front of a fire she'd made from dry grass and driftwood.

'You've got back', she said.

'No thanks to you. You trying to get me drowned?' I sat down heavily beside her, too angry to think how I looked.

'You should stay standing to get dry.'

'Aren't there subtler ways of seducing your admirers?'

She took me by the hand and got to her feet. 'You can hold me if you like. You're not going to do anything in your present state.' She laughed, that flat, mirthless laugh of hers. 'Look,' she said, after we'd stood in the keen wind for a while, 'you're tired, and I'm tired, so let's just lie down. I've folded my jeans so we have a pillow.'

'What for?'

'Put an arm round. Closer. Can't you feel me sinking into you? Now let yourself go. How do you feel?'

'Warm and close. Yes, I suppose so.'

'Understand?' she said. 'That's all I ever wanted. You to be open and frank with me. Not a sexpot but a friend. That's why we're like this. Last time it didn't work, but maybe it will now.'

'I do feel close to you. And easy about it, though it's a bit hard, this ground. I'll bring the clothes over.' I folded the jeans and pullovers into

a long pillow and we lay out on the stone floor, which was now warm.

'You can put an arm across if you like, but that's all,' she said, that small mouth only inches away. 'I know you, Steven Whittaker, so no tricks.'

'I wouldn't want to break the spell. It's an enchanted state of grace, though nothing has happened.'

Imogen raised herself to look at me. 'Of course we want lovers,' she said, 'and a home to bring up children, and a career, but there's also something elemental. Most of the time we don't want someone performing sexual antics on us, though films and magazines and psychiatrists say we should. I think it's the first time, the dreamtime, when we were pagans, the people whose remains you dig up. They must have had something to go on living, make them comfortable in their surroundings.'

'We don't know much about them really.'

'Were they matriarchal societies?'

‘Some were, probably.’ I thought of various papers and the artefacts and a host of theories, but who could say?

‘Could we find out if we listened to ourselves more? If we didn’t analyse our sensations but just let them take us wherever?’

‘Enticing thought, but I don’t know.’ I ran a finger down her arm. ‘We just reach into the intellectual wardrobe and put on something suitable. Maybe it’s mass delusion, or fear, but we don’t let on what we feel.’

‘What do you feel now, Steven?’

‘Some affinity with the scene, I suppose. With you. I could imagine staying like this in a Britain that had solstices and round barrows for the dead. Fishing, planting a few crops, producing children when needed. Of course we’d not live long, but there would be no need to. We’d just emerge into the daylight for a while, before sinking back into the dark dreamland of our natures. We’d see the bones of our parents and

grandparents and know that ours would join them shortly. You and me and all the others around us.'

'Our modern society would arrest us on the spot.'

'You know what I mean. There's a deep layer of yearning we make into art or religion. We can dress it up as a father-figure or grotesque gods or intangible spirit, but it's always there, hinting at things in coincidences or dreams. Something like that.'

'What did you see just now, when you were asleep? It was Penny, wasn't it?'

'I wasn't asleep.'

'You were happy, and I had the presenter's job.'

'Now don't spoil it.'

'You didn't feel that I'd already become the presenter, and Jill and the college and everything else had disappeared?' When I didn't reply she added, 'I want you to think about it when we go back. For the rest of your life maybe.'

'Even though we're just friends?'

‘Because I’m your special friend.’

We dressed and found the car after a walk that seemed shorter this time. Not much was said on the journey back, and I didn’t get out to open the door when we arrived at her flat.

‘Goodnight, Steven’, she said, and leant over to give a quick kiss. In the rustle I could feel a body that was suddenly close again. ‘Just for me, please think about it, and don’t say anything to Penny.’

‘I’m not giving up that easily.’

‘Then I feel sorry for you.’ She turned away, closing the door after a pause. I couldn’t see the expression as she walked up the steps, and the flat door was opened without a wave or backward glance.

Did I think about it? Endlessly, that night or what remained of it, and I was still thinking as the daylight filtered through the blinds and I got up to make myself some coffee. It seemed unreal, a nightmare that threatened to reappear at any time. Had I seen Imogen in the presenter’s role?

Most certainly, and a soft blankness where Penny's body settled into mine, which was also Imogen herself.

Chapter Seven

It had been Duffy's suggestion to put a trench across a southern projection of the hill, a few metres down from the summit earthwork. Probably just taking advantage of the contours, I'd told him, but here the lower ridge swelled out and formed a broad platform, giving that view of the sea Martins wanted.

Filming wasn't until eleven, when the light would be better, and I had two hours to transfer everyone to the new trench and rearrange the washing facilities. Penny appeared around ten in a long skirt and boots. 'It's my big day', she said to my look of surprise. She came over. 'You still

want me to ad lib, don't you? About what the hill has meant over the generations. Folk-lore and the enduring influence of the landscape.'

'I just don't think you should mention all that stuff about sightings and voices.' New age activities weren't Penny's style.

'Maybe it's not scientific, but it did happen. You're not still angry about the finds, are you?'

'Contrary to what Phil said, quite a lot seems to have been planted.'

'So you didn't have a good time with Imogen last night?' said Penny, changing the subject with a smile. 'Wasn't what you expected?'

'You probably approve of her little plan to blackmail me about the school trip. Think she would?'

'I think it's funny, you and the schoolgirl army. Imogen is secretive, so if she went topless she really was making a play for you.'

'On the field trip?'

'What did you think I meant?'

'Just that you women are so difficult to follow at times.'

'What's the matter, Steven?'

'Nothing is the matter', I said crossly, 'except that I'm hosting a programme on a site posing as a model of archaeological investigation which I know, and half of Dorchester knows, has been hopelessly compromised. Martins even has probably caught some of the gossip, after I stupidly introduced him to everybody.'

'The new trench isn't compromised. You've thrown off Neville Barnes and his helpers.'

'And left ourselves seriously short-handed. Should have prosecuted them.'

'Perhaps it's Dorset getting back at you. Impeding scientific progress.'

'Don't think I want to hear any more about the primal forces of nature and alternative archaeology.' I went to check the gridding, and returned to add, 'Got enough problems already.'

'With Jill?'

'Of course I have to see her again.'

'You could still invite me out, couldn't you? Or come over for dinner sometime. You used to come over a lot.'

'That was a time of summer happiness, a blessed interlude between striving to get the PhD and now all these fights with authority. I think for the only time in my life I actually looked forward to each new day.'

'I was very happy with you, Steven,' Penny was saying. 'And I'll always be happy in your company. Whatever you do.'

'Imogen said something like that. I want to be your friend, your real friend. Before she dropped the thunderbolt, that is.'

'You don't understand. If Imogen says something she means it. She's not promiscuous. She's very afraid of sex with the wrong person, of making mistakes and being laughed at. If she sunbathed topless on the picnic that's more than she's done for most suitors. Even I don't know if she's slept with that man in London.'

I could feel my stomach tightening, but said casually, 'Apparently not.'

'Then she hasn't. She tells you more than she tells me.'

'Penny, I've no designs on Imogen. She's a bewitching creature but I'd never be at peace. I'm not of her makeup.'

'Maybe you should broaden your interests, Steven Whittaker.' She stopped and said with a forced laugh, 'Well, a girl can't be more obvious than that.'

I tried to smile.

'Steven, I'd like it to be as it was before Jill came on the scene. I'm not trying to compromise or embarrass you, and I'm not setting terms and conditions. If I'm moody sometimes, you know why. Life is slipping away and you seem fixed on a plan that's only hurting Jill and everyone else.'

'That's very handsome of you. I will think about it.'

'So it's up to you.'

'When things are sorted out.'

'Invite me out on midsummer's eve. It's an old country custom, and it doesn't amount to anything, unless you want it to. I used to be as good company as Imogen.'

'You still are, probably more so.'

'So it's a date?'

'All right. If Jill hears about it, too bad. She probably knows about Imogen anyway, and Jill's not exactly a pillar of rectitude herself.'

The film crew were late in arriving. Imogen and the technicians appeared over the brow of the hill around twelve, and then there was the wind-buffed and bulky form of Joel Martins, who scrambled down to join us.

'Everyone on site, are they?' he asked as he looked over the platform where sections of the turf had been laid aside and a shallow cut started. 'Seem to remember more people here.'

'We're just excavating this section now', I said.

'Right, right. We'll go up on the main area later. This afternoon, I hope.'

Imogen appeared, clipboard in hand. She stood next to Martins, and gave me an indifferent smile.

‘Everyone in position?’ said our director.

There was much shifting of reflectors and positions until I was standing at the trench and facing the camera.

‘Very well, my dears. Let action commence. From the top, Steven, please.’

I launched forth on what has long been second nature. ‘Here we are standing on the edge of the Iron Age country, in one of the most southerly of their hill forts. Back over there’—I pointed grandly over the hill—‘the land undulates across Dorset and the Salisbury Plains into the Cotswolds and the Lincolnshire Wolds, a vast tract of dry limestone hills, looking much as they do today.’ I paused for what would be an aerial shot. ‘Down here, from this last fortification, the land falls steeply to the sea.’ The camera obligingly turned towards the village, and then panned out over Weymouth Bay. ‘Beyond what

you can see of Portland Bill, lay Brittany and the megalith builders of the Bronze Age. But now we are with a later wave of invaders, starting around 700 BC, and lasting until the Romans conquered the country in AD 43.'

I took breath, but Martins waved me on.

'In a later program we'll go to a reconstructed Iron Age village in Hampshire, but today I'd like you to imagine the scene. Each of these forts would have held a dozen—'

'Cut', said Martins. 'That's fine. Well done, Steven.'

'I thought you wanted me to do the whole scene.'

'We will. Now Imogen, my dear, you see Steven's approach. Laid the whole scene out for us. Let's see what you can do.'

'Wait a minute . . . ' I said as Imogen pranced up with an impish smile. 'This is my dig.'

'So it is, dear boy. We shall come back to you, never fear.'

With a bad grace I walked back to the group behind the camera, which Penny had now joined. ‘Flaming cheek’, I told her.

‘Kiddies, please. No talking. Off you go, Imogen.’

‘Here we are standing . . .’ she started. It was a faultless performance, which she’d clearly rehearsed long before the conversation of the previous night. I felt anger boiling up, but was then motioned to join her as she continued, ‘So here we turn to the dig’s supervisor, Dr Steven Whittaker of the University College of Bath South.’

I scrambled to the trench and tried to look pleasantly at ease.

‘So tell us, Dr Whittaker, what you hope to find here.’

‘Evidence. Archaeology is a hunt for clues. Who lived here, what they did, how they survived. Now we know from a brief excavation thirty years ago that the site was inhabited during the early Iron Age, around 600 BC, but what we’ve found

up the hill points to later settlement.’ I looked despairingly at Imogen. What had we found that hadn’t been planted?

‘Evidence of Mediterranean contacts, I understand’, said Imogen, smiling and turning her neat profile to the camera.

‘Yes, perhaps so. Though of course it’s a bit early to be sure.’

‘Dr Whittaker is making an important point’, said Imogen. ‘This is science, where everything has to be documented and rigorously checked.’

I tried not to glare, but the eyes hurt.

‘We shall be going to see the whole process shortly’, she continued. ‘How the layers are scraped back, the soil sifted and washed. How what is found has to be photographed, drawn on the plan, and then sent for conservation and identification.’

Clearly the script had been changed, and I looked at Martins, who gave me an amused smile. ‘That’s right’, I said, seizing the initiative. ‘Why we have stepped back here, and started on

an area that's never been dug before. A pristine site.'

'A pristine site', said Imogen. 'Now why are we doing that?'

'We're here because it's not unusual for earthworks to be redeveloped, deepened or added to at some later date.' Imogen looked more impish than ever. 'So', I continued, 'if there has been later settlement, this is a good place to look.' Why was I spouting this nonsense?

'How much later?' asked Imogen. 'Roman, as at Maiden Castle?'

'Later than that. Saxon even sometimes.'

I thought for a moment Imogen would point out that this wasn't a barrow but a hill fort, but she appeared to relent, and asked about the sceats we'd found.

'Could be', I said. 'Which is why it's so important to excavate the site properly.'

My heart sank at this needless stupidity, but Imogen was wrapping things up. 'Now we shall go to the washing plant to see if any of Dr.

Whittaker's conjectures have borne fruit.' She smiled and the camera swivelled to the next scene.

'Cut', said Martins. 'Yes, you make a good team. We'll have to reshoot one section, but that's an excellent start. Congratulations.'

Imogen mischievously held out a hand.

'Good, good', said Martins. 'Now refreshments, I understand, are at the farm. So everybody.'

I joined Penny, who led the way down. 'I did warn you', she said when we were out of earshot. 'And Imogen was good, I thought.'

'Doesn't have to gloat. All those leading questions. She was really enjoying herself.'

'Put a few shots across your bows about what she'd do if you fought her. But you can always talk to Martins. Or I can talk to Imogen.'

'I'll tackle Martins.'

He brushed the question aside when I walked up with him after lunch. 'Yes, we'll have a chinwag. Of course, my dear boy, but not just now. I hear there's been some find in the trench.'

There had. A bead had been dug up, and was being exhibited in the washing tent.

'Tell us about it', said Imogen as the cameras rolled again.

'Well, as you can see,' I said, 'it's a glass bead. And clearly it's not Iron Age.'

'So what period? Can you hazard a guess?'

I held the bead aloft and stared at the thing. It was getting worse. Why hadn't I set a guard on the trench?

'Not sure I'd want to stick my neck out at this stage.'

'The Romans had glass, didn't they?' she continued, encouragingly.

'Of course', I said. 'It might be Roman, or Romano-British, or perhaps even Saxon.' I stared glumly, and tossed the bead in her direction.

'No, it's genuine', she mouthed silently. 'Wasn't me.'

'Cut', said Martins. 'What's going on, you two?'

'We're just checking the facts, Mr Martins', said Imogen with an ingenuous smile. 'Steven hasn't seen the drawing or the photographic record yet.'

'Does he have to? A find is a find, isn't it?'

'Helps with the identification', I said improbably, turning to one of the assistants, who nodded, holding the pad out.

'So we can start again?' said Martins. 'From hazard a guess, or whatever it was.'

'Can you hazard a guess?' said Imogen.

'Well, it's splendid, isn't it?' I displayed it for the camera close-up. 'No one can be sure at the moment, but it could well be Saxon.'

'And a woman's.'

'Of course. Probably a high-born woman. These are quite unusual.' I smiled, pleased that something genuine had been found in this wretched place.

My high spirits were soon to change, however. We walked up to the top of the hill, and Penny

was interviewed about Leyton Rings, and their place in her life.

‘Hundreds of years’, she said. ‘Leyton is mentioned in the Doomsday Book. We’ve always lived hereabouts.’

‘And the Rings have a special place in your recollections?’ said Imogen.

‘Always. You can see them from the farm. They overlook the place. Forbidding in the winter, but in the summertime now, well, they look like a vast altar open to the sky. A place where you can commune.’

‘With nature?’

‘Something deeper than that. Something that enters the generations of people living here.’

I looked at Penny, who was staring wistfully over the sea. She was certainly eloquent, but the next question came by clockwork.

‘And you’ve heard voices?’

‘Once. A cold November day, when I came up here as a child. Faint but clear and very sad.’

‘And they were women’s voices?’

'It was a funeral for someone. Some important woman. I couldn't understand what they were saying, but that's what I sensed.'

'Can you be sure?'

Here it comes, I thought gloomily as Penny continued. 'I think it was something to do with what we've found today. Maybe that's her grave. I don't know, but I think it may be.'

I was too angry to listen to any more, but heard Imogen's light voice saying, 'So there we are. Perhaps we are on the brink of a major discovery. We shall return to the site in a few days to see if anything else has turned up.'

Not with me, you won't, I thought as I walked down to the trench. I could see Barnes's satisfied smile, and the quivering excitement in Hampton's stoat-like eyes. Well done, Whittaker, I thought. Even the York posting's going to be doubtful after this.

'Has anything else turned up?' I said to one of the young assistants who was carefully trowelling at the end of the trench.

'We've taken it down six inches, and the layer has petered out. Might have come from anywhere. But we could put in a traverse trench, from that point.'

'Do what you like.'

'Sir?'

'Dig the lot up. Mark out the whole area and partition it properly.'

'It's a big area. Be next week before we could start digging again.'

'That'll be fine.'

'There's the film. Aren't they coming back shortly?'

'We're not here just to make a film. Let's do the job properly, and then we'll know. If the source is not here it'll be up on the hill, which we won't cover this field season.'

'You think there really is something here?'

'How should I know? I'm only the director.'

'Poor thing', said a voice. 'We are sorry for ourselves.'

'Oh it's you', I said, turning round. 'Just push off, would you? I've had a bad day.'

'Penny and I are inviting you for a drink. To celebrate the start of the filming.'

'Your take-over, more like.'

'Steven, don't be a bad loser. Come and have a drink. The crew have packed up, and they'll be off site soon.'

'I have people here to look after.'

'Send them home. It's gone five.'

'We could start measuring up if you like, sir. It's a nice evening.'

'There you are. Even your students can see sense.' She put an arm round. 'Come along. We have some news, which we'll give you when we get to the farm.'

'Why don't you tell me now?'

'Because you'll need a strong drink.'

First the women opened a bottle of red wine, and then another, as we sat at the kitchen table

making small talk. The minutes ticked by, and I was feeling hungry.

‘So?’ I said. ‘You look mighty pleased with yourselves. What is it?’

‘You need another drink’, said Imogen, filling my glass again.

‘I have to drive back.’

‘Just sit down, and listen. Penny will explain.’

‘You’re not going to be happy with this, Steven, but we did it for your own good. You have to understand that.’

I didn’t reply, but thought of the previous help, of Barnes and the planted material.

‘And remember that newspapers have their sources, their ways of getting information’, said Imogen. ‘Which aren’t too nice always, but necessary.’

‘Suppose you tell me.’

‘Steven, you think David Farley’s the father of Megan, don’t you?’

'How do I know? Could have been anyone.' I realized what I'd said, and took another swig of wine.

'Well he's not. Imogen got a friend to do some snooping, and guess who came to see Jill after Megan was born? An old flame of hers. A Tom Hastings.'

'There was a Tommy someone in Jill's past, but that's all.'

'Imogen's friend spoke to the nurse. This Tom Hastings not only hung around for the whole delivery, but he was with Jill as soon as she could have visitors. He picked up Megan and looked at her, just as fathers do. You weren't there till much later, because Jill didn't warn you.'

'The birth was early.'

'Jill asked specially for you not to be told. Said you'd worry too much.'

'What are you trying to do?' I said, the news beginning to hurt.

'Help you', said Penny.

'Save you from yourself', said Imogen. 'My friend can document the affair with Farley, if you want.'

'You've done enough damage, thank you.'

'Now don't get cross with us', said Imogen.

'Cross? What the hell do you think you're doing? It's my life, and my decision what I do with it. How dare you muscle in.'

'Have some more wine.'

'I will not have more wine. I'm going home.'

'Not in this state', said Imogen. 'We'll put you up in the spare room.'

'No you won't.' I tried to get to my feet, but the world didn't seem too steady.

'Put him to bed. He's had enough for one day.'

'Come along', said Penny, and took me firmly by the arm.

Chapter Eight

I woke up, annoyed at myself, and looked at a small room with pink paper on two walls and dark beams across the ceiling. The window was a couple of inches ajar, and I could smell the rain on the flower beds, the geraniums especially unpleasant to someone with a head like mine. Nonetheless, I'd been properly looked after, I realized, the sheets freshly laundered, and my clothes laid out on a cane chair. A memory returned of the women laughing, and Imogen tripping out with a knowing smile as Penny kissed me goodnight. I looked at my watch, wincing again as I dressed and made my way carefully to the kitchen, where I found a couple of Alka-Seltzers on

the table by a glass of water. 'Breakfast is from seven. Please stay, P.', said the note.

Some fifteen minutes later I was feeling more in charge of events, and wondered if I shouldn't go home before anyone was the wiser, only it seemed pointless to drive over to Buckmayne simply to return for the students who would be arriving in a couple of hours. Besides, it hardly mattered what people thought, not after Jill had made such a fool of me. At the thought of our last meeting, my head ached once more, and I remembered that Jill hadn't wanted to come to Dorset, and perhaps wouldn't have done if the pregnancy hadn't intervened. We were married four months before Megan was born, but in Manchester, where Jill stayed until she could collect the PhD, and her mother send her on. Mrs Wooten, formidably like Jill herself, was the only person my wife took orders from.

Damn the lot of them, I thought, and stepped out into the yard. It was chilly, but the shower had passed, leaving the sun breaking through with a brilliance that hurt my eyes. I walked on to the far

side of the coppice, where I paused, and sat on a gate for a while, gazing at the path that looped over the hill and descended to the old lime working and the road back to Buncombe. What had I been thinking those two nights ago when the car had broken down on my return from Stacey's? Jill made no secret of her annoyance at dealing with the small boy who refused to do as directed, but Penny just accepted matters. Why this no surrender, this Steven Whittaker with his pugnacious jaw and angry freckles, who was always combative, winning every engagement?

Penny was busy in the kitchen when I returned. 'Sleep well?' she said as I kissed her on the cheek. 'Pleasant dreams in this place of dubious report?'

'Of being ravished in the night? Unfortunately not.'

'Steven, be careful.'

'Sorry, but last night's . . . Imogen really have that information?'

'People do talk.'

'And have a good laugh.'

'If you knew half the unhappiness and unrealised hopes of folk round here you'd not say that. No one's laughing. They like you, particularly when you first arrived. Anyway,' she said quickly, 'I've put you at table five. You are staying for breakfast, aren't you?'

'Before Jill came?'

'Before you put your head in blinkers. You could get a private detective. Imogen's friend would hand over the information. Or ask for a paternity test.'

'That would really put the fat in the fire. Jill was pretty cross before. Called the police on me.'

'You need to get cleaned up. Bathroom's the third on the left, and there's a razor on the window-sill.'

I said good morning as I walked into the dining room a few minutes later, but could feel the chill as I took my seat.

'You have to help yourself', said one woman, the civil servant probably. 'You haven't been here before?'

'You're the Time Watch man, aren't you?' said the other guest. 'He's the archaeologist', she explained.

'I know. Dr Whittaker.'

'And you work in Dorchester, I understand.'

'Pensions.'

'Vital work.'

Happily, Penny then appeared. 'Doreen,' she said, 'do have some more fruit if you want. Yours will be another few minutes. Steven, is it one egg or two?'

'An egg and one rasher of bacon would be fine.'

'Hard night, was it?' said the second woman.

'A bit, yes. Celebrating the first day's filming.'

'I can see', said the woman. 'Anyway, hope it goes well.'

'I'm sure it will.'

The first woman was also gone a few minutes later. Penny came through with a cup of tea and sat herself at the table.

‘You want another aspirin?’

‘Do I look that bad?’

‘Expect you’ll live. Working on the site today?’

‘I should look in, though they’ll just be marking out.’

‘So you can help me with the dishes, and then I’ll take you round the Leyton domain. You’ve not seen all of it.’

‘I’d prefer to talk.’

Penny gave me a quick glance. ‘Jill’s only protecting herself’, she said. ‘You’d do the same.’

‘Keeping mum, and blaming me?’

‘You ought to talk to her sensibly. Perhaps accept the situation, if you don’t want your career damaged. Most people have to compromise.’

‘Don’t preach to me. I’ve been hard done by, and I intend to put matters right.’

‘Steven, I’m not preaching. I hope you won’t go back, but your first commitment is to Jill. You have to sort that out.’

‘Everything is discussed.’

‘You have this extraordinary openness to experience, but when it comes to your own affairs you put your head down and go for what you can get.’

‘I do not.’

‘That’s why Imogen can play with you. She hasn’t a fraction of your knowledge or experience of the world, but she’s honest with herself and knows what has to be traded.’

‘No one makes it with her, I’d have thought.’

Penny sighed as she took my hand, and we walked up the hill, which now seemed a long journey from the farm. I was unsteady as we stood looking down on the new excavation being gridded by a couple of helpers.

‘That’s why Imogen’s here,’ she continued, ‘rather than in London. Every day her man phones her, but she won’t go back until I’m settled.’

'Imogen overnighted at the farm?'

'She'll wait until someone looks after Leyton. Be heartbreaking to think the tradition ended here. No male heirs, so it's up to us.' She paused. 'Look, I'd love it to be you, but I don't know whether you can. You'd have to accept Imogen winning.'

'Why should she?'

'Because you've charged off and alienated everyone.'

'Imogen has, through Barnes and his pagan lot.'

'Think about it. All the easy avenues are closed, except patching things up with Jill and going off to York. You may still have to do that.'

'After all she's done?'

'What have you done to her? You lock yourself away when her friends come. You're always out leading walks. Even Megan is a chore for you.'

'She's a monster.'

'Only because you don't love her. I've watched you sometimes in the park. You just go through the motions.'

'Hardly exciting, is it?'

'It should be. You have the care and upbringing of another living being. Someone to bring into the world with your hopes and values.'

'Wish I knew what they were.'

'You find them in people you love. Or in surroundings and commitments, don't you?'

'Is that what you want?' I said, putting an arm round. 'A little more loving?'

'No it isn't.' She laughed and unwound herself. 'You're supposed to be seeing Phil Duffy this morning, so there's something you can do for me. Ask him about Imogen.'

'What about Imogen?'

'Just ask. Or use your eyes.'

'All right. I'll be on my way.'

'About time.' She smiled, and held me at a distance. 'Steven, it's all right, but you need to talk to Jill, not me.'

'I will. In fact the lawyers have lined up a meeting shortly.'

'Good. See you on the twenty-third.'

'So what do you think,' I said to Duffy who looked up from a specimen he'd been cataloguing, 'is it Saxon, do you think?'

'I heard about that.' He took off his gilt spectacles and squinted at the bead. 'Is that the only one?'

'So far.'

'Who knows? Could be. Or Roman, they're commoner.'

'Didn't want to make a fool of myself at the filming yesterday.'

'Imogen teased you.'

'Which Martins allowed, and you must have known about. Dealing with people here is like

undertaking a dig, peeling back one layer after another.'

'That's how we are. Why I was taken by history, and no doubt you were. We live in the past as we see it, with the debris of other people's lives.'

'I teach the subject.'

'But you're not seeing how it applies in your case. Even this silly business about Leyton.'

'Who created the problem?'

'There weren't so many. Not if they came from here.' He indicated the rows of boxes stacked in front of him.

'You supplied them?'

'Helps to stay on top of the situation.' He reached for a folder. 'Let's see. A few bits of pottery. The Samian ware of course. And the Romano-British figurine.'

'That as well?'

'Come on. Romano-British pieces come from cemeteries, not hill forts.'

'And that applies to yesterday's find, does it? The glass bead.'

'That is a bit odd, I agree.'

'Not one of Barnes's plants?'

'Shouldn't have thought so. There have only been eight pieces. Not bad is it?'

'It's criminal. They didn't plant something yesterday? You're sure?'

'No, the bead does seem an anomaly.'

'Why can't I have a straightforward excavation that coincides with previous views and adds some. That's all I wanted.'

'You've never explained why you came to Dorset. I drifted here in the sixties, of course, when there was nothing to be had in Barnsley. Museum work was a cushy number, not well paid, but better than digging trenches when the ground is frozen solid, or cars are blowing exhaust at you on the hot roads. But you're different. You consciously chose archaeology.'

'Because it gave me power. If you look deeper than anyone else you can rewrite history. Yours,

or anybody's. You don't have to take what people see you as, or throw at you. Or your family.'

'Anything wrong with your lot?'

'No there isn't,' I said, cutting him short, 'Look, I'm under instructions from Penny to ask you about Imogen. Why you're so close to her.'

'We used to go for walks together, when her father died.'

'Before she got so scheming?'

'So we're coming to it. Will Imogen displace you as presenter in the film? You know the answer. She will try.'

'Even if I rat on your activities? Which might stop her publishing this silly piece about the field trip to Maiden Castle.'

'It'll just create bad blood, and put a question mark over your career. Let Imogen have her chance.'

'Because you're fond of her. You're a second father.'

'Meaning what?'

'Why don't you tell me?'

He pushed the box away. 'Perhaps it won't do any harm, and lots of folk will have guessed anyway.' He looked at me, and started fiddling with his pen. 'First of all,' he said, 'Esther Lawley was a good-looking woman.'

'I can imagine.'

'No you can't. Mere shadow of herself when you met her. Worry over the farm, endless smoking, and then cancer, poor soul. When I fell in love with Esther Lawley she was a beautiful woman, married to a brute of a husband. Handsome, but a dead loss about the place.'

'Esther Lawley had borne two children, both girls, was that it?'

'Three girls, but one died shortly after birth. Three in a row. Bob Lawley was desperate.'

'Imogen knows?'

'That I'm her natural father? Of course she does. The others have blue eyes, but Imogen's come from me. Once she said, "You know, Uncle Phil, it's a pity you couldn't have made a boy out

of me.” Then Bob Lawley died, which changed everything.’

‘You could have married Esther.’

‘That’s old country manners for you. No one would have been happy with that. I knew nothing about farming, and I wasn’t even local. Look at the churchyards. They can trace their families back hundreds of years.’

‘She could have done with help about the place.’

‘Esther hired people, and had a bailiff for a while. Only the supervision wasn’t too good, and some land had to go.’

‘There you are.’

‘Maybe, but I’m a single creature at heart, who doesn’t like attachments. Then I was just a museum assistant, with no credentials, and paid a pittance, but I had the freedom to go where I pleased.’

‘It is more your book, really.’

‘Doubt if I’d have ever written the notes up properly if you hadn’t badgered me. It was a

penance or consolation for what I'd thrown away.' He put his pen down. 'Do you know how I spend my time? When I'm not stuck here I walk round the town, envying people their lives. Of course they have their troubles and irritations, but someone needs them. If they don't turn up at work, or collect the children or come home for supper, someone will worry. Somebody will miss them.'

'You're kept pretty busy here.'

'Purely mechanical. Fifteen or twenty pieces of Iron Age pottery in this tray, one of hundreds stacked about the place. Yet each piece has to be drawn and described and numbered. Don't you think sometimes the dead are an intolerable burden on us?'

'Has to be done.'

'Not by us. There are people with clerk-like mentalities. People who work in factories or dead-end jobs. I'll be sixty-five this year, and I haven't done anything with my life. Just stood on the sidelines.'

'There was Imogen.'

'That's why I was determined she shouldn't waste her life. You know that man in London she had? I went up to see him. Said I was Imogen's guardian and wanted to talk.'

'Rather Traviata-like.'

'We had a couple of drinks in a pub round Soho, the three of us. He was a nice fellow, clearly fond of Imogen.'

'You asked him his intentions?'

'He wouldn't leave his wife. Soft-hearted and dithering. The worst type', Duffy added, looking sharply at me. 'He would slowly destroy Imogen's life just as I had Esther's.'

'Imogen have must realized. She's not a child.'

'In some ways she is. Saw her man as the father I should have been. Why she took a shine to you, I expect.'

'Thanks.'

'We all get it wrong. Even this practical joke with the site hasn't worked.' He rearranged some

pieces in the box. 'Ploy to get her back from London, be part of her life again.'

'She thinks she's helping Penny.'

'Of course she does, but I don't know if you're the right man. You can't face hurting people.'

'I won't take risks, you mean?'

'You take risks all right, but they're on unimportant matters like career and appearances. That's why Imogen can double-guess you. She's had plenty of time to figure out how folk work.'

'Phil, just because you messed up Imogen's life doesn't give her the right to mess up mine. She shouldn't publish this silly article.'

'You could give in. A festival at Leyton wouldn't be the end of the world.'

'Be the end of my work here.'

'You could leave tomorrow. Patch things up with your wife, continue climbing the academic ladder.'

'Why should I, when I can find a compromise and still keep my job?'

'You're both determined to succeed when there's no victory to be had. Why not give in to Imogen? Stop the girl crying, couldn't you?'

'I'm not her dad.'

'You're the schoolteacher, the authority figure. Just say yes and give her a big hug. That's all she wants.'

I thought of our swim together, but went on, 'What's she done to earn it?'

'What's fairness got to do with it? At the very least you're going to hurt Jill, who's not been straightforward, I agree, but you don't know what she sees in this Tom fellow or Farley because you haven't talked to her.'

'How do you know about Jill's old flame?'

'You don't talk much, do you?'

'I will when I've got something worked out. I'm not saying everyone's against me, and perhaps Imogen does have her reasons. But the only person who knows me is me. I take the decisions because only I know what I want.'

‘Steven, you have people who care for you, who want to be your friend. More in Penny’s case. But all the time it’s I, I, I.’ He looked down at the tray, and started turning over one of the pieces. ‘Just get on with your academic career, somewhere far away, where you won’t be a disaster.’

‘Look who’s talking.’

‘Because I’ve had years to think over my shortcomings. Long, bitter years that will come to you if you go on like this.’ He sighed, and scratched his hair. ‘Look, this is getting stupid. I don’t want us to be enemies, not after the book.’

‘Jill was right. You don’t appreciate what I did. None of you do in this provincial backwater.’

‘I think you’d better go.’

‘Don’t you worry. I’ll not be wasting time here again in a hurry.’ At the door I stopped to add, ‘One more thing. You can tell Imogen the answer’s no. She can do what she likes, but I’ll also tell everyone about your activities. Yours and

Imogen's and Barnes's. No one's going to come out of this too well. Just you tell her.'

'Steven, think about it.' He reached for the phone as it rang.

'If she crosses the line she should know what to expect', I said, and slammed the door behind me. There were several residents I knew in the High Street, but they got a surly greeting as I went over what Phil had said. Bloody nerve, I thought, repeating it as the memory of my performance flooded back. I drove out of the carpark, nearly colliding with someone coming in. 'See if a mere pupil can win over me', I shouted at a startled attendant, and put my foot down.

Chapter Nine

I gave the last of my course lectures the following morning, but saw a note from the Principal on the staff noticeboard. On presenting myself, I found Christopher Miles Hampton in that closed room of his, the pale face looking ghost-like in the shadows.

'Come in Whittaker and sit down.' The pudgy hand waved me to a chair. 'We haven't seen each other for a while, have we? You must tell me how everything is going at Leyton.'

He had bothered to add a name to the site. Usually it was 'your dig' or 'your project'. I braced myself for trouble. 'Can't complain', I said.

'Good. You have made another important find, I understand?'

'Bit early to know', I said. The stealthy eyes seemed amused that I didn't use 'sir' as everyone else.

'But you would go so far as to suppose that it may well be Saxon? Or have we now found evidence to counter that assumption?'

'Might be an isolated find. Or not Saxon at all.'

'Quite so. We mustn't run ahead of the facts in popularising our subject, must we Dr Whittaker? That would never do.'

Where was the pompous idiot going now? I wondered.

'Even for our television age, where appreciation of serious matters may not run deep. Between intellectual rigour and popular entertainment there is a gulf, I would go so far as to say an unbridgeable gulf, for those who see their subject correctly. Popularisation is best left to others.'

Hampton's lectures were not well attended, but I decided on a conciliatory approach. 'Of

course, theory is important,' I said, knowing he'd never forgiven the book, and the requests for talks it still brought, but 'no doubt we should remember that the past was made by people much like ourselves.'

'That is an assumption too easily made, I am tempted to suggest, but it brings us neatly to next year's syllabus.' He opened the desk drawer, and handed over a timetable. 'You will see I have put you down for a year's course in historiography.'

'Historiography? Even a proper university doesn't devote a year to that.'

'Stokes Monkton may only be a university college but I see no reason why we should not compete with the best educational establishments in the country. It will broaden our students' minds, cause them to think on matters of absorbing and continuing interest. Even you perhaps may benefit from its study.'

So would go the summer holiday, mugging up on something I knew nothing about, and saw no reason to. But Hampton still pulled the strings and

I was forced to say, 'Very well, new fields to conquer, as you say.'

He gave me a self-satisfied smile. 'So that's taken care of. Now we must consider your duties at the Buckmayne Field Centre.'

It was time to act. 'Yes, that has been bothering me', I said, springing to my feet. 'As you may know, the film project has been modified, so I shan't be so busy now.' I walked to the window and pushed back the blind to stare out at a brick wall before turning round with an expansive gesture. 'The Buckmayne Centre will probably not appear in the film.'

'Was it going to anyway, did you think?' said Hampton, his gaze following me at a suspicious distance.

'Casebook Films have brought in their own presenter. The view has been widened, and I'm more in the background.' I walked back, and stood gazing over the polished desk.

'But we still have a lot on our plate', said Hampton. 'Far to much for one man to accomplish to the standards expected.'

'Why I'm suggesting the film take in the larger aspects of archaeology. What we undertake digs for. What history can teach us.'

He looked puzzled. 'The more abstract aspects, you are saying?'

'Now this is not my field. Or at least not yet.' I smiled as Hampton blinked carefully. 'But it is yours. I should have thought an episode featuring your specialisations would be admirable.'

'Featuring this Department, is that?'

'Probably best shot here, rather than out at Leyton, which is more for the physical aspects.'

'And how does Joel Martins feel about this?'

'Put a few feelers out, but I couldn't argue for a formal inclusion until I'd discussed it with you.'

'No, I see. Quite so.'

'Our viewers will want to feel teachers are keeping up to date, not only in new finds but the whole theory of education. Trips up to the Viking

settlements at York are all very well, but the impressions don't find a lodgement unless the ground has been thoroughly prepared.'

'That is very fairly put, Whittaker. I see my words have not been entirely wasted. Very good.'

'In a Department that was behind its Principal,' I continued, 'where he in turn gave them every support. We hear so many stories of dissatisfaction in the teaching profession that it's important to see the truth for once. Brian Stacey and his studies into Tudor agricultural methods. Stewart Fraynes on Roman paternity structures. Myself at Leyton. But at each step you'd be reminding viewers of the underlying reasons for research.'

'I'd be appearing from time to time?'

'A lot of the time. Perhaps I've been a bit lax myself at Leyton, but close liaison is essential. Supposing of course I'm still in charge up there?'

'In those circumstances I don't know your position would be seriously challenged.'

'Because it's your decision of course.'

'No, I think we can look forward to that. On a closer cooperation basis. As we've discussed.'

'So I can get Joel Martins to come and see you?'

'In the next week, I think, if we're to make changes to the timetable.'

'I'll see what can be done.'

I could feel Hampton's doubts following me as I left the room. Stacey was in the staff refectory, but I finished my coffee before saying anything. He repeated the question.

'I've managed a stay of execution. Suggested the film include Hampton.'

Stacey took a moment to absorb the news. 'You want him queering the pitch up there?'

'Only he won't. When Martins finally puzzles out what the fool is saying, it'll be too late to pack me off to York. You might be in the film too.'

'Any reason for this rush of generosity? Patched things up with Jill?'

'I've got legal representation, and more damaging information on her activities.'

'Doesn't sound like a reconciliation to me.'

'Think of it as a charm offensive. I'm taking control of events, and Jill will have to listen.'

'I should go a bit carefully, if I were you.'

'Better be off now. Let me know if you hear anything.'

Surprisingly, all was going well at Leyton. The turf had been rolled back over the new site and the underlying soil gridded. I joined the three students trowelling one corner, but nothing much appeared. The one coin dug up was a worn Victorian sixpence.

We worked on till six, when I told everyone to go home. Tomorrow, I reminded them, I'm away on a history car ramble, so don't let anyone else on the site, specially not Neville Barnes and his pagan mob.

I thought to call at the farm, but instead went to the flat to read the book on historiography I'd borrowed from the college library. It was going to be a taxing course, not least for the lecturer.

Saturday was again fine, and on a track outside Durrington I met the party, most of them regulars. A silver Fiesta drew up, and Imogen came skipping over.

‘Surprised to see me?’ she said when I frowned. ‘I’ve persuaded Joel to include this in the film, though it’s your show today. Unless you’d like me to hold those diagrams?’

‘Thank you, no.’

‘Well, they won’t be long. I went ahead to give you the good news.’

‘What can I say?’

‘You’re bearing up manfully. After upsetting Phil, of course, but I expect it was a shock. You can cry on my shoulder later. Here’s the film mafia.’

‘Right, as you can see, we are out on the Chalk Downs near Stonehenge’, I started as the film crew got into position. ‘Now this bare upland was not always so open. In fact, until about 5000 BC, it was thickly wooded. But gradually Neolithic

farmers began clearing the ground for their crops and animals.'

'Fine, Steven. Could you do that again?' shouted Martins. 'I think we're ready now.'

I repeated the introduction, and held up the diagrams for Stonehenge, going on to explain the three phases of building and the stone alignments.

'So it's an astrological observatory', said one of the visitors, who was jumped on immediately.

'It's certainly complicated, and there's no shortage of theories', I said. 'Observatory is probably overdoing it, but you see in the first phase of building around 2800 BC the entrance to Stonehenge was aligned to the most northerly rising of the moon, what we call the major standstill.' I pointed to the diagram. 'Later we see an alignment to the midsummer sunrise. That's phase two, and particularly phase three, which is around 1500 BC.'

'A long time later,' remarked one of the party.

'It is a long time, longer than we've had a monarchy in this country. Around 1100 BC the monument was abandoned, and people no longer knew why it had been built. It became a brooding presence, around which all kinds of folk tales sprang up. But the archaeological facts are just as remarkable. Why did Bronze Age man erect these monuments? What did they mean to him?' These were primitive societies, living close to extinction. Why should they spend a vast amount of time building what had no practical value?'

'I guess they didn't know that. It was a sort of magic', said a regular.

'Yes it was. This whole area was one of magic. Avebury, Woodhenge, Silbury Hill. We shall be visiting them later today, but here's something to ponder. Four pits have been found in the Stonehenge area, and each was dug for a pinewood post. Carbon dating gave dates between 8500 and 7650 BC. Think of that, 5,000 years before Stonehenge came into being. Why? Let's bear that in mind as we go on to Durrington

Walls and then pick up the rest of our party at the Stonehenge car park.'

'You're enjoying this, aren't you?' said Imogen as the cars lined up on the road beside Woodhenge some two hours later.

'My speciality.'

'Look, can we be friends again? I'm sorry for taking over at Leyton, but Joel wanted to experiment.'

'You weren't too bad.'

'I just put a pretty face on events, but it means something to you, just as it does to Penny.'

'I don't think I want to hear about that again.'

'She used to go up on the hill because she was lonely. Perhaps she did commune with the spirits, but I wouldn't know. I didn't have a historian father.'

'Dad was a water board employee. Called himself an engineer, but he wasn't even that. A sad silent man, my mother used to call him. Run over on his way to work one morning, in case you were going to ask.'

'Sort of unintentionally?'

'Something like that. He died in the ambulance.'

'Sorry.'

'So is my mother now, stuck in her old people's home at Cheltenham.'

Imogen was looking at me as I remembered the last visit, walking the large house and grounds with her, past the other unfortunates my mother did not associate with.

'Mother dear, I'm sure they mean well', I said.

'That is not the point. There are certain standards to maintain, and I do not intend to abandon them at my stage in life.'

'Of course not', I said. Why was she so difficult? Most of the fees came from my salary, and, though Jill said nothing, she regarded the place as an extravagance. I glanced again at my watch.

'You don't have to stay. It's just once a month, when you can fit me in.'

'It's not a question of fitting you in. I'd just like you to be happier.'

'Are you happy, Steven? With Jill?'

'Yes of course.'

'Is Megan making more friends at school?'

'Probably.'

'You don't like your daughter. You don't like your wife. And you're still at loggerheads with your Principal.'

'I'm sure it'll work out. Jill's busy and . . .' How many times would this conversation repeat? I looked at my mother, at what she had become: a tired and cross-grained old woman whose fussing over tea maddened even me. She was folding the paper serviette and laying the knife down on the plate, the blade spotless. I wondered how she'd been as a wife, and found Imogen had said something.

She was staring with those flat green eyes.
'Hello. Anyone there?'

'Sorry. What was that?'

'I said like my stepfather. Another accident, but his own fault. He shouldn't have drunk so much.'

'Probably got too much for him working up there on his own.'

'Out chasing the local talent mostly.'

'But he had an affinity with the countryside, didn't he? Why Penny remembers everything he said.'

'She remembers more than that.'

'Is there something I'm supposed to be asking?'

'You should ask her. Look, everyone likes Penny. Melissa was more stuck up, and I spell trouble. But Penny is really nice, and that's amazing considering everything she went through. If you want to be close to her, to be part of her life, then you have to know what that sod of a father did to her.'

'If she wants,' I said carefully, 'but I'm not going to ask. I mean, if there were scandals in my family I'd not expect them to be aired in public.'

'Were there?'

'I'm just saying.'

Imogen puckered that inquisitive little mouth, and then relented. 'He made you the person you are now?'

'We'd go on these long country walks, all day when we were young and Mum was more active. We were dragged to every tourist spot in south-east England. Fields and woods and churches and country houses. He was enormously knowledgeable, and some of it rubbed off, obviously.'

'Do you feel him present when you lead these rambles?' She glanced round and stepped closer.

'Maybe.'

'That's what Penny thinks. She calls you a stranger on the earth, more in tune with the past. Hearing some faint music that no one else catches.'

'It's more than music.'

'Is that why you collaborated with Phil? To put on paper what your father couldn't find words for?'

'Imogen, it isn't really the time or place, is it?'

'When then?' She smiled mischievously.

'When I've finished some proposals that you're not going to sweet-talk me out of.'

'On Leyton? Do tell.'

For reply I started my Woodhenge talk, which Martins didn't film, but kept a watchful eye on us, as though there was something he hadn't noticed before.

We had lunch at Avebury, and from the pub I watched Imogen talking to Martins, causing him to push his hair back awkwardly. He was captivated, but also uncertain with her, occasionally glancing to see if I was watching.

Silbury Hill was the last stop, and I started with the usual statistics.

'That makes it the largest prehistoric structure in Europe', I told my audience. 'And no one knows why it was built.'

'It's a tomb?' said someone.

‘Apparently not. It’s been investigated several times, by shafts dug into the sides, but nothing has been found. Just a cone-shaped plug of clay.’

‘It’s a stargazing platform’, suggested Imogen sweetly.

‘That’s one possibility, yes.’

She gave me a mocking smile.

‘But why not place it on the highest ground round here?’ I said. ‘Why go to the incredible effort of building something of these dimensions? 325,000 cubic metres of chalk, rubble and earth. We’re not dealing with large populations, so a thousand people working when possible would have taken a hundred years.’

I let the prospect sink in, ending the tour with a few sentences on the Roman settlement nearby, when Imogen called across. ‘Why only one hundred years, when they lived here for thousands of years. Unless time was different then.’

‘Perhaps it was,’ I said, wanting to leave with last instructions, ‘though of course people lived much shorter lives. Maybe thirty-five on average.’

‘But life was more communal’, added Imogen, looking even more beguiling as she pranced from one member of the group to another. ‘Things were shared, even the sense of time. There was no writing, or individual sense of property. We can call them what we please, but our ancestors knew that spirits of the place existed because they could see and feel them.’

‘Can you see them now, Imogen?’ I asked. There was a titter of laughter, perhaps out of embarrassment.

‘There’re all around us in this haunted ground. It’s not that we can’t sense them, but we don’t have the words now. They’ve been intellectually disenfranchised.’

‘Imogen, I think we shall lose these good people, who’ve come on an archaeological field trip.’

'You carry on dear', added a woman. 'I want to know what you mean.'

Several of the group did, and I had to let Imogen mince up to the grass bank where I was standing. 'There was a sensory understanding', she said, looking around as I would have done.

My jaw was beginning to ache, but I tried to look unconcerned as people turned to see if I would let the discussion continue. For some reason I had to, and indeed began to feel unwell, grasping the fence to steady myself as Imogen continued.

'And that understanding gave their lives meaning, and told them what to do. To carry these baskets of earth would have been an imposition for us, but for them it was inspiration.'

I was now sitting down, with one of the regulars standing over. 'You all right, Doc?' he said.

'Yes of course', I said getting slowly to my feet. 'Fascinating idea', I added without conviction as the landscape tilted and then righted itself.

'We like to put things in simple words', continued Imogen, who now had the audience under her sway. 'If we're scientists we use words carefully. We define them. But the world of our ancestors was not impersonal. It was real and close and dangerous.'

What had I done to deserve this?

'There were wild boar, and bear and wolves, which had to be respected. Sometimes our ancestors saw themselves as the hunted, and their shamans dressed up in deer skins and wore antlers on their heads. Sympathetic magic it's called, but we just have to picture the scene. The campfire. The lamps burning animal fat. The long shadows flickering among the hunters who belonged to the other world. Perhaps they painted themselves. We don't know.'

'No we don't', I said. 'We ought to be concentrating on this site.'

'We are', said Imogen. 'Just think. What is this hill? It's the centre of their world, a connection between the earth and the sky gods.'

I now had to sit down again, and there were several anxious looks in my direction. Imogen carried on, enjoying her new-found power.

‘Remember how different that world was. Unhealthy, maybe, but also much more alive than ours. They would have felt the fall of sunlight on the grass, known the territories of birds from their song, and the exact time of the year from the stars or the yellowing of leaves on the trees.’

Perhaps I wasn’t hearing her properly. Or she had become a shaman herself and was calling up the spirits of the place.

‘But it’s all gone. We only have bones, and carbonised remains, and bits of pottery, and the barrows and standing stones and long avenues where our ancestors gathered at important times of the year.’

I was still hearing her words when I drew the meeting to a close, or what was left of the meeting, as some members had drifted off with Imogen, and seemed to be exchanging telephone numbers.

Martins ambled over and said, 'A most enlightening tour. My dear boy, you certainly have a way of putting the facts across.'

'Thank you. Though Imogen rather took over.'

'Imogen, yes. She tells me you have some ideas for the series. To you I'm all ears.'

'Well,' I said, gathering my thoughts, 'I was talking to Professor Hampton yesterday about injecting a little more theory into the narrative.'

'Theory? Am I hearing you aright, my dear boy? We're presenting the living experience of history, aren't we? What it's actually like to be here.'

'That's why I let the conversation go on a bit. Imogen's contribution, I mean. Where she stressed the significance of seeing things together.'

'I think I'm following you.'

'Of course theory's been dressed up in intimidating jargon, but the main points are sensible. Why do we study these matters? What can we learn from them?'

'Forgive me if I'm wrong, but I thought we had agreed that this was a series devoted to the living landscape, how it influences the way we see ourselves. Wasn't it?'

'I'm not saying popularise it. We're linked to the National Curriculum, after all. But with the smallest of changes we could show how history is working in schools and colleges.'

'I don't know we want to get beyond ourselves, not at this point.'

'Professor Hampton's idea was that behind the investigation should come some idea of how the knowledge filters through. What can fire young minds with enthusiasm for the subject.'

Martins seemed surprised. 'Miles Hampton said that?'

'Not in so many words, but I think he's anxious to show how keen he is on the series. Coming up with the important principles the work underlines. I don't want to put words in his mouth, but I think he'd be happy to draft out a proposal along those lines.'

'A proposal, right.'

'Only the opening should come from you. If you could broach the subject next time you'd be surprised at what he's thinking about.'

Martins had taken off his cap and was rubbing it on his arm.

'Of course he's a modest man,' I continued, 'so it's no good my saying anything. It should come from you.'

'Well, my dear boy, I can't say I quite follow all you have in mind, but a chinwag doesn't hurt.'

'What he has in mind, not me.' I smiled at him, and saw my hapless Principal giving Martins one of his patronising pep talks.

'Yes, what he has in mind. Right, I'll make a note of it.'

'You could always phone him. I hope I wasn't speaking out of turn, but I gave him to understand you might call him in a week or so.'

'Did you? Well we must see what's possible.' He tramped off to give last instructions to the camera crew, but I saw him turn round and stare,

though possibly it was more my reaction to Imogen's performance.

I didn't know a lot of things I realized on the journey back. There was tomorrow's meeting with Aubrey Jones and the Countryside Association, and the date with Penny, but my thoughts were on Imogen crossing the Downs in the little Fiesta, those mocking green eyes that absorbed the fields, the hedges and the houses with their flint-capped walls and tiled roofs. Why was I seeing the Lawleys and Duffy and Barnes and all the others standing like stone circles under a sky now deepening into sunset?

Chapter Ten

‘Aubrey, don’t interrupt’, said Tessa Jones. ‘I want to ask nice Dr Whittaker to give a talk to our Buckmayne Literary Society, before he’s upset by any more nonsense about the festival.’

‘If you’re thinking about the Dorset History Trails book,’ I said, ‘there’s not much I could say. Phil Duffy did most of the work. I only rewrote the material a bit.’

‘Just what our people need to know. Good writing is rewriting. One lump or two?’

‘None thanks.’

‘Very sensible. I’m trying to persuade Aubrey to give it up, and many other things. Aren’t I,

dear?’ She handed over the tea as Jones stuck thumbs into his knitted waistcoat. ‘He’s rather fixed in his ways, like the Countryside Association.’

‘Tess, you don’t know what you’re talking about. You never come to the meetings.’

‘Does your wife—Jill, isn’t it?—come on your history rambles, Dr Whittaker?’

‘No, not generally.’

‘There we are. I expect she hears all about them at home.’

Jones expressed his impatience, and went to sit in an armchair near the window. His wife kept an eye on him as I continued. ‘Jill’s pretty busy at the hospital, and of course we have a child. She’s a job and a half by herself.’

‘Oh they are. What age is she now?’

‘Megan is six.’

‘At least she’s started school. That’s a help.’

‘We keep persuading her to go with Tim, our next door neighbour’s kid, but currently she

doesn't want to fit in with anyone. She can be difficult.'

'They go through phases', said Tessa. 'Ours did.'

'Tess,' said Jones, 'Whittaker does not want to hear about our family problems. He's over to talk about the festival.'

'In a roundabout way I am, yes.'

'So we had better let him explain in his own good time. He doesn't want to be bullied into answering questions on something not of his own making. He's not responsible for what the landowners plan to do.'

'What do they plan to do?' said Jones.

'Aubrey, will you please sit down. You'll have to excuse my husband. He's got some bee in his bonnet about another Glastonbury up there.'

'There wouldn't be the space.'

'Aubrey, what did I tell you?'

'Could still cause a great deal of trouble. Have they spoken to the neighbouring properties?' Jones came back from the window, and sat in a

armchair, straightening creases in his cavalry twills. He looked more the farmer than a country solicitor.

‘The girls?’ I said. ‘Not as far as I know. And Melissa’s not there, of course.’

‘Such a pretty girl’, said Tessa. ‘She married that solicitor, didn’t she? Jessops or someone.’

‘James Lessops’, said her husband. ‘Pritchard and Lessops. They had an office in town.’

‘But not any more’, said Tessa. ‘You have any news of her?’

‘I hardly knew Melissa, Mrs Jones, but she’s doing well, from what I understand. There’s a lot of work in Shropshire, what with the overspill from the Midlands and property changing hands all the time.’

‘Aubrey knows that. He’s retired, but still goes in occasionally. You had some dealings with Leyton Farm at one time, didn’t you, dear?’

‘No.’

‘I’m sure you did.’

'We handled the conveyancing when Esther Lawley sold some of the land. But for the purchaser, not the Lawleys. No one deals with the Lawleys if they can help it.'

'So sad when property gets dispersed, don't you think?' said his wife.

'Should have sold the whole damned lot and been done with it.'

'Aubrey, I was asking Dr Whittaker about the changing pattern of the countryside. They've been there ages, haven't they?' she said, taking the teacup from me.

'The property has. It's mentioned in the Domesday Book, and a colleague of mine says they had a manor in Tudor times. Not that there's much to see now.'

'Let it go to ruin, I expect', said Jones. 'Like everything else the Lawleys get involved in. Inflated notions of grandeur and no practical competence. You'd better pour Whittaker another cup. He'll be here all night if he listens to the doings of the Lawleys.'

'They weren't all like Bob Lawley', said his wife. 'That was unfortunate.'

'The car accident?' I said.

'You tell us', said Jones. 'Bob Lawley was found in a wood near Bockhampton. He'd been hit by a car, but whether deliberately, or in a hit-and-run, no one knows. Found his body fifty yards off the road, a woman walking her dog.'

'Aubrey,' said Tessa. 'Dr Whittaker does not need the gory details. It was most distressing for everyone.'

'Not the family, apparently. Didn't report him missing for five days.'

'He was often away. You know that.'

'But what in the Dickens was he doing over at Bockhampton? Right the other side of town.' Jones stuck his thumbs into the waistcoat again, and looked significantly at me.

'The police have any idea?' I said.

'The trail had gone cold by then. Perhaps he did get up and crawl into the wood. Or perhaps the body was dumped there. Look Tess, I'm just

saying what everybody else said coming out of the inquest. Three girls and a wife, and not one had the gumption to raise the alarm. Mighty handy, wasn't it?

'He'd been drinking, I heard.'

'Tell me when he wasn't.'

'He did his best for the family all the same', said Tessa. 'Within his limits.'

'That's poppycock, as you know. Your uncle was on the bench. How many times did Bob Lawley appear before the authorities? Drunk and disorderly. Petty larceny. Fraud. And a good deal worse.'

'Nothing was ever proved.'

'It was hushed up. Like all those brats he fathered. Half the waifs and strays of the parish originate from his philandering.'

'You have no right to say that. It's not that many.'

'Still there in that gypsy park of theirs, which no one seems able to close down. More EEC

regulations that this damn-fool country has signed up to.'

'Aubrey has a thing about the gypsy camp. He thinks it spoils the town.'

'Hell of a mess. Been down there, Whittaker?'

'It's a bit out of my way, but I've passed it a few times. Set back from the road, behind some trees, isn't it?'

'Behind bars would be better. Bunch of ne'er-do-wells. You shouldn't have employed them on the dig, Whittaker. They only cause trouble.'

'They were quite useful, after Red Ned sorted them out. Neville Barnes I mean.'

'Everyone knows who you mean.'

'You had no trouble with Neville?' said Tessa. 'He has a reputation for being rather belligerent.'

'More than that', said Jones.

'Not really', I said. 'Imogen had him under control.' I realized the mistake, and looked down to give the tea another stir.

'That explains it. Whittaker, you don't know what you're doing up there.'

'My husband thinks Imogen is a little too persuasive, if you know what I mean.'

'That girl can twist anyone round her little finger.'

'Aubrey, that's enough. You don't have to believe the gossip and scandal-mongering.'

'Dancing round naked in the dead of night. Ritual orgies by the firelight. Does that sound innocent to you?'

'We were wild once. Or at least did things our elders and betters did not approve of. I shall show Dr Whittaker our old photos if you go on like this.'

'At least we were discreet. I don't say we didn't err occasionally, but we didn't flaunt ourselves in pagan practices or whatever they call it.'

'Hearsay, Aubrey. People should mind their own business.'

'It's not hearsay. One of the participants was taken into care, remember. The stories she told would make your hair stand on end.'

'So why didn't the police investigate, if that was the case?' said Tessa.

'Nothing they could do. Consenting adults is the phrase, I understand.'

There was a long pause. Tessa went out to refresh the pot. 'Have another scone', she said on returning, spreading the dress as she settled on the sofa. 'They're from Dorchester. I don't make them any more, but these are quite nice.'

'Yes, thank you. Excellent.'

'So, the festival. I suppose we should talk about that', she said. 'Before Aubrey bursts a blood-vessel.'

'Well I have only the briefest details of what Edward Tennant and Imogen are planning.'

'God help us', said Jones. 'Those two back together again?'

'Aubrey, be quiet. We want to know what's being planned.'

'As far as I can gather it's a modest affair. They'll have an open-air stage, and a band from

London. Probably not so different from a local dance.'

'They don't use London bands round here.'

'Aubrey, you wouldn't know. We haven't been to a dance in thirty years. What sort of band?'

'Not sure they've decided. I keep asking Imogen, but she's a bit evasive.'

'Whittaker, you be careful of that girl. You'd not be the first to come to grief with her.'

'Just ignore him, Dr Whittaker. Imogen Lawley is well-meaning, but she can lead people astray.'

'Go completely mad. Like that poor teacher.'

'What teacher?' I said.

'You must have heard of him. Committed suicide, poor chap. The story was in the local rag, though she wasn't mentioned by name. Legal restrictions or something.'

'The Dorset Times?'

'Ironic wasn't it, coming to work for it afterwards?'

'There was some impropriety?'

'Certainly would have cost him his job, but that wasn't it. They ran away together, and then she left him.'

'She was still at school'?

'In the sixth form', said Tessa. 'Perhaps she fell for him too, and didn't know what she was doing. She was only seventeen.'

'You'd think after that she'd stay away from the area, wouldn't you?' observed Jones. 'She knew what she was doing all right.'

'Imogen told me she was back to look after Penny', I said.

'Pretty sad if she needs someone like Imogen.'

'Penny does seem rather down on her luck, but maybe the bed and breakfast business will succeed. I went with her to the bank the other day.'

'Heard', said Jones.

'But they couldn't get a loan. Or not yet. Too risky, it seems.'

'Penny was the nicest of them, I've always thought,' said Tessa, 'but not fortunate with men.'

You saw a lot of her, didn't you, Dr Whittaker, when you were writing your book?'

'Penny did the illustrations. She seemed a happy girl.' There were better words. I remembered the picnics that seemed heaven now.

'You should have snapped her up then.'

'Aubrey, that's enough. Dr Whittaker has a beautiful wife in Jill. Much more his class.'

'I'm just repeating what the whole town said, though perhaps Whittaker wasn't aware of it.'

'You'll have to excuse Aubrey.'

'No offence taken. Penny was a lovely woman. I was certainly tempted, but Jill and I have always been straight with each other.'

'Have you?' said Jones.

'Aubrey, what's got into you?'

'Actually I'm taking Penny out shortly to see if wiser counsels can prevail', I said as the pause lengthened. 'Over the festival, I mean. Supposing the organizers decide to go ahead.'

'Whittaker, I thought you said the festival wasn't going ahead. It was just some pipe dream.'

'What I said, Mr Jones, is that I didn't know.' I took a deep breath. 'Or not much, anyway.'

'Can't you find out?'

'It's not my land for a start. I've tried Imogen, but she says one thing one day, and another the next.'

'Well, speak to Tennant. He's got a business head on his shoulders. He'll probably have one of those computer business plans that don't work, but at least you'll have some inkling of what's in the offing.'

'He is on the list of people to speak to, yes.'

'So your film director has finally woken up to the problems?' said Jones. 'About time.'

'Aubrey, don't be so inquisitorial. I'm sure Dr Whittaker has the matter in hand.'

'I'm trying to find some compromise. Devise an alternative plan.'

‘So let’s hear it. Warm some more scones, would you, Tess? Perhaps we’re going to get some sense at last.’

Two days later I outlined the same plan to Edward Tennant in his new office in Dorchester. He heard me out in silence, toying with a paperweight that sat on the glass-topped desk. He looked more impressive now in his blue suit, striped shirt and gold cuff links, the sleek hair polished into a large crest that gave him an air of the rare summer migrant, something from the Nordic nations that are clean-cut in their business dealings. ‘Shall we get a coffee outside?’ he said.

‘Here would do. If business is paying for all this splendour?’

‘Appearances count.’ He pressed the intercom. ‘Trish, I’ll be out for an hour.’

‘Yes, Mr Tennant.’

‘Is that the girl at the desk?’

‘Approve?’ He smiled. ‘No harm in giving Imogen some competition. Hope springs eternal

and all that. You patched it up with your better half yet?’

‘Hope to’, I said. Was no one unaware of my difficulties? ‘We have a meeting at the solicitor’s on Thursday.’

‘Keep them out of it, if I were you. My legal bill is out of this world. Then they charge you for postage, you know that? It’s mad.’

‘Perhaps you should stay on the straight and narrow more’, I said, still nettled by the reference to Jill.

‘They get you one way or the other. Even if you have a simple plan like yours. Which is going to cost a good deal more than you suppose.’

‘I can rehash the figures.’

‘So can I, standing on my head. That’s why we’ve gone for a walk.’ He looked around. ‘What do you see here?’

‘In the High Street? What do you expect me to see?’

'Quaint streets, museum, the visitor centre, tearooms, restaurants, bookshops. Know what I'm getting at?'

'No, Eddie, I don't.'

'This is a tourist centre. Everything the visitor could possibly want. Why on earth would they traipse out to Leyton Rings, do you think?'

'It's not that far. Only half an hour by car.'

'See that, the two cafés over there? Which one does the better business, would you reckon?'

'I don't know.' He was staring at me with a pleased look of enquiry, but perhaps it was my imagination. 'Can't be much in it', I said.

'There is. The one on the High Street does thirty per cent more business. That's right, old sport. Visitors are too idle to walk the extra twenty paces.'

'How do you know?'

'I know everything here.'

'That's what business consulting services means, does it? Snooping on the competition?'

'Information gives competitive advantage. That's what they pay us for.'

'Well, if you're not too thrilled with my plan, how's yours going to be any better? People would still have to drive out to the festival.'

'Not people. Locals. The young blood that is dying of boredom here. What did you do on a Saturday night? Go to a dance or restaurant?'

We never went out, I remembered, not after the early days. 'We couldn't afford it. And then there was a child to consider.'

'Jill does.'

'What, go out?' That was bad news, and I felt some of the old suspicions return. 'In Dorchester?'

'You don't want the details, old man. What I'm saying is that people splash out when they're courting, or on holiday. But at no other time, believe me.'

Perhaps we were never really courting. Irritably I said, 'And I've factored in some school visits. Round the year.'

'At three quid a head? You must be joking.'

'It's a reduction. Five pounds is the standard rate.'

'And that's wrong too. You don't have much of a feel for this, do you, Whittaker?'

'Too high, you reckon?' I stared at him, vexed, and walked on.

'Doesn't look right', said Tennant, catching me up. 'Sounds as though you just dreamt up a figure that sounds reasonable.'

'It is reasonable, compared with what other places charge.'

'Listen. Your price has to promise something substantial. Behind the figure should be the suggestion that all kinds of extras are included. Five seventy-five would be better, if you had the amenities to match.'

'We'd have a whole barn of computer simulations. Displays in some of the outhouses. A walk round the excavation.'

'How long is that going to keep the average family of fractious kids occupied? You can't charge five quid for half an hour.'

'How much then? Three and a half?'

'And then they wouldn't go at all. Wouldn't be much out there, if you're only charging that.'

'Then I don't get you.'

'Look, old man, you're on the right track, but you're not thinking big enough. You have to build something that appeals to several sectors of the market, not just history buffs.'

'History's on the school syllabus.'

'And schools don't have any money. Listen, ever been out to the other rock festival in Dorset?'

'So we're back with the festival.'

'Went there with Imogen. Know what they have? A park and gardens. It's beautiful. If you don't want to listen you can take in the scene. Now suppose we had something like that at Leyton Rings. Gardens, trees, a bandstand, places to walk round and look at. Not just look at, engage in. Just as museums don't have.'

'They're much more visitor-friendly these days, in case you haven't noticed.'

'You reckon? Schoolchildren going round with questionnaires. Call that participation? It's an extension of the classroom. No, it's got to be the real thing. People enjoying what they're doing.'

'But not a rock concert.'

'That's just to get the crowds in. You need the setting landscaped.'

'At Leyton? The era of country houses passed centuries ago. Who's got the money for that?'

'Nurseries. Agricultural colleges. We design the whole layout in collaboration with them, and they use sections to showcase their skills. Free gardens for us, and cheap advertising for them. Plus the power of big business. You should never forget that business can get the planning permission a farmer can't.'

'You've given it some thought. Perhaps I was wrong about this.'

'Everyone's wrong about me, old man. But that's just the beginning. You been to the geological section at the museum recently?'

'They seem to have changed it. Thrown out those old cases of fossils, and put multimedia in.'

'For the better, you think?'

'Suppose so.'

'No, you're wrong. They've thrown out one of the best fossil collections in the country, and that's mad. It's dumbing down, not popularising. What we're going to do at Leyton is have the best, the best of its kind anywhere. Which is where you come in.'

'No thank you.'

'Because you draw people in as we do in advertising. Create an emotional need, which is strengthened as they participate. Got that? Experience by involvement. What we're going to do with the background to Iron Age Britain. Not just the monuments and the relicts, but what they signify.'

'And what do they signify, for Christ's sake?'

'A pagan way of life.'

'I hope you're not thinking of letting Barnes and his pagan lot in. No one wants that mumbo-jumbo up there.'

'Of course it's mumbo-jumbo. That's because it's lost the language to express itself.'

'Imogen gave us a long lecture on that at my last history outing. Something about collective understanding providing meaning in the old pagan world. You've no idea how she went on.'

'Should hope so. Just dipping the toe in, but cheaper than focus groups.'

'You put her up to it, Eddie? On my field trip?'

'Ritual is the language of the ancient world.'

'Who says?'

'Because you've been too long in academia. Maybe it's not what dry old scholars want to hear, but that's the truth of the matter.'

'I've a sinking feeling we're coming to dancing round bonfires, and naked orgies.'

'Nonsense old man. Ever been to one of those meetings?'

'Have you?'

'Used to go with Imogen. Didn't she tell you?'
He looked at me slyly. 'Imogen's rather attached to rituals, I should have thought.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

'I wouldn't get hung up on it. Probably just teasing. Trying out her powers and all that.'

I looked at him. Imogen was closer to the pagans than people supposed. I walked with Tennant for a while as the woman loomed in my imagination. Perhaps what she promised only slipped away, as Duffy had warned. 'So what sort of ceremonies were you planning at Leyton?' I said carefully.

He didn't seem to hear.

'These acts of participation, family events are they?'

'Pretty well developed in the Nordic countries. It's feeling comfortable with yourself, of being at home in your sensory landscape. Not retreating into a sanitised world where you just move mental counters around. I'm not saying concepts don't

make sense on paper, but they have to feel right as well. You have to live your thoughts, otherwise it's just words.'

'You should go into marketing.'

'I am in marketing. We all are. What do you think, that housewives buy this packet of oven chips because they're tastier or better value? Course they don't. They associate with the brand. Overworked mum who wants the best for the family. Good-natured dad, who sneaks a chip from the oven, because we're all kids at heart.'

'So Leyton festival is being sold as wholesome, all-the-family entertainment, is it?'

'Not by me, old man. That's your job. You go round all the farms and schools and busybody meetings. Explain that Leyton Festival is an extrasensory experience, an immersion into a world our ancestors knew. What we've forgotten, but is still present somewhere.'

'Don't have that gift of the gab.'

'Yes you do. Everyone calls you a spell-binder. You make people believe in their hopes and dreams. That everything is possible.'

'When I'm teaching, sometimes.'

'When you're talking. You reach into people's hearts, and tell them what's there, which they've always known but hadn't the words for. Passing into another dimension, telling us we're all transitory creatures with our longings that don't make much sense from the outside but which are intensely real.'

'Lord in Heaven, Eddie. I thought I overdid it at times.'

'Doesn't matter what you say, as long as you believe it. That's what our funding partners are going to look for.'

'You've got people lined up, from Scandinavia or somewhere? Is that where the plan's going?'

'Or we could franchise the idea. Ever thought of that? Lots of untapped opportunities in this tight, rainy little island.'

'You'd want me to meet these people?'

'In time. Not just for the moment. We have to get a business plan shaped up first.'

'That's exactly what I need to know. What's on the drawing board now?'

'When we do.'

'Yes, but when's that?'

He shook his head, and wouldn't say more. I left him at the door to his office, and walked slowly back to the car park, where I was some time turning on the ignition. Not for the first time I saw myself lagging behind the locals of Dorchester. Reluctantly, after I'd got back to the flat, I phoned Aubrey Jones, who went on the offensive immediately.

'So are they going to have a festival or not?' he demanded.

'Well, as I've said, more than a festival, at least in time. They're relandscaping the whole hill.'

'The devil they are. Those hills have looked over the town for centuries. We're not having some Eden centre down here.'

'It could be tasteful, don't you think, done properly?'

'Since when has Edward Tennant shown any taste? You'll have to put your foot down.'

'It's not up to me. But they'll have to get planning permission, which won't be easy, and may take years.'

'You said they'd develop in stages, so that damned rock festival could happen any time.'

'If it were just a small affair, at first anyway.'

'Meaning it'll get bigger every year?'

'Not necessarily.'

'Right, Whittaker. I'll tell you what we'll do. We'll have a meeting in the Community Centre next Saturday evening. I'll get the vicar to organize it. You can tell people what you have in mind, which seems pretty sensible to me, and Edward Tennant can lay out his plans. Then we'll invite questions from the floor. Thrash out something that everyone can live with.'

It seemed a bold step, but I simply said, 'And you'll be there too, as the Countryside Association representative?'

'Don't you worry about that.'

He rung off, and I made myself lunch before driving to Leyton Rings, where the new excavation was going well. Another bead had been found, and a fragment of wood that would need treatment before removal. At six, when we knocked off for the day, I looked down at the farmhouse, where Penny was no doubt preparing the evening meal, but then thought of tomorrow's meeting with Jill, which wouldn't be easy.

Chapter Eleven

My solicitor was a balding, fussy man new to Dorchester, and engaged for that reason, so there would be no under-the-table deals. At my request, he began by outlining the choices, in which there were no surprises.

'So, in conclusion, Dr Whittaker, a reconciliation would be best. You have real grievances, and some damaging information on your wife's behaviour, but I think you'll want to wait to see what cards are placed on the table. Life being what it is, I expect the other party will come up with its own set of complaints, real or otherwise.'

'She's been extraordinary. Locking me out like that.'

'And keeping you from your child, whom you're naturally fond of.'

'She had no right to do that.'

'You are fond of your . . . let me see . . . Megan, aren't you, Dr Whittaker? Because if you're not, and you dispute the paternity, then of course that does change matters, about custody and maintenance payments.'

'Exactly.'

'Perhaps I should press you more. Would you feel happy paying maintenance for Megan if divorce proved the only solution?'

'Someone's got to support her, though she's none too likeable.'

'Well, this is only a preparatory meeting, so we can defer details until both parties have had a chance to think through the implications of any settlement proposed.'

'I just want Jill back.'

'Of course. And the fact that they have agreed to a meeting does point to a level-headed and sensible attitude. In short, most encouraging. Shall we go in?'

I'd expected to find Jill in full command of the situation, and she was indeed the experienced administrator, though somehow still my wife. The two solicitors shook hands and Jenkins smiled at me. I looked across to Jill, who bent her head slightly, as though submitting to a grievous injustice. I sat across the table, doing my best to smile, though I felt the muscles tightening in my neck.

The solicitors outlined the situation, and there was a pause. 'So,' said my solicitor, 'would representation for Mrs Whittaker like to present the substance of her grievances against my client?'

'No,' said Jenkins after a look from Jill. 'Mrs Whittaker has made herself clear to her husband. Because he has called this meeting, he must have something he wishes to discuss. Mrs Whittaker would be happy to hear what it is.'

'Well then, Dr Whittaker, the floor is yours', said my solicitor.

I measured my words carefully. I observed that my wife had locked me out of our house for no conceivable reason, had kept me from seeing Megan, and had on one occasion called the police when I refused to go.

Jill didn't reply but looked to Jenkins.

'My client has made the situation abundantly clear to Dr Whittaker. He has not been a caring husband. Besides being emotionally cold towards her, he has not taken a proper role in the running of the household, and seems to regard looking after their child Megan as an irrelevant chore.' Jenkins stopped and gave me a hapless look before adding, 'He has also accused my client of infidelity, which she regards as an intolerable slur on her character.'

I could feel my eyes hurting, but Jenkins continued. 'To add insult to injury'—Jenkins didn't seem to believe the script, and raised his eyebrows before continuing—'has been the

cavalier attitude of Dr Whittaker with regard to his own behaviour. He has consorted with women of dubious character, which has further damaged my client's reputation.'

After the revelations of Aubrey Jones I might have accepted that description for Imogen, but Penny? I heard my voice trembling with anger as I started. 'There has been no wrongdoing on my part, I can assure you.'

'Yes', said my solicitor quickly. 'Let us not go down that road for the moment. We need to see what the parties would agree to, I think.'

Jenkins cleared his throat, but I cut across. 'How dare she say that?'

'Dr Whittaker,' said my solicitor, 'if you would.'

'Let's try to keep this on a friendly footing', said Jenkins.

'Friendly? Listen. That scheming woman who is looking down her nose at us is a consummate liar. She's having an affair with a Dr David Farley. Everyone at the hospital knows it, and I can and will bring witnesses to prove that is the case.'

Jill remained impassive, those clear eyes looking at me without emotion.

'More than that,' I continued, 'it appears that Megan is not my daughter at all. Nor is she Dr Farley's, incidentally. No, my wife had another lover in that regard, a Tom Hastings. Again I can bring witnesses, and will prove matters with a paternity test.'

Jill didn't say anything at first. Then she leant across and whispered something to Jenkins, who pulled a face and said, 'My client has asked for a few minutes alone with Dr Whittaker.'

'Is that acceptable?' asked my solicitor. 'You are not obliged to agree.'

'Yes, I'll talk to Jill.'

I could remember her arrival in Dorchester, how pleased I'd been to walk down the street with her, or the stir she created with my female pupils when she came to collect me from school occasionally, or we went shopping together, often for the new house. Oh I'm not sure that's what my wife would want, I'd say, which the sales

assistants would remember when they saw me come into the showroom with Jill, giving me a warm smile of approval. She got a job with an estate agent's by simply walking through the door, and then transferred to the hospital when the administrator's vacancy came up, being hired as soon as interviews could be dispensed with.

The solicitors collected their papers and left the room. Jill looked at me coolly, but I was not falling into the trap of starting first.

'What are you trying to do?' she said at last. The voice was controlled but had a soft edge to it, which it does on those rare occasions when Jill is speaking emotionally.

I bit back my thoughts, and said, 'Jill, you made all this trouble. Locking me out, going to the solicitors.'

'To try to put matters right. Don't you realize I can't talk to you any more?'

'How was locking me out going to help?' I searched her face for some explanation but Jill was as inscrutable as ever.

'Steven, you don't understand. I was at my wit's end. I thought if I did this you would stop your work for once and start paying attention to me. That's all I wanted. I wanted us to have a real marriage again.'

'While you still played around with David Farley?'

'Steven, I swear to you there hasn't been anyone else. Megan is your child. You can have a paternity test any time you like. Tomorrow if you want.'

Of course it might be a defence, realising I now had the advantage, but if Jill is controlled and wary, she is not an outright liar. 'Doesn't have to be tomorrow', I said.

'Steven, it's you I love. It always has been. Can't you see that?'

Perhaps she did. Jill's new behaviour was unexpected, indeed unknown. 'Well, I'd like to', I said, carefully, wondering what was next.

'I haven't been a loving partner, it's true, but the physical side is difficult for me. I don't trust my feelings. Does that make sense to you?'

'Maybe.' I tried to smile. 'Things weren't so bad between us.' To overcome that towering wall of condescension would be an unlooked-for victory.

'Yes they were, and it was my fault. You don't realize what it was like, coming to Dorchester and meeting everyone you'd made friends with. I was the outsider, and they compared me with Penny Lawley. I couldn't believe I still had you.'

'Why not?'

'She's a lovely woman. Beautiful and sensible. I was astonished when I met her. I couldn't see how anyone, or anyone like me, could compete.'

'I told you nothing happened with Penny.'

'And when we married you seemed preoccupied. I thought you were growing out of love with me. There were rumours you were still seeing Penny, and then came Imogen. I blamed you for what were really my own failings.'

Surely it was time to stretch a hand across, to say sorry for all those irritating mannerisms I'd developed to get my own back? 'Look,' I said, 'I wasn't the perfect husband. You supported me, and I didn't like it. Of course I was grateful, and couldn't have done the book or got the PhD without you, but I didn't like being so dependent. Probably took it out on you by not trying as hard as I should have done.'

'You did try, Steven.' There was a soft edge to the voice, and a long pause.

'Then we've both been silly, haven't we?' I said.

Jill smiled, a slow radiant smile. 'There is no marriage without you. Nothing that really makes sense.'

'And I've always loved you', I found myself saying, the words borne onward with the strength of pent-up frustration. I scratched my head awkwardly. 'So where do we go from here?'

'I want you to come home. Will you just come home with me? Please?'

'Will Megan be there?'

'She's at school.' Jill's look was kindly again. 'I just hoped it might work out', she said.

'We'll tell our legal friends to send the bills on.'

I don't think the solicitors were surprised. 'Splendid', said mine. 'If that's to everyone's satisfaction, then I'm delighted. I imagine Mr Jenkins is too. Litigation doesn't always help, and it's enormously expensive.' He patted me on the back, and added, 'But of course if you need to come and see me again, the door is always open.' I could see the two peering out of the window as we climbed into our cars and left the parking lot.

'Look,' said Jill when we got back, 'don't let's talk. Just take me to bed. Yes I know it's only midday, but we can make up for all the Sundays missed.'

I grinned. 'All day and all night if you want.'

Jill was still my wife, but there was a change. She was in the bathroom twenty minutes, but then appeared without the bathrobe, a new

confidence in her. Perhaps I'd forgotten what an attractive woman my wife was, and she was pleased when I looked her over and pulled the bedcovers back.

'We don't need to dally', she said, and pulled me over, tightening her legs around my back. 'Just do it.'

That wasn't Jill's usual language of love, or anyone else's I could remember, but if the ensuing performance wasn't accomplished it was certainly energetic. Perhaps someone else had unlocked this latent dynamism, but that seemed an ungenerous thought, and unworthy of what life might become. Jill's body had been drawn back more notches than I'd known it possessed, and spoke of a willingness to open further. That was true. A strong and vibrant woman could be expected to make demands while I had the strength to meet them, even if the satisfaction was local and rather bruising.

'You all right?' she said when we lay out together, exhausted again.

'You bet', I said, giving her shoulder a soft bite, probably so she wouldn't see my puzzlement. Jill had never been a caring or sensitive lover, but I wondered if I didn't like the old version better.

'You are quite a tiger, aren't you, Steven Whittaker?'

'Only with you.'

She smiled, and folded her arms round, rolling me back on the bed.

An hour later I went down to the fridge, and opened it, gazing at the interior as I tried to absorb my new prospects. I drank a glass of orange juice before walking up carefully with a tray for the two of us, when we sat sprawled out on the bed, looking down at our legs, which spoke for our natures, mine knotted and aggressive, hers sleek and firmly muscled. Of course I was also vaguely aware I had thrown away my suspicions, and was yielding to an animal hunger that had no connection with our marriage. Possibly Megan was my daughter after

all, and would certainly have to be, as I couldn't now ask Jill for a paternity test.

We went to the kitchen and Jill prepared some toast, which we ate in our bathrobes. She was calm, and happy with herself, giving me an encouraging smile when I caught her eye. My thoughts were less settled, however, and I remembered the evening when Penny and Imogen had laughed and put me to bed. Imogen could look after herself, but Penny's nature seemed betrayed, as though a mark of sole ownership had been stamped on my body.

Jill looked up. 'You still having second thoughts?' she said.

'No. You were marvellous.'

'Steven, there has never been anyone else. Before we got married, I had some doubts, but not seriously, and not since. You do believe that, don't you?'

'Of course. And I've never been unfaithful to you. That's the truth.' I had already slipped over

to the other side, sensing the rituals where men served their brief roles and were discarded.

'I know'. She gave that warm smile of hers, ingenuous and confiding. 'Come on, we've got hours yet.'

Afterwards, Steven Whittaker was again walking taller, but he was also striding away from the past, into manhood's kingdom, which is built of appetites acknowledged and returned.

Around four we got up and dressed, ready for Megan's return from school.

'Daddy's come back', said Jill as the child stood in the entrance, her mouth set in a grimace. She walked past me and started up the stairs.

Jill ran after her. 'No sweetie, say something to daddy. Aren't you pleased to see daddy again?'

Megan turned round slowly and said, 'No.' With fists on hip she added, 'Why has he come back? We don't want him.'

'You don't mean that, sweetie', I said, and went up to take her arm. She shook me off and

stamped up to her bedroom, where we heard the door slam.

Jill shook her head. 'It's just the sudden change. I'll go up shortly with the milk, and you can read to her.'

Megan listened in heavy silence, and then rolled over. Jill turned the light off. We both kissed her on the head, but she gave no response beyond wrapping the bedclothes more tightly.

'She'll grow out of it', said Jill when we were sat in the lounge.

'Like me to take her to the park tomorrow? I have to be on site, but I could get back early.'

'It's not necessary, and children are happiest keeping to routines.' Jill smiled. 'We'll get it back, if we both work at it.'

'Of course, and I am trying. Even spoke to Miles Hampton a few days ago about him appearing in the film.'

'Did you?' Jill was looking at me with guarded interest. 'But how would that fit in with your schedule, if you're still the series presenter?'

'I may not be. Martins is thinking of bringing in someone else.' Jill's thoughts seemed to be elsewhere. 'Though everything's a bit up in the air at the moment', I continued.

'But you'll need to know shortly, won't you? It'll affect the timetable.'

'I'm running a course on historiography.'

'Are you? Well, that's good.' She gave me a quick look, and put her arms round. 'I'm pleased.'

'Your husband does try', I said, freeing myself.

'I know. And I shouldn't have made those comments about local characters. It's your career, and I'm sure you know what's best. The dig's going well, I heard.'

It was the first time she'd ever expressed an interest in fieldwork, but doubtless we were both on our best behaviour. 'We've opened an area in the southern flank of the hill,' I said, 'where there's a sort of platform overlooking the sea. Not much so far, but we've found a couple of beads that might be Saxon.'

'Is that significant?'

'Could be a burial there. That would be really interesting. Help the career, and be some compensation if your husband doesn't become a star of the small screen.'

'I ought to see if Megan's asleep. And let's have an early night.'

'All right Jill.'

'But I'm pleased about the dig.' She gave me a hug. 'Don't be long.'

The following morning I saw Megan into the school minibus, and watched it move off. The wretched child didn't turn round, and I thought gloomily of Saturday's outing. At least there would be Tim, if I let him know.

His mother opened the door. 'Oh you're back', she said. 'It's good to see you.'

'Just calling to know if Tim wants to go to the park on Saturday. With Megan.'

'He'd love to, I'm sure. I'll just go and ask him.'

She went through to the kitchen and I could hear her saying, 'No. With uncle Steven. I'm sure

you'll be able to go with uncle David some other time. Do you want to go or not?'

'Sorry about that', she said on coming back to the door. 'Tim will be delighted. Usual time?'

'Expect he gets confused with all the changes.'

'Yes, your brother-in-law took him sometimes. How did the trip go, by the way? Germany or somewhere, wasn't it?'

'Fine thanks. I'll call about ten.'

'Good of you, Steven.'

Jill was getting her papers together when I returned to the house. 'Megan get off all right?' she said.

'Yes. I may have to whiz over to the flat to bring some clothes back.'

'As you like. We'll see each other later. You can put Megan to bed, can't you?'

'I'll need to get in.'

'Of course you will.' She stopped, and unthreaded a key from the ring. 'Don't lose it. The only spare we have.'

'See you tonight.'

'About eight.' She gave me a long hug.

For an hour I didn't know what to do. I could have a row with Jill, but she'd only call the police, and have the locks changed again. I made some tea, and then called next door.

'Oh you again', said our neighbour.

'Just to say I'll try and make Saturday, but something's come up. If I'm not here by nine thirty I won't be able to make it. It'll be off.'

'All right, Steven. I think Tim wants to go out with some friends anyway.'

'That's all right then.'

'Thanks for letting us know.'

With growing annoyance, I drove to the dig, and supervised for an hour or so, thinking afterwards of walking down to the farm. What could I tell Penny? That I'd gone back to Jill and made a fool of myself? She probably knew that

already, from the speed at which our rumour mill works.

Perhaps I should get another copy of the key made, in case I had to surrender mine to Jill.

There was a key cutting and cobbler's shop near one of the Dorchester car parks, but I went over to the shop near the hospital.

'Long time', said the bearded operator. 'What can I do for the good Dr Whittaker?'

'Just this key, if you could. Jill asked me to get another copy made.'

'Again?'

'I know, Bert. We keep losing them.'

'No point in increasing security if you drop keys around the place. Your wife had two made last month.'

'We'll be more careful.'

'I went back to the dig, where still there was nothing to report. Perhaps the glass beads had been nothing, just something casually lost. Around lunchtime, when the helpers got out their sandwiches, I walked down to the farm. Penny

led me through to the kitchen, where she brewed a mug of tea.

‘Just thought I ought to drop in and explain what’s happening’, I told her.

‘We’re not having the date tonight?’

‘I do pretty well know now that Jill was seeing David Farley.’

‘She was probably lonely.’ Penny sat down and looked hard at me. ‘What is it?’

‘We had the meeting in the solicitor’s office and patched something up. She said the usual words, and of course I believed her. We went back yesterday, and in some ways things were better. Then I found she’d been lying. She had been seeing David Farley after all.’

‘We both told you that.’

‘But I wanted proof. I was up at Aubrey Jones’s place on Sunday, and I have to say they weren’t too keen on the Lawleys. They like you, but not Imogen, and not your father at all. They had a few stories to tell about him.’

‘What’s that got to do with us?’

'He seems to have been something of a skirt-chaser.'

'He was a drunkard. He abused Melissa, and gave my mother a hard time.'

'You never told me that.'

'Would it have helped? He had what you have too. A liking for the maidens of the parish.'

'Of course I'm attracted to Imogen, but it's not serious. I don't even know if she tells the truth. There was some affair with a teacher, according to Aubrey.'

'Imogen was trying out her powers.' She frowned, and sat looking at me. 'Listen, Imogen is Imogen. You'll never understand her if you keep following along behind, turning over all her comments and actions to find what she's hiding. She does tell the truth, in a strange way, but that's not the point. She's asking about your intentions.'

'I want you.'

'Are you sure?'

'Of course I'm not sure. Christ, there's a meeting at the Community Centre on Saturday, when I have to explain to everyone what would be best for Leyton. You want the festival, but Imogen won't say what it is. Tennant is planning to relandscape the whole site, and Jones is having panic attacks at the very thought.'

'Perhaps we'd better call the date off, if you're going back to your old life.'

'So Jill can make a fool of me with Farley? She's changed, and I'm not sure I like the new brand.'

'I thought things were better.'

'She's better in bed, if you want the ungarnished truth.'

'Which you don't like?'

'It's the woman inside. Before she was evasive and guarded. Now it's rapacious and exhausting, and, well, to get on with Jill you have to be as demanding and insensitive as she is.'

'It's taken you a long time to realize that.'

‘Don’t laugh at me. I’m talking because I’ve got no one else to talk to.’ I blushed at the frankness of the words, and went to sit on the small sofa.

‘You want everything made to your specifications?’ She came to sit with me. ‘You’re not going to find everything in the one person.’

‘Not even you?’

‘Especially me. I’m far more demanding than ever Jill was.’

‘We wouldn’t fight, would we? Not more than the other day, I mean.’ I took her hand and placed it, palm up, on my lap. ‘Look, maybe I’m not quite in control now.’

‘Were you ever?’

‘Of course I was.’

‘Steven, let me tell you something. I don’t want to be unkind, but sometimes you’re not awake. Of all the people I saw in Dorchester when I was working there, how many were happy, leading fulfilled and worthwhile lives? You go round the car park and look at the faces. Even here, how do you think it is for me? Trying to keep the place

together, hearing about Melissa's latest holiday or Imogen's hopes in London. Here I have a run-down farm, which is my home, and always will be, but what comes after that, when I'm forty or sixty-five? People will say, ah yes, there's Penny, really pretty in her time, but somehow never got it together. Makes lovely cakes.'

Penny had never spoken this way before. I took her hand, but didn't know what to say. 'Is this us we're talking about?'

'All the people who've lived here or on the hill. For you they're history, but I can hear their voices. Sometimes walking along in the evening, when there's shadow under the trees, or sharp sunlight in the hedgerows, I can hear people crying out in the darkness.'

'What do they say?'

'You're not understanding, are you? They don't talk about love or happiness or life working out in the end. It's something else, on the other side and immensely sad.' She got up and shook her head. 'I'm getting like you.' She leant over,

hesitated, and gave me a lingering kiss that stopped my thoughts. 'Steven, come tonight if you want to, anyway.'

'Anyway what?'

'Because I'm forcing the pace with you, which may be a mistake. For you, and much more for me.'

'What are you saying?'

'Call for me at eight if you want to. Or don't call. It's up to you.'

Chapter Twelve

Megan was delivered at four. I made her tea, and sat with her as she watched television. At seven she was escorted upstairs, washed and tucked into bed.

'You can go now, daddy. I don't want a story from you', she said as I drew up the bedside stool.

'Of course you do. Is mummy reading this one?'

'It's my book.' She snatched it from my grasp, and thrust it under the pillow. 'You can go now. You've done what mummy said.'

'Megan, I'm happy to read you a story. I'm still your father, even though I haven't been here much recently.'

'You are not my father, and nobody wants you.'

'Megan, if you don't want a story, you don't have to have one. But just be a little more polite, please. Your mother and I are doing our best to patch things up. I know that will be difficult, but we all have to make an effort.'

For answer, Megan reached over to the table-lamp, and pulled out the plug. In the dark, and without kissing her goodnight, I blundered out of the room and went downstairs. Why was the child so difficult? She poisoned the whole house with her tantrums, and the wretch probably wasn't even mine.

From the armchair I looked round the room, at the sofa, the expensive curtains and now our wedding photograph, which had reappeared in its silver frame. We were starting again. Megan was my daughter, and I'd have to win her over. Or

there was Penny, with Bob Lawley's death and Imogen's reputation. Jill was impossible, but no damaging stories would emerge just as I was accepting some glittering academic prize. Slowly, without reaching a conclusion, I turned these thoughts round in my mind, until I heard Jill arrive and went out to meet her.

'Have to sleep at the flat tonight,' I said, 'so here's the house key, in case I'm not back to take Megan out. We've found something at the dig.'

'Oh the dig? Right.' Jill's look softened. 'I'll see you tomorrow.'

'In case you don't. I'm taking Penny Lawley out to dinner.'

She stared at me. 'Don't be silly, Steven. Whatever for?'

'To get some perspective. On us, to be frank.'

Jill took the key, placed it firmly in her bag, and went into the house. I started the old Rover, and drove thoughtfully to Leyton Farm, taking the narrow Buncombe road and then turning off towards the smooth outline of the hills silhouetted

against the evening sky. Nothing was decided, and nothing need be decided, I said to myself. Penny was just a friend. We could have a quiet meal and talk. I stopped to open the gate, and drove through into the yard. There were no lights in the house, and I thought with sudden disappointment she'd changed her mind, though the guests should be in.

I was pressing the doorbell a second time when Penny appeared in a long white dress. The earrings glittered under the thickly waved hair, and a small diamond pendant hung between the breasts.

'Didn't you think I'd make an effort?' she said as she stepped out into the yard, and stood there in heavy magnificence, smiling at my look. 'You don't like it?'

'You look absolutely stunning.'

'Penelope Lawley is queen of the high country and the low,' she said grandly, turning around so the dress unfolded its full bulk. She laughed again at my admiration. 'So where are we going?'

'I'd thought of a modest restaurant in Weymouth, but that's hardly suitable now.'

Penny took a few steps, and swung round. 'If you really want to do the honours, we could try somewhere I know.'

'Expensive? More than where I went with Imogen?'

'Much worse.'

'Oh well, for one night', I said. 'This night and all nights.' I gave her a soft kiss, which she half refused, pushing me away and laughing.

'Don't. You'll spoil the makeup.'

'So where is this place?' I said when we were settled in the car.

'You'll need a tie.' She fished one out from the evening bag as we drove along. 'You take the coast road to Bridport.'

'One of those places.'

'I'll do it up if you keep still.'

I checked in the rear mirror when we arrived, and then the two of us made our entrance, the

waiters smiling and backing away to lead us over to a table at the window, where we could see ourselves reflected in the dark glass, one of many couples done up in their evening finery. We ordered aperitifs and studied the menu.

'Hope your credit line runs to this', she said. 'Prices haven't gone down.'

'Lots of impoverished suitors, are there? All rueing the cost of taking out the magnificent Penelope Lawley?'

'I came here with Richard once, that's all.'

'He had nothing to complain of, not with the most beautiful woman in Dorset.'

'Melissa was that. But Richard did expect more.'

I felt myself blushing. 'Let's talk about something else', I said.

'Steven, I'd better tell you, since you'll only hear wild stories. I wasn't in love with Richard, though I did try. He was kind and generous and a good lover and all those things the brides

magazines tell you about, but he wanted me to himself, and that he could never have.'

'There were other men, if you don't mind me asking? You couldn't be faithful?'

'Oh I'm very faithful.'

I coloured again. 'Is this the right thing to be starting with?'

'You don't need to feel embarrassed. It's all in the past.'

'Well, for what it's worth, I was very drawn to you. But there was Jill, and I was engaged, and had a life mapped out. But,' I added with effort, 'if you want to know, I'd have given a king's ransom to have kissed you on our picnics together. But I couldn't see where it would lead, and there was nothing on offer.'

'Wasn't there?'

'Penny,' I said, 'aren't we supposed to take this gently, and get to know each other better? That's how it was with Jill.'

'Have you told her about tonight?'

'She didn't believe me.'

Penny laughed.

'Or perhaps she did', I said crossly. 'Jill's not easy to read.'

'It's out of her hands. It's between us, or rather between you and your past. Tonight you have to answer the questions you've been dodging for years.'

'Penny, what could I do? Throw everything over for a passing whim, some beautiful creature with whom I had nothing in common?'

'How do you know?'

'Or I was afraid of you. Is that better? I was in mortal terror, not in my proper mind when I was with you. Even you coming into the office with the drawings, just a few words, and I would be upset for days, dream about you, write a long letter to Jill saying how much I missed her.'

'Which was a lie.'

'It was the sober truth. With Jill I could build a life that was stable and orderly and be what people talk about. Why do you think I lead these history walks? Or do the TV series? While I work

on other people, on their interests or emotions, I'm safe. Perhaps I don't fully exist but I'm happy. That doesn't make sense, I know, but that's all I can say.'

'That's not all you can say.'

'More I can't tell you because you'd think I'm an idiot. Insane or something.'

'Are you insane, Steven Whittaker?'

'Expect so.'

'With me or generally?'

'I see another world, which I seem to belong to, though it causes a sort of vertigo. Even the tablecloth, glasses, the candlelight here are all startlingly alive.'

'Is Penelope Lawley alive?'

'You're an overwhelming wonder that I feel I've always known but didn't recognize. Your voice, your body that pushes through the dress.' I stopped and said crossly, 'Now I'm talking nonsense. But you wanted this date, and, well, that is how I am.'

'I've always known that. Just as you've always known about me, not in so many words, though you should have guessed. You surely didn't need Imogen to make you play detective.'

'You're talking about the accident?'

'I killed my husband, you ought to know.'

'How?' I said, not believing her.

'Richard drowned himself. They said it was an accident, that he'd had a heart attack, but he didn't. I know he killed himself. He was a very determined man, even more than you. He tried, he really tried, and when he knew he hadn't won, he simply went out and ended it.'

'You can't be sure.'

'Just as I'm sure you killed your father.'

'No I didn't. At least I didn't write him off and not contact anyone.'

'Steven, if you knew all my father did to Melissa, what he tried with me, or what he did to any village girl simple enough to listen, then the accident was far less than he deserved.'

'Why didn't you go to the authorities?'

'Have it all aired in public? No thank you. However idyllic it may be to summer visitors, the country doesn't tolerate squeamish souls. Animals are slaughtered, chickens have their necks wrung, and unwanted individuals meet with sudden accidents.'

'Do people round here know that?'

'That Robert Lawley was murdered? They can guess. Steven, I did say the other farmers didn't like us, but at least Robert Lawley was put down humanely. He wasn't killed slowly, year after year, by the only person he loved.'

'Who was?'

'I'm talking about your father. Why he took you out on walks, gave you his knowledge and understanding of the countryside, told you what he wouldn't tell anyone else. He was just hoping you might some day understand and appreciate him a little.'

'He had a strange way of going about it. Wouldn't speak for whole days, you know that?'

'Did you ever meet her?'

'The secret other? I saw a photograph once. Nothing to write home about.'

'So it wasn't the affair that upset you, but that your father should make a fool of himself over someone who was so ordinary. Here was your mother, attractive and outgoing, and your father mooned about some mouse of a creature no one would look at twice.'

'She must have had something.'

'Does it matter? He shut himself up in his thoughts, just as you immerse yourself in history.'

'So what did you do, when you knew about Melissa and your father?' I said.

'What do you think? I'd lose myself in books, or go for long hours on the hill, hoping someone would come along to change my life. And Imogen, in case it hasn't occurred to you, went wild, made a play for you, ran off with some teacher, got mixed up in fertility cults and the pagans.'

'You guessed all this about me early on?'

'I didn't like you at first. Imogen kept talking about the dishy schoolteacher, the blonde warrior as she called you, but you came over as cold and distant.'

'I was trying to be distant, though the look you gave me with the portfolio nearly finished me off.'

'I wanted the commission, to get away from the farm. And don't look so crestfallen. Looks can be a barrier, on both sides. That's what Imogen finds. She can attract anyone she pleases, but she doesn't understand or make friends with them.'

'She did say something about wanting us to be friends. Only it's difficult. You never know with her.'

'Perhaps you have to decide whether you want the teasing and playful Imogen or the good-natured and sensible Penny.'

'Oh I think the bill's going to decide that,' I said with a short laugh. 'But what the hell.' I picked up my glass. 'Penny I'm pleased to be back with you,

if only for an evening, an evening I'll always remember, whatever happens.'

'What do you want to happen?'

'Everything. Everything about you I want. Your thoughts, the way you laugh, the body and a thousands sights that troubled my dreams for years.'

'That could be expensive.'

'No more than the cost of my present existence. A cold-natured schemer for a wife. Megan who is a horror. My Principal who's a pompous fraud, and that idiot of a TV producer. I'm telling you, Penny, I've had enough.'

'Life with me will be harder than that. You should be warned.'

'I don't care.'

'What about the Leyton Rings festival? I want that to go ahead.'

'Even if it kills the TV series?'

'I want a festival, and a proper site where we can cater for visitors, and do bed and breakfast

round the year. I want it to be the most visited place in Dorset.'

'That's impossible. Just think of the competition.'

'Make it a centre for prehistoric Britain. Models, computer reconstructions, displays, books, a guided tour. You could do that.'

'Where's the money coming from? For the advertising, brochures, computers?'

'Eddie can get funds from abroad. We'll raise a loan on the farm if you put in your money from the sale of the house.'

'Jill may come back.'

'Not when you've taken her rival out to a place she's never been to.'

'Can't be helped. I'm enjoying myself.'

'Steven, you have to be serious. After tonight you will not go back to your old ways. You'll be another man, and the past won't belong to you.'

'How do you know I won't take it in my stride, just notch up a conquest and go back to Jill?'

'You will try, but your journey ends here.' She took my hands and smiled. 'When the Lawleys love they never let go.'

'Bit melodramatic, isn't it?' I took my hands away. 'What journey?'

'You have always been looking for me, just as I've been waiting for you. I used to sit for hours on the hill, looking out at the sea and dreaming of the warrior who would come ashore and claim me.'

'None of these folk tales count for much. They only go back a few hundred years. And they're coloured by the present, always.'

'I know the hill is important, that something significant will happen to me and everyone associated with it. It's what places do. Or this place anyway.' Leyton was Penny's spiritual home, but also just another hill fort, no different from hundreds across the country. I looked carefully at her when she said, 'A strong feeling. We will go up to the hill and be together and nothing will ever seem the same again.'

'Melissa take her man up there?' I said, more to ease the conversation back into comfortable channels.

'Melissa's not fulfilled. Big house, swimming pool, yachting holidays in the south of France, but she is not what she should be.'

'Would the hill have made any difference?'

'I know you can't blame her', continued Penny. You've seen the farm, how we live. When a smooth-talking lawyer offered a way out she took it, and is being punished.'

'I wish we weren't having this conversation.'

'You've always imagined it, even as a small boy.'

'Not with you.'

'Did you ever see the woman in your dreams, the one waiting for you when you made your journeys around London?'

'Only that she was loving, and warm and understanding. I never saw her face.'

'Do you now?'

She was leaning across the table, the face warm and inviting: a Penny Lawley even more alluring than on our picnics.

‘So just be patient, and stop staring. The waiter’s coming with the first course.’

I poured the wine, and we talked about the site, where the visitor’s centre should be located, and the car park in the old lime pit at the base of the hill. She’d been thinking about it, and the plan did make sense. Perhaps it was Penny in that low-cut dress, or the wine, or the warmth of candles and waiters and other guests who turned round occasionally to smile at us, but in no time I was showing her to the car, and we were carried in a daze of happy expectation towards Leyton.

‘You’d better park behind the barn,’ said Penny when we arrived, ‘though they’ll be no one on the roads tonight, not once the Black Swan has closed.’

‘Except a few courting couples like us.’ I reached over to kiss her.

'Not like us.' She laughed and turned away. I shut the engine off, when it was suddenly quiet. The night air rushed at my face as Penny clicked open the door and climbed out. 'I'll get a bag', she said. 'We'll need a groundsheet and rugs. They'll be a heavy dew tonight.'

'You're going to change, aren't you? It's muddy up there.'

'We're going by another route that skirts the excavations. I don't want to see what you're doing to the place.'

She took my hand, a reassuring warmth as she led me through to collect the rugs and groundsheet. 'You need practice in country ways', she said gently, pushing me on, and closing the farmhouse door, a sharp sound that echoed back from the pens and line of trees just visible against the dark sky. 'Everything's different at night. Follow me.'

We walked towards the gate over the loose stones, which slipped under my feet. Here Penny made no sound at all, quiet as an animal, her

slight perfume absorbed in the smell of grass and dry dust my feet kicked up. She went ahead at the stile, and moved slowly up the side of the field, the long dress brilliant in the moonlight. What in heaven was I doing? I stopped for a moment and watched the headlights of a car pick their way along a road on the far side of the hill, and then looked down to the village where a single light showed and went out. Where was Jill now, or even Imogen? I caught up with Penny. 'Less dreaming', she said. 'We have a long climb ahead.'

In the last field, which was steep and given over to rough pasture, the path hardly showed, zigzagging like a rabbit between the grass and small clumps of gorse. 'Further this way than you'd think,' I said, glad of the break. I put the bag down. The wind tugged at my jacket and trousers, and hummed quietly in the gorse bushes, occasionally lifting a branch. It felt chilly on my ankles, though it was only a summer wind, with a faint smell of the sea. 'But it's peaceful up here,' I added when we were climbing the outer

earthwork and half running down the interior depression where the grass was thick and wet, leaving threads of moisture on my trousers. Then we were climbing again, and were suddenly at the brow of the hill, making our way to the south, away from the first trench. We settled in a slight depression that overlooked the sea. 'Probably one of the old storage pits,' I said as I helped Penny spread the groundsheet and lay out the rugs. She folded her dress into the bag, and then held me as I took off my shirt and trousers. Without embarrassment she removed her underwear, and placed them in the same bag, which she weighted with a large stone. 'You're not shy of me like this are you?'

'Didn't know you looked so good.'

'Come and sit here. Now hold my hands and say after me, 'Tonight I offer myself to Penelope, who is queen of the hill people. Tonight I will serve her in whatever way she desires. Faithfully and fully.'

'Is this necessary?'

'Tonight I offer myself . . . Why are you smiling?'

'Sounds unlikely.'

She was sitting on her heels, watching me carefully. Very unlikely. But she was queen at least of this place and this night, and I felt her bend over and touch the nape of my neck. 'And the oath?' she said. I repeated the words.

'Then you are mine, Steven Whittaker,' she said happily. 'You have married the queen of the place and are her paramour. For one night you have dominion of her counties.'

'After that?'

'It's not yours to ask.' She smiled and drew me closer, though I needed no prompting as I felt myself folded more deeply into her than even with Kaja those years ago. At times I wanted to ask her about the others who had preceded me to this place, had lain with the pert-eared Imogen or the splendid Melissa, but none of this mattered as the night drew on and I sank into a reverie I do not need to explain.

It was first light when I woke and found Penny looking at me. 'You have gone to sleep on me,' she said indignantly. 'Three hours. That is not faithfully and fully.'

'Perhaps we should try again.'

'Once is forever.' She tugged me to my feet. 'Come and look at the sea.'

'I'd rather stay here.'

'You've had your chance.'

'Very well,' I said, 'the sea, which takes in Portland and Bridport. Quite a view.'

'This is where my ancestors sat. To watch the Phoenicians and the round-headed people and the Saxons come in to colonize our lands.'

'Did they?'

'Which we always countered. We outbred them.'

'Now have a little modesty. I'm a respectable university teacher, and the dig is just down there. Anyone might come up.'

'There are other places.'

Like children we ran over the hill, and she fell laughing into one of the broad ditches as Steven became Pan of the woods and served her faithfully until he was exhausted, and was given a headband of flowers in the now warm grass. Around eight, before the helpers could arrive, the children of nature began their descent into the world of men. Though there was no flaming angel on the slopes, I felt looking back at the hill, on which the sun flooded its brilliance, that I should not again have the experience of being so close to the land, of entering and possessing its rural deity. I was yoked to Penny Lawley as I had never belonged to anyone else, though the rawness of the exertions was now pricking my skin under the everyday clothes.

We showered at the farm, where Penny cooked breakfast and sent me on my way. Several times I stopped the car and looked back, at the folds of the hills that were settling into a picture-book of childhood, where we colour in the shapes but do not know what they mean. I could still feel Penny's body, but what spoke to the outside

world had been replaced by an automaton that unaccountably had my clothes and voice. Steven Whittaker had become a different man, though not a steady or confident one. What is done is done, I said to myself, steadying my concentration on the road ahead. No doubt because of the lack of sleep, or my strange elation, the sunshine now threw painful kaleidoscopes of colour on the windscreen, and the world pressed in more threateningly than ever.

Chapter Thirteen

In this distracted state I drove to Dorchester, where I looked up the Pagan Historical Centre in the telephone book and bought a street plan, studying it over a cup of tea, and then another. Barnes wasn't the easiest of people to deal with, and I now had to include Imogen and Tennant in whatever they did on summer evenings when Jill and I watched the television or talked over the day's events.

'Going to make a meal of it?' said the waitress. 'Only we do a full breakfast if you want. Keep yourself going.'

'Best be off', I said.

She gave me a smile, perhaps of recognition, but I wasn't paying attention. I collected the Rover from the car park, and found the pagan centre quickly enough: a semi-detached house on the west edge of town. I checked the address and reread the hand-painted notice propped in the garden before creaking open the gate. Hardly inviting, I thought, ringing the bell and waiting several minutes until a slatternly woman opened the door. She wore a blouse buttoned up the wrong way, and no shoes.

'It's private', she said. 'Not open to the public.'

'I was hoping to have a word with Neville Barnes, if he's here.'

She hung on the door and looked at me. 'You a friend or something?'

'He knows me. Steven Whittaker.'

She went into the house, reappearing a few moments later. 'You'll have to wait.'

The door was shut, and I went to sit in the car. Several minutes went by, and then half an hour.

Barnes was being difficult, as he'd been on that first briefing at the dig.

'Those are the procedures,' I told him, 'which every helper has to follow. Everything, absolutely everything has to be documented. Call one of the supervisors the moment you find something.'

'I reckon I'd know more than he did what it was', said Barnes. 'It'd be pagan.'

'Likely to be a fragment of bone or pottery, though of course if it looks like wood, or there's some impression in the ground, you call someone immediately. Don't hack at it with the trowel.'

'But we'd know. It would be a communication with another soul.'

'Bits of the past don't speak to you across the centuries. You have to know what you're looking at.'

'That's what I mean. And you wouldn't.' He stared up, the strong neck bristling out of a check shirt.

'Just make sure everyone follows procedures.'

'You have the theories and long words, but you don't feel what it was like. You haven't been through the ceremonies.'

'He's right in a way', said Duffy when I mentioned Barnes's earlier behaviour. 'We don't know how our ancestors felt about themselves, or the landscape they lived in. You couldn't tell Shakespeare's thoughts by staring at some abbey ruins.'

'The dissolution of the monasteries was before his time.'

'You know what I mean. We build elaborate theories on a few shreds of evidence. Remember the iceman? We thought we knew how Neolithic man lived, and then a single find comes along to show we'd been talking nonsense.'

'There was a lot of debate. You should have come to the conferences.'

'I just think,' said Duffy, laying down his glasses and staring at me with those curiously flat eyes, 'that country dwellers have a better idea of how their ancestors lived than we do. Or they did

before modern farming methods with their big fields and fertilisers and computer programs.'

'You want us to go back to living in smoky hovels?'

'They had something we've lost, obviously', said Duffy, and pulled another card from the box.

Indeed I'd talked to Imogen about it on our midnight swim, when she stopped being playful. 'He was seeking the spirit of the place', she declared. 'Tell me not here, it needs no saying, what tune the enchantress plays, For she and I were long acquainted, and I knew all her ways.'

'I thought you took media studies.'

'English. Wasn't so bad, though I don't read it now. Penny does. You should talk to her. She's the romantic.'

'You decided to be the go-getter.'

'I am the go-getter, which you can't stop. I speak to your inner nature.'

'God help us.'

'Steven, do you know how short life is? Each day comes, and we don't do anything with it. More pointless repetition. And then it goes. It doesn't come back.'

'At least you try. You know what you want.'

'Do I?' She sat up and hung her arms about my neck. 'Only that you have to go out and take what you want. Life won't come to you.'

Her body was suddenly wanted, but I diverted my thoughts and said, 'But there are responsibilities to other people, aren't there?'

'Then maybe you shouldn't promise, not till you're sure. You know what I'm talking about, and it's not me like this, which wouldn't work.'

'I suppose not.'

'It would kill the enchanted state.'

'I'd like us to be friends, yes of course.'

'Steven, I'm trying to tell you something. I want life as much as you're attracted to me and my teasing and never being what you imagine. It's a sharp pain, an overwhelming and never-ending pain, and somehow I can't get there. I've tried

most things, more than you know, which maybe people hate me for. Not because of what I did, but because I had the courage to try, and didn't wrap up things in high-sounding words. Like you did with your Polish friend. Ever regret it?'

'No one got hurt, so I suppose not.'

'People did get hurt. Jill did, because you kept thinking how it should be.'

'It's different when you're married. There are shared interests to hold you together.'

'Then may I never get married, but live like a child of nature in the woods and have any man I please.'

'Better join Barnes's pagan circle.'

'Maybe I did.' She frowned. 'But they're primitives. You can be alive and intelligent, and not get tied down in stupid rituals. It's just exchanging one form of slavery for another.'

'Imogen Lawley, what is it you want?'

'I want you to give up your conformist ways, and live with Penny.'

'You I was talking about.'

'You might not make it, but at least you'd have tried. You'd have really, really tried.'

'Perhaps I don't have your damn-the-consequences attitude.'

'Then you wouldn't have come with me. Afraid you'll hurt Penny? You're hurting her all the time anyway', she continued, turning to smile lazily at me. 'Thinks you'll come over, but she's not sure. You don't know this, and I shouldn't tell you, but in the evening she goes up to the site, when there's no one else around, and wanders about, thinking the hill will give you over to her.'

'Doesn't seem rational behaviour.'

'Nor is yours. You're also losing control. You grow more absent-minded and distracted. You are not the blonde warrior any more.'

'Hardly surprising with all these vexations. You think I'm losing it? Seriously?'

'You will unless you do what nature is telling you.'

Perhaps it was true, and I was frowning, just as Imogen had frowned when I'd mentioned Barnes's

pagan circle. I remembered him in class: a slow-witted oaf of a boy to whom the captious Imogen was a terrible tease. And of course he'd been on that wretched school trip to Maiden Castle, and had seen Imogen in her flagrant nakedness. Perhaps he'd even taken up the pagan religion in the memory of that day, which Imogen understood and felt sorry for, though contrition was not in her character.

The door opened and the woman came down the path. She'd put shoes on, and rebuttoned the blouse. Barnes was unshaven, sitting with jeans and creased shirt in the centre of the living room, which showed various posters on the walls but was furnished only with bedrolls, some Japanese arrangement set in an open square. I sat opposite him as the woman dropped down and took his hand.

'You have to cross your legs', said Barnes. 'That's the correct position.'

'All right', I said, shifting uncomfortably. 'Is this your ritual area?'

He didn't answer but said, 'Jan, get some coffee.'

'So what do you want?' he said, the heavy jowls turning in my direction.

'Ned, I just thought we ought to have a chat before the meeting tonight. So we're all on the same wavelength.'

'What wavelength?'

'Edward Tennant has some grand scheme for Leyton Rings, which he's outlined to me. He says they'll be a place for the Pagan Historical Centre, but I'm not sure in what capacity.'

'There will, that's right.'

'Well, given that you don't enjoy a favourable press locally, it would help to know what's been talked about.'

'What's it to you?'

He was still sore from being thrown off the site. The woman came in with the coffees, which

she placed in front of us and sat down again. Barnes didn't take her hand.

'You can give me some idea, can't you? I have to say something this evening.'

'Jan,' he said, 'show him upstairs. He'd like that.'

'You sure?' said the woman, not getting to her feet. 'It's occult knowledge. Meant to be private.'

'Go on. Be an eye-opener for our capitalist lackey here.'

I followed the woman up the stairs, and found myself looking at an uncarpeted landing with shut bedroom doors.

The woman opened one. 'That's our lecture room', she said. I saw several chairs and a blackboard. There were drawings of the chakras and tantric positions.

'Pretty difficult, isn't it?'

'You have to practise. That was last week's lecture. There are over two hundred thousand pagans in Britain. Wouldn't think that, would you?'

'More of you than regular churchgoers.'

'We are the new religion. Anyway, this is for initiation', she said, showing me a bare room without furniture or pictures. 'You have to meditate here for a whole day. Then you can appreciate the rest.' We went out and she hesitated before opening a third door. 'I don't think you should see this, but if it's what Ned wants.' There was an explicit drawing in black on the floorboards. 'Shouldn't have that, I reckon', she said. 'It's sexist.'

'Certainly graphic.'

So were the photographs on the walls, of various ceremonies in the woods: a campfire and a circle of naked figures.'

'Looks mighty uncomfortable.'

'It's meant to be. You need to absorb the spirit of the place. The night air, the woods listening and the fire flaring up. You have to be there to understand.'

'That's not you, is it?' I said, nodding at a large photograph of a woman standing naked in front of the fire, surrounded by figures that prostrated

themselves before her, their hands stretched out in worship.

‘Ned says you know her.’

‘Imogen still come to the ceremonies?’

‘She only did that once. Why he keeps the photo. He had it enlarged.’

‘Is that what you want to do at Leyton Rings?’

‘It’s a magic site. You’d realize that if you went there.’

She gave me a knowing look, and we went downstairs. Barnes surveyed us with malignant satisfaction.

‘I was asking Jan if you were planning to hold ceremonies at Leyton Rings’, I said. ‘It’s a matter for the owners, of course, and anyone who’s organising things up there, but I’m speaking this evening, and may be asked.’

‘They can ask me. We’re all going, aren’t we, Jan?’ The woman gave him a wary smile and nodded her head. ‘So they just ask me’, he repeated.

'It's not as simple as that. Joel Martins wants to know the Pagan Historical Centre is part of the community. That people approve of what you'd be doing at Leyton.'

'What they don't know they can't complain about.'

'Ned, listen. There are all kinds of rumours, pretty salacious ones, and Martins has to think of his audience. You can see that, can't you?'

I was losing my patience when the woman said, 'Are they going to film us too?'

'Could do', I said. 'Or whatever is suitable, though audiences are fairly tolerant these days.'

The two exchanged glances, and the woman said, 'Well I mean I would. I don't mind standing in the altogether in front of the flames. But not the other part.'

'It's simulated now', said Barnes.

'All right, you two. I've got the picture.'

'But I got more than that', announced Barnes. 'Just so you know. You'd be really surprised, wouldn't he, Jan?'

'That was special. For initiates.'

'It's special all right.' He leered at me.

'If you want to boast of your conquests don't do it with me.' I was now angrier than ever. 'Look, you great lumbering Neanderthal, Imogen was just using you.'

Barnes frowned uncertainly. 'You shouldn't start calling me names.'

'Getting you to plant things on the site. Of course I know, but you've been a bloody nuisance.'

'Too right, I have, haven't I?'

'You're still the dull-witted oaf I taught twelve years ago. The one all the girls laughed at. Christ almighty, you haven't grown up at all.' I got to my feet as Barnes sat angrily mulling this over. 'I'll go before you start using your fists, which is what idiots of your mentality usually resort to.'

Jan caught up with me as I was opening the car door. 'I'm sorry,' she said, 'but Ned's got a crush on her. He doesn't mean anything.'

‘And I shouldn’t have lost my temper. Can’t you keep Ned muzzled this evening, or he’ll make an even bigger fool of himself?’

‘Maybe’, she said and bit her lip. ‘Listen. I’m not supposed to say this, but Ned’s not got it right.’

‘The ceremonies are never personal?’

‘That’s the first law.’

‘Jan, I’ve got nothing against Neville. He wasn’t a model pupil, but he probably wants to be like everyone else. Not a power thing with him, is it?’

‘He wants to make it with Imogen.’

‘Couldn’t you get him to destroy the photo?’

‘What about the others?’ She looked glumly at me, and then walked slowly back into the house.

Another wasted journey, I thought, which only increased my suspicions of Imogen, and gave no useful information at all. I had the greatest difficulty concentrating as one image and then another floated into my mind.

'Just tea, is it?' said the waitress.

'No. I'll have the . . . '

'Go on, spoil yourself. You were here earlier, weren't you?'

'Yes, the breakfast, I'll have the all-day breakfast.'

'Or anything else, Mr TV man.'

'No that's fine. I have to get back to the dig soon. Up at Leyton, though you probably haven't heard of it.'

'Meeting's tonight. Me and the hubby are going.'

'Well I hope it'll be worth it, whatever's decided. Plan's still vague of course.'

'Just you give it them, Dr Whittaker. We're all supporting you.'

Thank you, I told her, but only saw my latest imbecility going the rounds, behind which was Imogen's blackmail, which glowered distantly, the article she had written, or perhaps hadn't written.

It was difficult to feel I still had my faculties when I wandered round the site that afternoon. More beads were coming to light, and probably a whole necklace with its corroded fastening. But there was no skeleton, no neck vertebrae around which it should have been strung, though we took two hours to brush away the earth.

‘That is something, though, isn’t it, sir? It could be Saxon.’

‘Wouldn’t want to go public yet.’

‘Just thought you might be pleased.’

We had found something in place, not a stray bead from the top of the hill, but I was still light-headed. Imogen’s image festered, and the scene turned increasingly surreal.

A mirror emerged from the soil: black, fragile and corroded, but with the characteristic decoration. We stared at it, until I said, ‘All right, put the earth back, and then secure a covering over the top.’

‘Sir?’

'It's too late to do anything tonight. Just cover it up while we decide where to go now.'

'But it is Saxon. You are excited, aren't you, sir?'

I wasn't, only fearful that events were slipping out of control. Penny had believed in a burial and now we had it, perhaps not a queen, but a woman of high rank. A string of Saxon settlements was known along the coast, but this burial was high up in the Chalk hills, where Saxons did not go. It was overlooking the sea, as Penny had fancifully imagined, but everything was otherwise wrong. Was this an elaborate plant, a charade even more outrageous than Duffy's before?

But it couldn't be. I was excavating the mirror in situ, so perhaps it was the little sleep the previous night, or the photos at Barnes's place, that caused me to feel unsteady now. The helpers had looked at me strangely the whole afternoon, and seemed not to take my instructions seriously when I saw them off the site.

I walked back slowly from shutting the gate, and in my mind saw Penny's smiling face, and Imogen dancing in the flames before she was suddenly thrown to the ground, and then Jill in a remorseless tandem of legs and interlocked bodies. I ran along the crest of the hill, shouting at the sea-wind which buffeted my face, and then staggered down to the car, where the bonnet was cold and solid to the touch. Slowly I came to, more or less, and with growing unease motored down to Buckmayne, now darkening with the first shadows of evening.

Chapter Fourteen

I was surprised, walking into the Community Centre around seven that evening, to find so many townsfolk already in place. The car park was packed, and the hall filled up steadily as the minute hand of the clock ticked towards the twelve.

'You'd think they'd have better things to do on a Saturday evening', I said to Tennant when he joined me on the stage and we looked out at the twenty rows of seats arranged in two groups on either side of the hall.

'Not when the interests of the propertied classes are at stake.'

'Bit over the top, isn't it?'

'You reckon?' He nodded at the Countryside Association in their tight rows of unsmiling faces. 'Aubrey's done his job.'

On the other side were grouped Barnes and his cohorts, sprawling, drinking their beer, and jeering at the townsfolk who quietly took their seats. I looked for Jan's calming influence, but she was languishing on her own, towards the back of the hall.

'I guess your lot's not unprepared either.'

'Me?' said Tennant. 'I don't have a lot.'

'So where's Imogen?'

'She's in her professional capacity. Over there with some of the London press. Probably that man of hers, or his wife. The pack can always smell blood.'

'Which you had nothing to do with, not tipping them off or anything?'

He looked at me blandly. 'Could be writing their articles already. The Community Centre in the small Dorset town of Buckmayne was the

scene last night of an extraordinary confrontation between middle England and the agents for change. You know how it goes.'

'All hanging on your words.'

'I'm leaving the options open, saying nothing's been decided, and planning permission is years away, which will allow full consultation.'

'Aubrey will want more than that. Why he's called the meeting.'

'But you and I are not going to say anything, are we?'

'I don't know that's possible. Have to bring in the festival somehow.'

'Don't, old man. Don't say anything.'

'I gave Penny my word that I'd make a case for developing Leyton Rings. It's important to her.'

'And Imogen and I have put months of work into our scheme. We're not going to have it torn to pieces before it's even finished.'

'Then I can't see why we're having this meeting at all.'

'It's because you managed to stir up a hornet's nest. Newcomers versus the establishment. Barnes and the Lawleys and the likes of us against the old interests. Which the film's going to bring out.'

'Don't see the film crew here.'

'Martins has more sense, and I hope you have too.' He gave a bored glance at the vicar, who was now getting to his feet. 'Just wow them with the learned eloquence, that'll do it.'

'Ladies and gentlemen, if I may have your attention', began the Reverend Sandy Flourier, Buckmayne's popular and enterprising vicar. One of Barnes's lot slurped his beer noisily, and another threw a missile at the massed ranks opposite, but the hubbub gradually died down. 'Now I don't have to explain why this meeting has been called. Ever since Buckmayne has been thrust into the national spotlight by the investigations at Leyton Rings, there has been speculation about what is to happen to our local landmark. I hope we shall get some answers tonight.'

'Not from me, you won't', muttered Tennant, smoothing a lock of hair into place.

'We are particularly fortunate in having our distinguished local archaeologist with us, and I know he will be delighted to give us his thoughts.' All eyes turned in my direction. 'With of course that infectious eloquence that has made him a star of the small screen.'

'See what I mean?' said Tennant. He pursed his lips and settled into a bright vacuity of expression, as though his credit card at an expensive restaurant had again been inexplicably refused.

'But before I ask Dr Whittaker to speak, I'm going to call on representatives of local interests, the Countryside Association and civic business. From faraway Dorchester, that is.' There was a ripple of laughter, and Tennant nodded sleepily at the audience. 'So, without more ado, I shall ask Aubrey Jones to outline the concerns that I know many of you will have about our beloved countryside.'

Jones got to his feet, and opened in his blustering manner. 'Listen neighbours. I'm not going to waste words telling you what you already know. You have seen how our way of life has changed over the last decade or two. More cars, more visitors, more daily inconvenience. Not that we mind tourists. We are proud of our little town that does so well against the odds. Second again in Dorset's prettiest village contest. Known throughout the west country for its annual pageant. Soon to feature in a BBC film entitled Change and Continuity in the Community. These are real achievements, but they come at a great cost.'

I stopped listening, only waking up when Jones said in a thunderous roar, 'So now we have a new threat. Our beloved Leyton Rings, which looks down on us, a constant reminder of the Downs in which Buckmayne nestles so contentedly, is to be made the plaything of rampant commercialism.'

I looked at Tennant, who was staring at the floor.

'Yes, that is what we hear. A vast relandscaping venture is in progress that will change its character forever. Some of you will know the Eden Project in Cornwall, which brought novelty to the blighted industrial landscape of china clay quarries. Vast domes of glass, and an even vaster amphitheatre of parking spaces.'

Jones had been doing his homework, I realized, and recalled what Penny had said about the old lime working under Leyton Rings.

'But ours is not a blighted industrial landscape,' continued Jones, 'but a country of great beauty, celebrated in the novels of Thomas Hardy, John Cowper Powys, and many others. Who can look at the paintings of Paul Nash or Frances Hodgkins without breathing in the noble simplicity of our bare Chalk hills and clear streams.'

I remembered the paintings on the walls of the Jones's house, that rambling old coaching inn, and the books lining his wife's shelves.

'But that comes with responsibility,' he was saying, 'which is eternal vigilance. We must never surrender to the crude interests of those who simply want to make a fast buck.'

A jibe at Tennant, I thought, but its object was still staring at the floor, his eyes half closed. Jones wound up his speech with the need for careful thought, accountability to the community, and respect for the town's long-term interests. Flushed and determined, he sat down and was warmly applauded, even by several of Barnes's lot, until their leader leant over and punched one of the more vocal.

Interest now switched to Tennant, who got to his feet languidly and stared at the audience. 'Go on Eddie, give it to them', said one of the pagan zealots. Tennant smiled slightly and sniffed before remarking quietly, 'Faraway Dorchester, as our vicar has termed it.'

I looked along to Sainly Sandy but he was beaming excitedly at the audience, clearly enjoying the spectacle. Perhaps the feud had been forgotten.

'Yes, it must seem that way, though of course most of you go there to shop. Or to get your car fixed, though there is a good garage here in Buckmayne. Or go to the Dorchester library, with its better selection of books and videos.' He wrinkled his nose again and continued mildly. 'Then there are the seed merchants, the suppliers of farm machinery, the hospital, and more GP surgeries, in case you should want to keep affairs to yourself.'

I wondered what incident Tennant was referring to, but several of the farming community were smiling.

'Yes,' he continued, 'Dorchester is for business. Many of you gentlemen go to see your bank manager there, to extend your loan at some new and ruinous rate of interest.' He paused as some of Jones's people poked each other in the ribs.

'And some of you gentlemen call in to see me, because you know that farming is a business, and business requires you do your sums properly. Particularly if you're to get one of those grants which Whitehall does its best to withhold

through Byzantine procedures.’ There was a general guffaw at this, causing Barnes to look round and smile uncertainly.

‘And business is the word. It’s business that makes the town so neat and appealing. Many places have more natural advantages—Windborne or Abbotsbury—but Buckmayne has the leisure that comes with prosperity. It’s prosperity that ensures houses are properly painted and every garden can be looking its best. It’s sound business that allows everyone to contribute to the annual pageant, and gives people the money to support it. It’s even prosperity that makes the Black Swan such a popular rendezvous, and lets people pay their prices.’ He held up a hand. ‘Which are worth it, especially the mixed grill. I recommend it.’ There was more laughter, but Tennant was now rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

‘And I suppose,’ he went on, ‘we must admit Dorchester helps. If we were frank about it, we’d agree that visitors come to Dorchester first. They come because of its history and quaint streets, and museum and restaurants and Thomas Hardy

associations. From Dorchester they set out to explore Dorset, and find the wide range of amenities it offers. Historic buildings, beautiful beaches, theme parks and much else, as you know. They find Buckmayne because they stay in Dorchester, and they only stay in Dorchester because there is so much to do in the countryside around.'

It was clear now where Tennant was headed, but I wondered how he'd avoid the questions that were impatiently lining up on the faces below.

'Does that mean Dorchester calls the shots? No it doesn't. Does it mean that Dorchester's commercial interests will trample over those of the countryside? Of course they won't. Dorchester's interests are those of the countryside. It serves those interest, whether they're traditional farming or the tourist trade.'

This was hardly a revelation, and a general hum rose to drown his voice. He held his hand up, and defiantly tossed back that raven crest of hair.

'Shall I tell you a secret? We have been planning a project, a big project, for months now.'

The room was quiet again, and Tennant began to wander distractedly up and down the stage.

'But now I have to be careful', he said, stopping suddenly and turning to the audience. 'There are commercial interests involved. Not only national, but international interests, and I am sworn to secrecy.'

'Come on Eddie', said someone. 'Stop faffing about.'

'Very well. I shall tell you this. We are planning it now, very carefully. We have a team of consultants. We have prepared a detailed plan with artist's impressions. Not once or twice, but five times. Think of that. The cost and time involved, just to get it right.'

'We haven't heard about it', said Aubrey Jones.

'Indeed not', said the vicar, straightening his smile in happy anticipation.

'No', said Tennant. 'No one has. Why?' he added as more shouts came from the floor. 'Because we have to get it right, not only for the investors, but the planning authorities. We've been working on it for two years, and we haven't even reached the stage of submitting it to public scrutiny.'

'You've been working on Leyton Rings for two years?' shouted Jones. 'That's a turn up, isn't it, folks?' There was an answering murmur of support.

'No, this is not Leyton Rings. This is another project, which I'm not at liberty to name even.'

He smiled indulgently at the audience, which looked momentarily stunned.

'That's no good, Eddie', said an exasperated voice. 'We need to know about Leyton.'

'So do I,' said Tennant, 'before I can even present plans for planning permission, when of course everyone, and I do mean everyone, will have a chance to study the proposal carefully. Yes, that is the time to look critically at our plans. But,' he added, as the hubbub rose again, 'I can tell

you this. It won't be an Eden Project. Of course not. Who wants glass domes overlooking the town? Or some modern architectural horror? No, it will be something that everyone is happy with, which enhances the town's setting, and adds amenities in a way that draws on the countryside's ancient heritage.'

He sat down with a smile. 'Well, go on', came a voice from the hall. 'What?'

'No, that's all I can say. Please.'

He refused to be drawn further and the vicar got slowly to his feet. 'Well, I have to say that's not quite what we hoped for. Leyton seems more mysterious than ever. You can't even tell us about the rock festival?'

Tennant shook his head.

'Well then, we must turn to Dr Whittaker. Who had some plans at one time, I understand?'

I got to my feet warily. There was little I could safely say, though I had somehow to explain the festival, if only for Penny's sake. I decided to follow Jones's theme.

‘An ancient heritage. It is, isn’t it? Can there be a part of the world where so much natural beauty blurs into the timeless fabric of local events? The proud sweep of the Downs with their smooth contours and deeply incised valleys. The richness of our agricultural land with its fields and quietly meandering streams. Our hamlets and villages and towns with their warm-coloured stone and age-old simplicity.’

Perhaps I was overdoing the description, but no, they were following me.

‘And only a few miles away is the Jurassic coastline of multicoloured sandstones and clays, of craggy limestone cliffs and dazzling white expanses of Chalk. A world-heritage site, which no one wants to change. As our previous speakers have stressed, so correctly, this is our country, our heritage, what we have stewardship over.’

I paused to let the words sink in. There were a few puzzled looks, but these disappeared when I walked up to the edge of the platform.

'It's our country, and we have every reason to be proud of it. After all, it's what we've created for our needs while we respond to its needs for nurture and wise management. Each of us going about our everyday lives realizes that the land stays behind as the foundation to our short existences. We have our hopes and festivals, our pageants, marriages and burials within what has always supported us, as it did our parents, and their parents before them. We know, looking up at the bare slopes with their close-cropped turf, and aromatic smell of juniper and gorse, with the birds circling high above, that whatever our own griefs or abounding happiness on the days of high promise in early summer, or the melancholy of autumn days that retreat into absence and regret, that they are larger and more significant than any of us.'

I glanced over to the contingent from the Townswoman's Guild, but they sat with knitted concentration bordering on stupefaction. Barnes had his mouth open, and I could see Jan at the back of the hall looking at me in strange wonder.

'It has always been so', I continued. 'Those who've been kind enough to come on my history rambles will know that men before us thought of this area as a magical place. Stonehenge dates from 2800 BC, but well before that, another 5000 years earlier, Neolithic man marked off the area as somehow special. In what way we don't know. Or what strange rituals were conducted within the shadowy precincts of the structures he built.'

'Yes we do, chum', shouted Barnes. 'At least our centre does. They were pagan.' His crowd hooted and fell about laughing.

'Yes, they were pagan,' I continued once the hubbub had died down. 'Of course they were. Man was in tune with his natural feelings. Man at one with the landscape.'

'Too right', shouted one of Barnes's lot. 'Natural feelings. Come and indulge your feelings with us.' There was more laughter, and a beer-can sailed across the room.

'Can we have some order here?' said the vicar. 'Dr Whittaker is trying to explain, about the background to the Leyton festival, I imagine.'

'Rock, rock, rock', shouted the pagans.

'Outrageous', exclaimed Jones, who was on his feet and red in the face. 'Sit down the whole damn lot of you.'

'You sit down, you yellow-bellied buffoon', shouted Barnes.

I noticed the press pack was scribbling vigorously: a dull provincial meeting had suddenly become interesting.

'Right', I said firmly, when the pagan crowd had finally been settled. 'Let's leave magical practices for a moment.' Barnes's jeering annoyed me, and I remembered his references to Imogen that morning. She was not my responsibility, but that neat outline seemed sullied by his behaviour.

'Now let me tell you a secret.' I said suddenly, rather irrationally, though I couldn't think what else to say. 'Like many of you, I had a dream when young. A vision of what life would be. Of course I

should explain that I grew up in the suburbs of London, far away from any of this beauty. Imagine long streets of suburban sameness planned by an army of well-meaning bureaucrats but completely artificial. Nothing natural grew there. The local streams were diverted and flowed through high concrete channels, fenced off from small boys and would-be anglers. There were local factories that had fallen into disuse and stood rusting behind barbed wire or electrified fences, where the refuse heaps and the showers of broken glass became in summer a blaze with the crimson flowers of the rose-bay-willow-herb, and with all manner of tansies and pennywort and wayside weeds. Marvellous places because the land was regenerating itself, taking back from unthinking humans what had never belonged to them.'

That seemed hardly relevant, and there was a murmur of unrest that every teacher knows is impending trouble. I should speak more personally, stress that I was only putting into words what they had always felt.

'Why am I telling you this?' I exclaimed suddenly. 'To ask you, to beg you, never to take for granted this country of ours. Over that hill at sunset, or along that path half hidden in the trees, or at some lighted doorway we pass one evening in the car, there is something speaking to us. Who among you tonight has not felt this yearning to belong, this terrible, unrelenting urge to be united with something that will accept us as we are, whether that be some honest and unassuming man, or some woman whose quiet beauty will tell us our journeyings are at an end, and that we are rejoining our deeper natures. I too have known that and, here in Dorset, I have found what was always promised me, that a new life would begin.'

The audience were still following me, though I could see Jones motioning to one of his lieutenants, and Barnes hitting out to keep order in his group. Or perhaps I was only imagining the scene, as the audience was fading into the distance.

‘Indeed I had every reason to suppose it was true,’ a voice was saying, ‘and even years later, when the Metropolitan train would take me past the back-to-back houses of Harlesden, through the light industrial works of Wembley, and on into the leafy suburbs of Harrow, to get off at stations that only partially answered to my recollections, I would still expect, down some street opposite and after turning once or twice through the neat suburban thoroughfares, to find that cul-de-sac with the high fence and thick cluster of trees surrounding a house that was important to me.’

I went to stand next to the vicar, who stared up at me, his dark eyes fixed grimly in wire-framed spectacles.

‘And after each disappointment I would try with renewed anticipation, the first chance I had, and while it is true I did not find the house, or even the right suburb, I found bits of it, like the weeds and wild barley sprouting through the paving stones that spoke of a rural Middlesex buried but not dead beneath our new housing estate. I always understood why these unkempt oddments, these

leftovers from a larger heritage, were important to me, why I would sit for hours learning their names and habitats, dissecting them, pulling them apart as though they held some special instructions.'

The audience seemed far away now as I saw the scenes of childhood that had been suppressed all these years.

'We all of us know this because each of us has that person who stands guardian over our castles of happiness. Even Neville Barnes here and his pagans who see in Imogen Lawley their disrobed symbol of womanhood find themselves at the gates of a true paradise, which is not of the future, but a memory of what they have lost. Let them leap through the flames, and howl at her resplendent nakedness, but no gross sexual act will possess her because her body is woven of myth and ritual that everyday events cannot fill.'

Perhaps this was some remove from the festival I had promised Penny she should have, but Tennant was looking at me in open admiration, as far as I could tell through the shifting scene of impressions.

'What ritual, you ask? Surely it is through dance that we surrender ourselves to what is elemental and continuing. Of course there will be a rock concert at Leyton Rings. Possibly it will be a small affair. No doubt it should be a small affair, as each one in dance lives in his own private communion with the music. But for the young it will be a liberation.'

There was a shout from below, and I saw Barnes's group had taken over. Round and round they danced, and some were removing their shirts. The good folk of Buckmayne had retreated to the corners of the room, and stared bewildered as I soldiered on, not feeling too steady.

'Yes, for a few short hours one evening the young will be able to shed their dull routines and enter into rapturous communion with what man has always known to be his primal heritage. Don't all of us here tonight know that what we call wisdom is timidity, disappointment, a shrinking from our fuller natures? Surely passion is healthy, being the parent of all our virtues.'

I felt distinctly unwell, and heard the press jabbering excitedly into their mobiles.

'Look at this landscape we have in our safe keeping. All around it offers the evidence of a mythic innocence, and we take pictures or write academic papers. What is the point of that, I ask you? Life has to be lived, to be experienced in its overwhelming bodily closeness. Speak plainly to your neighbour. Reach out for that common humanity that officialdom would legislate out of existence.'

At this the scene finally tilted over, and there were faces looking down at me. Perhaps my words were a little indistinct, but I said as hands laid me out, 'Let me continue. I was destined to tell you this. All of us at heart are country folk, creatures of the sun and rain. What is buried up at Leyton Rings is part of our common heritage, our instinctive need for giving and community, of living beyond the stifling sense of personal achievement.'

The ceiling spun round, and lengthened into a sleepy procession as I felt my body being carried, followed by a heavy slam of car doors, and no

doubt other things which trailed after me like tin cans on the bridal car, only there would not now be a wedding, or perhaps any celebration, only a drifting over into a noisy sleep. I sat up in the ambulance, but the doors stared back at me. 'Just relax', said a voice, and then the numbness took over.

Chapter Fifteen

I was some time coming to my senses, but the apparition steadied into Jill, who seemed less than her professional self. She stood by the bed as I opened one eye and then the other.

‘Steven, that’s enough. The doctors say you’ve had a mild sedative. You can perfectly well understand what I’m saying.’

Perhaps it wasn’t a dream at all. ‘Could you read it again?’ I said.

‘You read it’, she said in controlled exasperation and held the newspaper out.

‘Right’, I said. ‘It’s this one, is it? “Pupil-Teacher Relationships: The Need for Greater Vigilance.”’

‘Just read it, would you?’

I cast my eye down the three columns of newsprint. ‘A case in point concerns a teacher who has become a TV personality. Parents complained that young girls in his care were encouraged to strip off and display themselves in an unseemly manner on a field trip to Maiden Castle. Steven Whittaker maintained that he simply lost control of the class, but his fellow teachers were clearly unhappy with the explanation, and Whittaker was quietly moved to another school. “This is entirely unacceptable”, said one mother, whom I contacted during my research. “M. was traumatized by the event, and even now, twelve years later, has psychological difficulties that have retarded her development into a normal, healthy woman.”’

‘If that’s Monica Selsdon,’ I said, ‘the reason she has man problems is because she’s an unlovely lump of a girl. Nothing to do with the field trip.’

‘Are you living in the real world at all? Have you any idea what this article means?’

‘Won’t help the film much, I agree.’

‘Isn’t that exactly like you? The first person you think of is yourself.’

‘You knew about the trip. I told you at the time.’

‘And I’ve been trying to forget it ever since. To hope I’m not married to a paedophile, or perverted prankster.’

‘It was just one troublesome girl who managed to incite the others to misbehave. That’s teenagers.’

‘Sue the newspaper then.’

‘I will if there’s anything libellous.’ I skimmed through the article again. ‘No. She’s put a spin on events, but the facts are about right.’

‘You’ve been seeing Imogen Lawley again, and now she’s spilled the beans.’

‘Calm down, Jill. I’ve met Imogen a few times recently over the film.’

‘You had a sordid little affair with an ex-pupil, which went wrong, and now she’s getting her own back. How can you be so crassly discourteous to me? After all I’ve done for you, turned a blind eye

to Penny, now your affair with the sister's going to be headline news round the county.'

'That's absurd. You're not in your right mind saying such things.'

'Do you know what this place is? You've been sectioned.'

'Can't be.'

'You haven't read the accounts of the Buckmayne meeting, have you? I have a demanding position in one of the better hospitals in the country, and you wilfully and deliberately jeopardize all I've achieved. I've already had reporters come up to me in the hospital, did you know that?'

'It'll blow over.'

'My parents have had to take Megan. I'd be surprised if reporters don't go up there too. They're certainly camped outside our place.'

'Maybe I shouldn't have spoken at the meeting.'

'Then why did you? I asked you not to associate with the undesirables of Buckmayne, but you went off and did exactly that. Why,

Steven? Why have you been so recklessly opposed to everything I've asked of you?'

'You don't know if they've found anything more at Leyton, do you?'

'Haven't you been listening? It's our marriage I've here to talk about, and you're still worried about this ridiculous archaeological nonsense.'

'Just wondering.'

'Steven, I'm not going to waste any more time. I'm telling you now I'm suing for divorce. I'm taking the house, and you can do your belated best to support Megan. You'll be hearing from the solicitors shortly.'

'I'm damned if I'm supporting some brat that isn't mine.'

'Isn't she? Try to blacken my name if you like, but it won't work. I shall find out who's been spreading these lies, and I shall sue. This time you're not going to slide out of your responsibilities.'

Unusually for Jill, she was speaking vehemently, and a nurse came in to intervene. 'I think the patient should get some rest now.'

'I'm going. But if I hear any more of these wild assertions they'll be a court order. And you'll pay full damages, supposing you've got anything left after this.'

'Mrs Whittaker, I must ask you to let the patient have some quiet.'

'Contest the divorce settlement, and you'll be destitute. Just remember that.'

She stormed out, and the nurse gave me a tranquilliser, which I swallowed after some protest. It was evening when I woke to find Duffy was sitting at the bedside.

'Can't see what's so funny', I said. 'Just when we're turning up something interesting, I get incarcerated in here.'

'Been overdoing it a bit, I'm thinking. But you'll get some proper rest now.'

'I want to get back to the site. Unless Imogen's taken over that too.'

'Ah yes, the article. Bit naughty of her.'

'Don't ah yes me. Whatever got into her? I didn't block the festival. On the contrary, I made a strong case for it.'

'Disrobed symbols of womanhood. Imogen dancing naked at witch's covens. Wasn't too helpful.'

'Did I say that?'

'Penny's barricaded in at the farm. Jill has visited the solicitors, and it's just as well you're staying here at present.'

'Perhaps I'll move in with Imogen. She started all this.'

'Imogen is not too happy either. Spitting fire is the phrase, I think.'

'Something took over. But if I didn't know what I was saying, Imogen certainly did when she wrote that piece.'

'Couldn't you say you were delirious, and issue a retraction?'

'Why should I?'

'To get your career back. I had a call from a colleague of yours last night. Thinks Hampton's packing you off to York.'

'Who's going to look after Leyton?'

'It'll be the great man himself, with the help of the British Museum. I was with them this morning, and it's amazing what's coming to light.'

'Can they do that, just take over?'

'If the landowners agree, of course they can. Imogen is doing what Melissa wants, and I wouldn't try to talk to her today. Her newspaper's sent her off on assignment, and even I don't know where she's gone.' Duffy shook his head. 'But there would be one possibility. You could talk to Neville Barnes.'

'Whatever for?'

'He's holding out for an exclusive. Would you think he's got something damaging on Imogen?'

'Yes.'

'Now is not the time to be playing games.'

'Thinks Imogen used him. That's what I told him, frankly.'

'So it's goodbye to the film, your career, Imogen's prospects, the whole Leyton Rings hoopla.' Duffy said nothing for a while, and sat polishing his glasses. 'So what will you be doing now?' he said when he was his impish self again. 'Still opting for an academic career, or will you swing your lot in with us?'

'Any guarantee I'd get the York posting?'

'If Joel Martins can offer a film part to Miles Hampton, then maybe something could be sorted out.'

'But I'd not be the film presenter. Imogen would have won.'

'She's already won.'

'Supposing she can keep Ned from talking, and persuade Joel Martins to continue with this bunch of misfits', I said.

'He's got too much invested to want to pull out now. But you'd have to reach some settlement with Jill, and make yourself plain to Penny. You weren't hoping to take her up to York, were you?'

'Not really.'

'You could try, but I don't think it's fair to ask her. You'll need her and Imogen to get your house back.'

'You think I could stay out at Leyton?'

'Whatever for, laddo? Be a terrific red rag to Jill and Hampton and the whole farming community.'

'Do I have to decide right now?'

'Penny's entitled to know you've chosen her, rather than dodged into safety.'

'It was all done for her.'

'The message will be delivered, but I'd not be counting on too much from that quarter at present.'

'I put her case at the meeting.'

'Going on about Imogen? There's a limit to sisterly affection.'

Duffy left me to my thoughts, and two days later came a visit from Martins, who appeared with a smartly dressed Imogen.

'How's the patient?' he said jovially as Imogen looked on with distant coolness.

'Hope to be out shortly.'

'Good, my dear boy. Now I've just dropped in to explain what we're doing at Leyton. You remember we were coming back to see if more beads had been found. And of course they have. It's an important find, I understand.'

'Could be, Joel. I certainly hope so.'

'The academic caution. Quite right. But since you're laid up for a while, and viewers need a close-up of the necklace and now the other finds, I thought we should ask Imogen to introduce the piece.'

Imogen was looking at me carefully, but I did my honest best to smile. 'Of course, Joel', I said.

'Fine, fine. And we'll ask one of your assistants to talk us through the actual discovery.'

'They've worked very hard up there. Entitled to some recognition.'

'Splendid, my dear boy. That's why we came really.' He waited. Imogen was unfathomable.

'Yes, I was going to say something about Imogen's presentation the other day. I thought she

did very well. Intelligent questions and good screen presence.'

'We'll have to reshoot some sections, but that might be worth thinking about for some of the other instalments. Nothing's decided yet, and we have an agreement of course.'

Martins was clearly uncomfortable and Imogen was gazing into the distance, but it had to be done. 'What I was thinking,' I said, 'is that perhaps Imogen should do all the presentations. I'd like to be involved, especially for Leyton, and perhaps if you do one on Avebury and Silbury Hill, but more as the resident expert.'

'Not the presenter, you're saying, my boy? That would be most generous, though we'd have to alter the contract. You'd be happy with that?'

'With something reasonable. Archaeology should be made attractive, and adding some glamour in the form of Imogen I'm sure wouldn't hurt.'

Imogen opened her eyes and frowned.

'Thank you, my dear boy. We'll be in touch. I think that's it.'

'Mr Martins, I'll join you in a moment', said Imogen. 'There's something I'd like to talk to Steven about.'

'Talk to him. Right. I'll see you in the lobby. We'd better go through the press cordon together.'

He walked out, and Imogen sat on the bedside chair.

'Do I have to make it obvious?' I said. 'You won.'

'Supposing Ned doesn't shoot his mouth off. And Martins can take the heat. And a dozen other disasters. Steven, I told you this would happen and you just carried on.'

'I'm sorry if it's caused problems in London.'

'It's caused problems everywhere. And why, Steven? Why did you have to say all those stupid things at the meeting?'

'Because Red Ned wound me up, and the words came welling out. Until I keeled over.'

'I know what happened, though I didn't know where to look. Why do you hate me so much?'

'I don't at all. I was jealous. I thought of you with Ned, and the lights went out.'

'What's it to you?'

'Nothing. I kept telling myself that, but something took over.'

She stared at me and then sat on the bed. 'Was I such a tease that you had to go off the rails like that?'

'Ned didn't help. Are the photos bad, the other ones?'

Imogen showed her teeth. 'Horrible. His girlfriend's destroyed them, so he doesn't keep thinking about me.'

'You're not a threat to Jan, are you?'

'I'm not a threat to anyone. Except you, at one time.' She pulled a face. 'Listen, I'll do what I can, but you've been a real pain.'

'Friends at last?'

'Is that what friends do? Say what you did at the meeting?'

'Or publish the article?'

'I told you I would.'

'But not if you cared, not as I honestly care for you.'

We looked at each other, appalled, but Imogen was the first to turn away. 'That's handy, Steven. Really handy.'

'Just forget it.'

She got up and walked across to the window. 'So what do we do now?' She came over and sat on the bed again. 'What do we do now?'

'Imogen dearest, I don't know.'

I felt my mouth open, and a constriction in the throat. When the tears came, I glanced down to see the small hand squeeze mine, for a instant, and then withdraw itself. Afterwards I gazed at the ceiling, perhaps for the whole afternoon, and then ate my dinner as a good little boy, the nurse said, smiling to see a change in the patient.

I was discharged a week later and went back to my flat, now thankfully free of reporters. David Farley's address I got from the phone book, and drove round one evening, finding him at work in front of the house. 'Have we met?' he said, looking up from the weeding.

'I'm Jill's deranged husband.'

'So you are. You haven't brought a loaded shotgun? You'd better come through.'

I wish I could say the man was a loathsome specimen of humanity, but of course he was only frank and sensible. Beers were opened, and he sat listening as I explained my position.

'So what are you proposing?' he said.

'That you talk some sense into Jill. Agree to something reasonable.'

'All right.' When I stared at him, he said, 'Steven, how is a long and messy divorce going to help? As you can see, we don't need the money, but for the sake of fairness you should split the house in the ratio of what the parties have put in. As for Megan's maintenance, I'd

happily accept her as my own. She's difficult, but I've grown fond of her.'

'Is that it?'

'Unless there's something else? A divorce takes time to come through, but if it's not contested it shouldn't be more than a year.'

'You'll talk to Jill?'

'And you'll come round again? We should be friends, at least for Jill's sake.' He saw me to the door. 'Drive carefully. You're probably at the limit now.'

The elation died down when I got to the flat. Without a moment's thought I had wiped out twelve years of my life, for prospects that were doubtful at best. On impulse I phoned Stacey, who didn't lift my spirits.

'You know your own mind, but it seems a pity.'

'Brian, I'm asking about my position at the college. Have you seen next year's timetable? Am I on it?'

'Well, frankly, you're not. We had a faculty meeting yesterday, and Hampton is not extending your tenure.'

'Packing me off to York?'

'I asked about that, but it seems York is off too.'

'He's firing me?'

'There was that spoof paper, and now the newspaper articles. An appeal wouldn't work, not in the present circumstances, though of course you'd be very welcome in the staff coffee room.'

'Anyone stick up for me at the meeting?'

'Even I couldn't. The last week was too much.'

'Good luck with the new term.'

'Steven, why on earth didn't you take my advice, and stick to the academic side?'

'I told you.'

'Well, if we can help in any way . . .'

'Don't worry, I'll land on my feet.'

How exactly wasn't clear when I replaced the phone and thought again of what couldn't be avoided.

'Penny,' I said at last, 'it's Steven.' There was no reply, and I realized my hand wasn't steady. 'Steven', I repeated.

'I know.'

'Can we talk?'

'About what?' The voice had none of its usual softness.

'I know I've been a fool, and I'm sorry.'

'The fool has been me.'

'But surely there's something we can talk about.'

'Apart from Imogen?'

'Penny, I haven't forgotten our night', I said, noticing my hand was trembling again. 'I may be difficult, but no one's ever accused me of not fighting my corner.'

There was a long pause. 'Maybe there's something you can do.' Another silence followed,

before she said, 'If you're going up to the site tomorrow?'

'All day.'

'I'll come up in the evening, after I've cooked dinner. About eight.'

'They've installed floodlights there now.'

'Just after eight, Steven.'

It was only after I put the receiver down that I remembered we were filming the following morning, and I would see Imogen again, and have an even more difficult visit from Hampton, who bumbled about the site and annoyed everyone. I thought of changing the meeting, but didn't feel up to another conversation.

'Everything all right?' said Martins the following lunchtime. 'With the Lawley girls, I mean.'

'Why wouldn't they be?'

'I hope so, my dear boy, because the chemistry does show, and you were a little stiff with Imogen this morning, I thought.'

'It's not my dig any more, so perhaps it's difficult to find the old enthusiasm.'

'And you didn't go down to the farm for lunch.'

'It's that wretched talk I gave in Buckmayne. I said a few words out of turn.'

'But you will sort it out, won't you?' He patted my hand and added, 'Because we must have a happy ship. I'm sure you see that.'

I was not in good spirits afterwards, and didn't object when one of the Museum staff gave the summary of the day's finds. Imogen was perfect: leading him on, filling out the staccato comments, giving her winning smile to the camera. To my mind, the comparisons with Sutton Hoo were unnecessary, but there had now been a shield unearthed, and a tantalising glimpse of gold in one of the jewellery caches. I should have been delighted, but wasn't, and even Phil gave up trying to jolly me along.

Penny arrived on time, in jeans and pink blouse, which brought the usual wolf whistles.

She smiled and went over to talk to Imogen, and then with Martins, probably to check catering needs.

‘Aren’t you going over?’ said a familiar voice. ‘She won’t hang around for ever.’

‘It’s been arranged.’

‘I know that,’ said Imogen and gave me a push. ‘And we’ve worked something out. The girls are going to share you.’

‘What?’

‘Professionally speaking. But seeing you phoned Penny and not me, little Imogen is going to take a backseat.’ She gave a hang-dog look and took my arm. ‘Steven, it’s all right. I haven’t said anything to Penny.’

‘Don’t think you have to.’

‘As for wandering around like Hamlet’s ghost, everybody thinks it’s the medication. Just keep taking the pills, and they won’t mind.’

‘They do. Martins was clear about getting on better with you.’

‘You won’t have to worry soon. After this shoot I shall be in London. Out of your hair.’

'You've found someone else?'

'That is most uncalled for. I'm surprised at you, Steven Whittaker. I expected better.'

'I'm not quite myself at present.'

'Then perhaps the Lawleys can put Humpty-Dumpty back together again. Stranger things have happened. Come along.'

'I'm not going to see you again?'

'You're going to talk matters through with Penny. If, after that, you still want to see me, then Penny has the address. But you try with Penny first. You really try, Steven.'

'If she wants me to.'

'He's made a promise, hasn't he?' she said to Penny, who had now joined us. 'Faithfully and fully.'

Penny didn't smile but said quietly, 'Shall we go up on to the top, out of the mess they're making?'

'It's all needed, now the big boys have taken over.'

'I want you to do something for me.'

'But you were right. It is a Saxon queen, or some high notable.'

'Steven, listen. I don't want to hear about the talk, and what you meant or didn't mean. Or what you feel for Imogen, or are going to do about Jill.'

'Good news there. I'm going to get half the house, which can go towards the project. As we talked about.'

'I didn't give you the full story of dad's accident. For obvious reasons, but things have taken a difficult turn.'

'Quite able to do my sums.'

'Will you just listen? It's about Imogen and Neville Barnes.'

'Penny, it's been sorted. Anything incriminating has been destroyed.'

'Which is why Ned is running about like a mad bull. The photos were important to him.'

'Nothing he can do now.'

'There is, Steven. There most certainly is.' She took my hands and those blue eyes stared into mine, though they were shadowed and uneasy. 'I

didn't say who had arranged to meet dad that evening. Who led him on, got him plastered with cheap booze and then ran him down. Are you following me?'

'Should you be telling me this?'

'Unfortunately, Imogen couldn't keep her mouth shut, and had to say something to Neville Barnes.'

'That was Ned's hold on her?'

'Why he planted those finds on the site. To tie her in further.'

'That's not what Imogen said.' I frowned, not making sense of the new twist.

'Which is why Imogen made a play for you. I'm not saying she didn't have a crush on you, or she doesn't now, but what she really wanted was protection, a father-figure who would deal with Barnes.'

'That's nice to know.'

'But you can warn him off. Tell him you'll report him to the police for planting evidence.'

That Imogen will say I was nowhere in the area, or that she didn't want me abused.'

'You should have told me', I said quietly, after a pause.'

'Just go as a friend, and say you can get Imogen to drop charges if he takes himself off. Leaves the county, joins the army or something.'

'And if Barnes doesn't oblige I have to perjure myself?'

'I told you at the restaurant that life with me would not be easy. You'd have to do things you didn't like, far more than with Jill.'

'There was the idiotic talk at Buckmayne, and of course I've lost any academic standing, so perhaps there isn't much to lose.'

'You have me for a start. A career to give up, and Imogen, and everything else that once made sense. Is that what you're prepared to do?'

'Expect so.'

'Today, starting with Barnes and Imogen.'

'I'm not to see Imogen again?'

‘Are you prepared to do that? That’s what I’m asking. If not, I understand, but the land of enchantment is closed. You’ll not get another chance.’

Chapter Sixteen

'Why not?' I said to Imogen the following evening as we sat high above the sea. The wind battered our faces, and tore at the gorse bushes round us on the narrow track.

'We'd only end up hurting each other', she said, moving more into the shelter from the old Rover.

'I'd never hurt you, Imogen. I couldn't imagine doing that.'

'We'd be very violent with each other. If you can't feel that, then you haven't fallen for me. Besides, little Imogen knows how she is.'

'A child of nature, as I remember it.'

She rolled over, and propped her chin on her hands. 'Listen, suppose you did come to London, shared a flat with me? You don't have a job, and I'd be away most of the time.'

'I could get some teaching position. Not glamorous, but enough to keep us going.'

'You'd hate it. Long hours on the train, cooped up in some dingy part of London, with only the television for company.'

'You wouldn't be out all the time. At least we'd have the nights together.'

'You'd never be sure. It's the job, and how I'd want to be. Imogen is not promiscuous, but she is scheming and ambitious. You couldn't cope with that, and I wouldn't want you to.'

'Then why are we here?'

'You invited me, remember.' She lifted her head to examine her fingernails. 'To talk about Penny, or some excuse.'

'We should have got a quick drink at the local, your sister be damned.'

'It's more private, up on the Downs above Abbotsbury here.'

'It's Bexington.'

'Don't be pedantic. It's a beautiful evening, and we should be happy.'

'I am.'

'You're the most miserable celebrant I've ever seen. Here you have a pretty girl pouring her heart out to you on a magnificent summer evening, and you keep wanting things that can't happen. I told you, if Penny wants you to read the riot act to Neville Barnes, that's what you have to do. It's a modest fee.'

'But it doesn't make any sense.'

'Me, if I were a man, I'd love to sink into Dorset with Penny. She's a true countrywoman. She knows what the weather will be just from how the curtains hang in the room, and she'd wake in the middle of the night if a fox got into the chickens. If you want a bond to the land, Penny is the one to go for.'

'That's all very high-minded of you, Imogen, but I don't see why I have to warn off Barnes. I wouldn't want to make his life difficult unless I were sure.'

'Well don't. Just tell Penny you've given Barnes a stiff lecture, and she'll be happy.'

'That's not answering the question. How can Barnes make demands if you're not going to be here?'

'He isn't.'

'He saw your editor.'

'Barnes can't string two words together. No one's going to be interested anyway. Buckmayne got two day's coverage in the national press, and that's all. Look,' she continued, 'doesn't it seem like one of those summer storms when you were little? Vivid lightning, things lit up in electrifying sharpness, torrents of rain. Then it passes. In the morning everything is revived and natural.'

'You're talking about us?'

'The dig, the silly photos, and your troubles with Jill. Just a moment of madness, which passes.'

'That's a bit cavalier, isn't it? Barnes has been blackmailing you for years.'

'Of course he hasn't. Do you think I can't handle the oaf?'

'Imogen, you're not facing up to life.'

'And you're mad, or on the edge of madness.'

'Me?'

'Just think a moment. Can you really imagine me talking about something that didn't happen? Or Barnes keeping his mouth shut at the inquest? Just snap out of it. I know the fumes of passion drive men mad, especially Penny's, but you might ask yourself a few questions. Penny wasn't there. She was in Dorchester, all day.'

I stared at her.

'Oh I see. You think I'm playing games. Steven, I'm fond of Penny. She's the nicest in the whole family, but she's dotty sometimes. She makes things up. Whether deliberately I don't know, but things she talks about haven't actually happened.'

'She was right about the Saxon burial.'

'And she's right about you. If you'd just forget about me, and the career and Jill and God knows how many other false starts in life, you could be very happy with Penny. She'd do anything for you. She's warm and loving. And sleeping with her, I should have thought, was as close to paradise as we poor mortals get.'

'Something like that.'

'Then why go after me? Penny offers happiness, and that I'll never give.'

'You're too hard on yourself. I have been extraordinarily happy with you.'

'And I've loved having your company, Steven, and I hope I always will. But that's not what we're talking about. It's Penny, who lives in her own world.'

'Perhaps you would, if you'd been abused by your father.'

'Penny wasn't abused. And even Melissa we're not sure about. I told you how my stepfather was killed.'

'Not the full picture.'

'The truth is that no one knows. Probably a hit-and-run, or not even that. But given Robert Lawley's philandering ways, folk were delighted to think the worst.'

'So why Penny's demand I warn off Barnes?'

'How do I know? You will always have that with her, though she doesn't mean any harm.'

'Perhaps that's one murder we can remove from her list of crimes.' When Imogen frowned, I added, 'Told me she drove her husband to kill himself. He beat her up when she couldn't love him enough, and then went out and drowned himself.'

'Ever meet Richard Dawton?'

'I saw the wedding photos in the local paper.'

'Then you'd have known he couldn't have laid a finger on her. Richard had masses of friends. Everyone adored him. He was the only man I've met you could actually call dashing. The trouble was Penny. I like entertaining, but Melissa doesn't, and Penny is hopeless. The Dawtons had heaps of money, which meant people for

dinner, couples staying the weekend. Socialites talking about their yachts and Cannes holidays and Eton chums. She was completely lost.'

'Then why marry him?'

'She hoped someone else might do the decent thing.'

'Penny was seeing him when I knew her?'

'On and off. She didn't tell you because she didn't want to exert any pressure. When Jill came down I kept telling her to make her feelings known, but she wouldn't. Then you married Jill. I've never seen anyone so sad in all my life. She mooned about the farm, and sat on the hill for hours. Even I couldn't talk to her. Afterwards she married Richard, who looked after her. He really looked after Penny, couldn't do enough for her, until he had the heart attack.'

'Which wasn't when he was swimming?'

'But he didn't drown. Richard died in the ambulance taking him to hospital. If you don't believe me you can look up the coroner's report.'

'Are you saying Penny's a liar?'

'If you care for her, look after her, keep her out of harm. That's what Richard would have done.'

'She doesn't seem to have enjoyed the experience.'

'Hasn't it occurred to you that maybe she's making life easy for you? She plays the dumb blonde, the rural deity who knows nothing of the world outside the parish, but she's actually quite sophisticated. She dresses better than I do, and she usually comes out with just the right words. Phil thinks the world of her, and so does everyone else in town. She just doesn't like mixing with people who aren't sensitive to what she's at home with. Richard thought she'd blossom out in time, but she withdrew, just as she used to when a child, up on the hill with a book or imaginary friend. Sort of people you mix with.'

'I do not.'

'She's not quite in the real world, and you most certainly are not.'

'That's uncalled for.'

'Penny is a wonderful creature. If Richard could have built a house for her at Leyton, and respected her privacy more, they would have made the most glamorous couple in the county. But he had a business to run, and that means associating with folk who don't understand us.'

'You should go into the public relations business.'

'I was, if you remember, with Eddie.'

'Did you know he's got a look-alike for secretary? Your style anyway.'

'Trish is all right. We laugh about Eddie.'

'Poor man.'

'He can look after himself. I may take up with him again.'

'You wouldn't.'

'Eddie won't come to harm. He's much too self-centred to suffer any troubles of the heart.'

'Nothing to do with me. You're right.'

Imogen took my hand. 'You're going to have to be much more discreet and understanding, since

you'll see a lot of us if the Leyton venture goes ahead. Martins has landed me some more interviews, but I'm also involved in Leyton, as you are.'

'I'm just a looker-on. Hampton bumbles about importantly, and the BM people smile at him and continue in their soulless way. The only joy are the schoolchildren, who keep asking questions any teacher would see a mile off, but our academics find fearfully vexing. They don't like using simple words.'

'They should do. Leyton's future lies with the public, not with their dusty reports and whatever career advancement they can get from the material.'

'Try telling academics that.'

'You could.'

'Not a chance. I wouldn't say Hampton gloats. In fact he's bearable most of the time, in that hand-flapping, ineffectual way. But he does know he's exercising overall authority. My only consolation is that I get to call him Christopher,

which he absolutely hates. Now the others do as well.'

'Let them. It's our land, and the work goes ahead with our permission.'

'Not really. Even Phil minds his ps and qs with the London lot. Amazing the equipment they've installed, and the security. It's the best funded dig in the country. Probably in Europe. You should see some of the stuff coming out.'

'Which is why we're going to make you Project Director.'

'The BM would never wear that. It's their baby now.'

'The gold is treasure trove, but the other was found on our land, and belongs to us.'

'Technically, maybe, but they're talking about displays in London. Not even Dorchester. It's that important.'

'Tell them they can't. We'll build a museum here. The best in the country.'

‘What with? It would cost millions to build a proper display centre, not to mention planning permission.’

‘That’s what Eddie’s working on. He’s got the funding. Not much locally, but eight million from Scandinavia so far. It’s their history, and they’re really excited. What we need is someone with the right qualifications to talk to everyone on a professional level. You can. They’d have to deal with you, as would London.’

‘Shouldn’t think my credibility stands for much now.’

‘You’ve become a local hero. Especially after we issue a retraction tomorrow, or the day after. A full, grovelling apology, courtesy of yours truly. You don’t know how much humble pie I’m going to have to eat over that, especially with the parents involved.’

‘Well, thank you, Imogen, though I suppose it’s conditional on joining the project, and looking after Penny. If she wants me to.’

'We can overrule her, but it's better you go and see her yourself. Tell her you've fixed the Barnes problem. That there's nothing between us. You'll get a long account of my immaturity and unwillingness to take risks.'

'No one could say that.'

'Imogen has never held a relationship together, never been in love.'

'That's not true.'

'It is true. I won't risk it with you, and you're the only person I've really cared for.'

'There was that man in London.'

'So there was.' She laughed. 'I must have forgotten him. Look at me, Steven. I'm trouble. Little Imogen is going to be bad news all over the country.'

'I hope not.'

'That's because you care, and will always care. Which is why I'm not going to get involved with you. We can stay kissing cousins.'

'That won't be music to Penny's ears.'

'Better than stepsister-in-law, or whatever the word is.'

'I'm not following you.'

'Steven, I'm telling you it ends here, this madness of summer, or whatever you call it. I shall always be fond of you, but we're going to be real friends from now on.'

'Aren't we already?'

'You're not hearing me. I'm asking you to kiss me. For the first time and the last time.'

'Here?'

'It's very simple. You take me in your arms, and kiss my eyes shut, and then you kiss me on the mouth properly. That's all. Just a kiss, but I give you one back that you will never forget. Little Imogen promises. That's what she wants. To be remembered by someone she was very fond of, and thought about for years, imagined giving herself to, but in the end didn't. Don't you understand? I want you to remember me for ever and ever, just as I was, one summer evening, when we were both young

and in love with the world. Then I'll probably have to drive.'

'Must we leave it like that?'

'Ready?'

I wasn't ready, and she didn't drive back, but the kiss I did remember, and perhaps will always remember. Nothing in what followed, when I spent more time at Leyton and began looking after Penny, came to soften its painful exhilaration, and perhaps even when lost in a body that became increasingly dear to me, I could still feel that small breath drawing out the spirit or whatever we call our most poignant and guarded feelings.

Chapter Seventeen

I saw little of Imogen in the weeks following. Eddie brought potential investors to the site, Penny was busy catering, and I was often up in London, talking to British Museum officials who weren't pleased with developments. Penny didn't suggest I move into Leyton, and I simply took dinner there occasionally, driving back to my Buckmayne flat late in the evening. Nothing had outwardly changed, as I told my mother during my August visit.

She looked at me suspiciously when I'd finished wheeling her round the garden, and we sat over a cup of tea in the cafeteria.

'Steven', she said, laying the cup down carefully. 'You haven't mentioned Megan recently.'

'School holidays', I said. 'She's got a whole new band of friends now.'

'You said she wasn't fitting in well.' Mother was breaking the currant cake into small squares, seeming preoccupied but beginning to probe.

I headed her off. 'Takes time, of course. Are you going on that coach tour? Wales was good last year, wasn't it?'

'You asked me that before, and I told you.' She looked at me sharply and frowned. 'You're no better at covering up than your father was. Are you still living with Jill?'

'That's absurd. Why shouldn't I be?'

'Are you?'

'Not just at the moment. We've fallen out.' I explained, and then a little more, mentioning the project but keeping the Lawleys out of the picture.

'Leyton?' she said. 'That's where that girl you were keen on came from, wasn't it? Penny Lawley or someone.'

I had never discovered my mother's feelings towards the marriage, only that she hadn't felt obliged to come to Megan's baptism, though mobile then. Nor had Jill seen fit to come to Cheltenham. Nonetheless, there was no hostility between them I could see, only a certain coolness. 'Yes,' I said, 'Penny's still there.'

'So that marriage didn't work out either?'

'It should have done, but the husband had a heart attack, unfortunately.'

'She's on the hunt again.'

'Mother dear, I don't think there's any call to say that. Women don't have to marry these days.'

'Someone as good-looking as that certainly will. And for a man who doesn't have a home, a family or a job any more, she'd be quite a catch. Her or the sister.'

I muttered something about the dance Imogen was leading the lovelorn men of Dorchester.

'Well, you were a fool then, and I expect you'll be a fool now.'

'I wish you wouldn't say such things.'

My mother went on eating for a while. I hitched back a cuff and glanced at the time. There was another hour before I could properly leave. 'You haven't told me about your new neighbour', I said.

'Steven, are you going back to Jill?'

'How do I know?'

'You're sure?' My mother had now folded up the paper napkin, placed her knife neatly on the plate, and was preparing for battle.

'She's suing for divorce, and I've agreed not to contest it. Does that satisfy you?'

'What I should have done with my marriage long ago.'

'You would?' I was startled. Mother disliked my father's silences, perhaps despised him for being so self-effacing, but I'd not heard divorce mentioned before.

'So what are you doing about yours?' she said, now leaning out of the wheelchair and

weighing me up carefully. 'About the Penny woman, I mean.'

'What should I be doing?'

'Steven, you are the most obtuse and stupid man I've ever known. Your father was addle-headed but not wilfully blind. Don't you think I know what's best for my own son? That I don't have the time to think about it, cooped up in this place with nothing to do but wait for meals and lights out?'

'I'd bring some books, only you've never been one for reading.'

'For Heaven's sake, Steven. The only time I've ever seen you happy is when you were going out with that Penny woman. You used to tell me jokes, and laugh, and read bits out of the paper.'

'We were just working together.'

'Then you go and marry Jill Wooten. A smooth-talking, controlling type who was as much use as your father was to me. Whatever for?' I wondered if my mother was drawing the parallels correctly, but she continued before I could reply.

'Don't you understand? Jill walks all over you because that's the way she is. I don't suppose she wants to, any more than I did with your father, but you weren't compatible, as anyone could see.'

'We share a lot, being ambitious types.'

'It wasn't that you had to escape your background, was it?' my mother continued, probably more to herself. 'Why don't you let it all go, and concentrate on what you've got?'

'I may move in with Penny. Quite possibly.'

'Why haven't you?'

'We don't want to rush it, do we?' I sighed heavily, and glanced at the clock behind her in the cafeteria.

'So who is it? Some student at the college?'

'Please don't give me this inquisition. I know it's well-meant, but I'm quite able to sort out my own life.'

'You haven't done so far. Who is it?'

'Imogen. The sister. Maybe.'

'Maybe? You know if you're in love, don't you?'

'We agreed not to do anything, to give me a chance with Penny.'

'Just as I said, a fool. What woman ever gives up a man she wants?'

'Imogen said it wouldn't last, and we'd both be sorry afterwards.'

She looked at me crossly, as someone hardly worth the trouble correcting. 'Your father's influence, I suppose.'

'Please don't keep saying that. I fight for what I want, as I've always done.'

'What do you want, Steven? You've got no home, no job apart from this Leyton project, which you won't keep if you fall out with the Lawleys. Can't you forget about Imogen and patch things up with Penny? I'm sure those two can sort something out between them.'

'That's the trouble. Neither is very straight, I've come to realize.'

'Have you?' She looked amused. 'At least they must want you.'

'I don't see it that way, as I shall tell Penny when we have our festival. You'll get the details, in due course.'

'Will I, Steven?'

'All right. I know I didn't make it last month, but July was difficult.'

'That's not what I meant. I've got some bad news.' She looked fixedly at me and said, 'Perhaps you'd better be wheeling me about when I tell you this.'

'Tell me what?'

'First I want you to promise not to fuss. You can phone me here or at the hospital, but there's nothing to be done, and no point whatever in coming up to see me. You've never enjoyed that, and your visits haven't been high points on my calendar. Do you understand?'

'What are you saying?' Mother was never given to melodrama, and a sharp pain was tightening in my stomach.

'Will you promise you'll reach an understanding with this Penny woman? She'll look after you when I can't. No, keep moving. It's very rapid. The doctors say a month or less. I'll get the morphine, and this place will let me stay on until almost the end.'

'My God, mother dear, why didn't you say?'

'The house-sister is waiting, so if you'll push me that far she'll take over. Listen. I've done my best for you, and if you want to make an old woman happy you'll see what can be done with Penny Lawley. You hear me, Steven? Just try. Will you do that?'

'I'm more concerned about you. What is it? There must be something they can do.'

'Will you promise?'

'I'll try. Up to a point.'

'Steven.'

'All right, I promise. I really will try.'

'Good, now hand me over to the sister, and walk out. I don't want any histrionics. Goodbye, Steven.'

I kissed her on the forehead, and walked quickly away. Near the exit doors I turned, but she was already being wheeled off, a tired figure whom I don't suppose I ever understood. So that was it, I thought as I drove slowly home: another life gone, unfulfilled, and as much perplexed by events as mine. And with another promise extracted which I couldn't see how to fulfil, though I'd tried several times to broach the matter with Penny, who was still waiting for a report on Barnes.

That opportunity came a week later when I drove him out to Corfe Castle. We went round and afterwards sat talking on one of the walls.

'Places have spirits, don't they?' he repeated.

'You tell me.' When he wouldn't reply I said, 'Ned, I know the official history of the castle. How it held out against the Parliamentarians, who pulled it down. But why the name?'

'You'll only laugh.'

'I'd like to know the local legends. If I need the historical facts I can get them from the guide. Why did they call it Corfe?'

'Comes from what the descendents of the Ark called it. Caph. The other one was at Maiden Castle. That was the great Puratheia. It means where there is fire worship.'

'What period was this?'

'The prehistoric. Pagan. They were all pagan then.'

'So the descendents of Noah came to this country, and made a great temple?'

'The mystic name of Noah was Med-din. So Maiden Castle was called Merd-din Caph or the mount of Noah. It's in an old book.'

'The Gentlemen's Magazine of 1826, to be exact.'

'So you know.'

'Ned, I'm sorry for pitching into you back there, but I thought you knew about Bob Lawley's death. Something you were threatening to use.'

'How?'

'On Imogen.'

'Who said I'd want to do the dirty on Imogen? We're friends. But maybe, just maybe I do know something. I'm not saying they killed him, but maybe they covered up. You know, dragged the body into the wood and hid it. Could have done.'

'If the police weren't concerned ten years ago, I don't suppose they will be now.'

'Not with her uncle being a magistrate.'

'Imogen's?'

He was puzzled. 'What's Imogen got to do with it? You know who.'

I suddenly did, and saw why. Tessa could have gone to the police, but it wouldn't have brought Bob Lawley back, or helped their marriage. All the extra activities: the Dramatics Society, local writer's group: everything but the Countryside Association. I remembered Penny's words, and finally understood why I was talking to Barnes.

'Strange world, isn't it?' I said.

'Why's that?'

'Ned, do you want to write a paper with me? Pagan customs and their deconstruction?'

'Their what?'

'Never mind. I can see how folk-lore is a key to places. It makes sense somehow.'

'That's right. I told you.'

'If you supply the material I'll write it.' I could see quite a few being provoked by this, starting with Hampton.

Barnes looked at me suspiciously. 'What's in it for me?'

'No fame or fortune, I shouldn't think. But you'd like your Pagan Historical Centre to be well-known, wouldn't you?'

'It's already well known.'

'Outside Dorchester. You could be invited to give talks round the country, with lots of gorgeous university students queuing up to hear more.'

'Recruits, you reckon?'

'Maybe. The occult is becoming academically respectable, if approached in the right way, of course.'

'Girls like Imogen?'

'Might go for someone who embodies the male instincts. Be a change for them.'

Barnes looked pleased. 'That's right, I do', he said.

Duffy heard the news of my mother's death without saying anything. 'The end came very quickly', I added. 'More a mercy, really.'

'Very sorry to hear it, laddo.'

'Couldn't have been much of a life for her, cooped up there without friends or anything to do, but we tried our best.'

'She'll have known that. Did Jill go?'

'Didn't ask her. Or Penny. It was a private affair.'

I stared into the yard through windows now streaked with rain. My mother's life, my own, and

those of people around me now seemed moulded into their own strange and incomplete patterns.

Duffy was used to these silences, and held his beer up to the light. 'I'm thinking some of the weather has got into this too.' He swilled the glass morosely, and turned to look at the other customers in the Black Swan.

'You're wondering why I'm writing this book', I said at last. 'First the article, and now a proper history of pagan cults, from Julian the Apostate to present times. Even though I'm so busy with public relations, and going up to London for the finance meetings.'

Duffy was still deciding whether to send the beer back.

'Not so strange, is it?' I continued. 'Not after the matter of Bob Lawley's death.'

'I don't think anyone really knows about that', said Duffy.

'Then of course I do a little digging, checking on what you and the girls and Aubrey Jones and the newspapers and the coroner and the locals all

reported, when it becomes even more confusing. Aubrey Jones looked after Melissa afterwards, paid for her secretarial training and got her a job in Dorchester.'

'I believe he did.' Duffy brightened up, and decided the beer wasn't too bad after all. 'But then she was a pretty girl.'

'I went to see Melissa. Who is happily married, incidentally, with no plans to camp out on Leyton Rings at midsummer, or visit Dorchester soon.'

'Melissa was always a little superior', he said.

'Like Jill, she has a healthy distrust of the family, the Buckmayne riff-raff, and Dorchester life generally. Frankly, I can see why. For the first time after splitting up with my wife, I can see her point of view.'

'You'll be better off with Penny. And Imogen has a new man in London, did you know?'

'That's fine.'

'Laddo, it wouldn't have worked. Any more than it did with Penny and Richard, whatever she

felt.' He looked at the empty glass and motioned me to finish mine.

'We don't talk about it.' I shook my head at the barman, who was now collecting empties.

'Then maybe I should add something', said Duffy, disappointed as the large hand clicked our glasses together and removed them. 'You know Penny isn't marrying on the rebound, or for convenience, or anything like that. She went out with Richard long before she met you. Penny was fond of him, probably fonder than she'll ever be of you.'

'That's nice to know. Thanks.'

'Now don't get huffy. Only one thing stood in the way, as she always knew. Penny needs solitude. She can't stand being surrounded by people. Just as you can't.'

'Is that how I make a good teacher?'

'Teaching is showmanship for you. You're fantastic at it, but it's on the outside. It's not how you really are.'

'How does the good Phillip Duffy work that out?'

'Penny did, when she read the manuscript. They were my notes, but you put them as only someone who experienced life as she did could have known. That's when she started thinking there might be someone who understood her, who didn't want what she couldn't give.'

'Phil, I will talk it through, some time.'

'So I'll tell you, in case it helps. Imogen is in love with you. She will always be in love, if you let her. But that doesn't mean she won't marry someone else and be happy, any more than Penny won't be happy with you, though she loved Richard a good deal more.'

'I've got the point.'

'I want you and Penny to be happy. I want Imogen to make a life for herself outside Dorset and our small country ways. I want none of you to make the mistakes I did. And above all I am telling you be careful with Imogen. If you care for

her, then do what's she's doing for you. Stay away.'

I felt the old anger stirring. 'We've agreed not to take matters any further', I said.

'You'd better stick to it. Either of you could miss your footing in an instant, and it wouldn't help. Imogen needs to be the centre of attraction, and you would soon grow tired of that. Besides, she doesn't belong here, and you might, in time, if you worked at it.'

'A little rich coming from you.'

'Do you see this landscape properly? Maybe it's given farmers a solid livelihood, but it's also saturated with grief and disappointment and wasted hopes. Every field had to be made by hand. You think how many times in lifting a stone into place a labourer didn't reflect on what he'd hoped for. You can write it away, or lose it in computer programs and God knows what. But it's real, and you should know.' When I didn't reply, he went on, 'Listen to what it's saying. You have the gift to hear, and explain it to other people, all those

dimwits who drive around saying silly things about the immemorial countryside and its unchanging verities. It's a terrible place. It's built on class divisions, half-starving peasants, landowners bored out of their minds. Much of it is still wrong. You have the chance to write its history again, to see the feudal system and the land enclosures and now the tourist business as phases in a process that is still continuing.'

'I told you I'm writing something with Barnes. That what we remember are only vestiges of something more permanent, some larger landscape we carry inside us.' Duffy turned that disapproving nose sideways as I continued. 'We don't create them. We just clothe them in some present-day reality.'

'Now isn't education a wonderful thing?'

'More a question of understanding things. Like Bob Lawley's death.'

'I keep telling you, laddo. Nobody knows.'

'Which was just as deliberate as planting finds at Leyton, though that was partly my fault. The Department dropped enough hints.'

Duffy looked exasperated. 'Anyway, you're out of that world now', he said. 'Seeing Penny, I hear.'

'You can't threaten someone with the consequences of what they haven't done. Penny insisted I talk to Neville Barnes, read the riot act to him, which I did, until I realized the oaf wasn't understanding anything. He's mesmerized by that daughter of yours, the enchantress who turns men into animals and gives midnight swims a devious purpose.'

'I don't think I want to hear that.'

'So perhaps I'll write a section on the whole sorcery business, the fertility queens peopling the land as they please.'

'It's to create something original and beautiful. Generations go by and the countryside produces its sturdy farmer's wives, the honest-to-goodness sorts that no farm would last a week without. And

then there's something else. Something different appears for a few generations, and shakes everything up.'

'I do know.'

'But they still have to settle and make a home. So talk to Penny, will you? She's not going to play second fiddle to her sister, and is pretty fed up with consultants and camera crews tramping about the place. You don't consult her enough, Steven, and you didn't even ask her to come to the funeral, which you could have done.'

Duffy's advice was still with me the following month, when the Leyton Festival opened. A platform had been erected in the shelter of the trees, but near enough for one of the buildings to house the generators, and the barn provide refreshments. Admission was strictly by invitation, but Imogen and Eddie's friends had come in droves, overflowing the yard with their vehicles and parking in scattered groups along the farm road.

Penny served in barmaid fashion, hair pinned up into a red kerchief, but then changed into jeans and tight blouse for the break we'd promised ourselves.

'Wherever you like, but not Weymouth. That's Imogen's territory.'

'All in the past, though I'll tell you if you want.'

'We can go up to the hill, or anywhere, as long as you're open with me. You're frank and honest and tell me what you want.'

She refused my hand and we didn't stop until we sat overlooking the excavations at the top of the hill. Penny settled beside me, drawing her legs up and gazing over the sea below.

'So?' she said.

'What is it you want to know?'

'Don't play games with me. What are you going to do about Imogen?'

'Who's been playing games? Imogen got me fired from my first teaching post. You planted evidence at Leyton to get the dig going. My whole life has been turned upside down by the Lawleys.'

‘That’s not the issue.’

I could feel the famous temper returning, but took a deep breath and continued quietly. ‘Listen. Leyton Rings, or the Leyton Treasure as it’s being called, is the biggest find since Philip the Second’s tomb in Macedonia. We’ve all been interviewed, and they’ve even run a feature on Melissa, though she hated the place, and left the first chance she got.

‘I don’t want to hear about Melissa.’ She took my hand and placed it on her lap. ‘Imogen.’

‘Now I don’t mind your famous three stories, though Melissa was astounded when I asked her about the midsummer ritual. She couldn’t believe I was even asking her.’

‘You shouldn’t have mentioned that. It was just between us.’

‘I know it’s difficult at present. Which is why the cottage is being rebuilt on the other side of the copse, where you get a view of the sea. Everyone’s agreed to that.’

'You've talked to Imogen before you had the courtesy to discuss it with me?'

'I'm much closer to you than ever I was to your sister, though I was nearly drowned by her antics.'

'She didn't check the tide tables.'

'It was a calculated risk. Only if I was scared out of my mind would I see the world in her terms.'

'So she can take you back any time she wants.'

'Imogen's going to London, where she's going to make a name for herself. She's equally determined that we'll succeed. That's how I shall remember her, just as you won't forget Richard. My home is here, near this hill fort that extends far beyond our own lives into the past.' I put an arm round, and brought her closer. 'For you it's always been there, but for me it's a growing enchantment, just as sleeping with you was.'

'Isn't there something you're supposed to say then?'

'And I've always been in love with you. Even as a boy, you were the enchantress in the dark forests of imagination.'

'But now, Steven?' She was looking at me, half edging away.

'That's why I took up with that oaf Neville Barnes, going round the countryside, trying to see it as you wanted.'

'Do you?'

'Sometimes, but mostly when I'm on my own, surrendering to its features. At those moments I join that vast unwritten landscape that surrounds us. You understand? It's not going to be easy, for either of us, but I'm still the fighter.' She didn't draw closer, but let me kiss her.

We didn't say more, and I had time in walking back to think what would happen. Penny would be a blessing and a responsibility, but through her I would see Dorchester as it was when I first arrived, its unfriendly streets and the high Downs beyond. Under one of those is Leyton cottage, where I should feel the damp lime and porous brickwork

into which long days of rain are seeping, perhaps a millennium of rain, with its smell of leaves and pungent earth. At the centre of that and everything else will be Penny. In the clothes hung up in the wardrobe, the comfortable smell of sheets, the utensils laid on the cooker and the list of things to do pinned to the kitchen noticeboard will be the woman I saw a long time ago, in an existence finally given to me.

Imogen gave us a swift glance as we came back to the farm, perhaps pleased, though I wasn't sure. 'We are making progress', she said, and took my arm as the three of us went through to where the party was now beginning.

'Happy, Steven?' she said when Penny left to put some more pies in the oven. 'Going to ask me to dance, since you're family now.'

'Dearest Imogen, let us hope so.'

She frowned, and took me over to the far side of the dance area, where we sat beyond the floodlights. 'Don't do that', she said.

'It wasn't intended.'

'Don't you think it's hard for me? Listen, Steven, I'm always going to be your friend. Wherever I go, and I intend to go far—you don't know what plans little Imogen has, what mischief she's going to cause—I will always think of you. When you appeared as the blonde warrior. When I took Penny to see you. Our swims.' She grinned. 'Steven, please understand. I've kept those impressions to myself, and I always will. I told you what I felt about them when we kissed up on the Downs, and that's where you'll always be. Maybe when I'm old and embittered and have only myself to blame I will come back to this quiet backwater, long after you're dead, and Penny, when no one remembers the Lawleys, and look up to the Downlands and see us there, as we might have been. Whatever happens, that's what I've promised myself, whether you remember or not.'

I didn't say anything.

'I see little Imogen has put her foot in it again. Let's go back.'

'In a moment. I'm not saying anything because I can't speak. There are so many things to say, but I can't find the words.'

'Well don't then.'

'Imogen, I haven't forgotten. Penny is larger than both of us, and with her I'm happy and contented in a way I didn't expect. But you I'll always remember. Whatever that kiss meant is still somehow with me. And that wretched field trip, and the swims. Every frank and intimate detail has somehow become part of my own skeleton. I'm not being rational, but you haven't gone away. I'm in love with your sister. I pray to God I always will be, but secreted deep inside is a small body that would leave me breathless if I thought about it. Mostly I don't, but it's the most natural and essential part of me.'

'Then you must look after it, Steven, please.'

'Perhaps it's happiness, or something to do with this place. With all the people here, the long generations that are passing into what's nothing

to do with us, or even the others we know. Something elemental, or whatever the word is.'

'You remember Silbury?'

'For heaven's sake, Imogen, I've always known. It was so bad I didn't know if you were speaking or it was just my own thoughts. All the drive back, when my passengers were being polite and chattering about something they thought would interest me, I was seeing your little Fiesta shuttling across the Downlands with you inside, your eyes taking in what I was also seeing. I was so overcome I nearly ran over an old woman on a crossing, and the chattering stopped. My passengers thought I'd finally flipped. I had flipped. I was driving through a landscape that also held you. All the Lawleys, but you most of all.'

'It wasn't so different for me. I could still feel you from the swimming trip. That's why I risked it. I wanted to be friendly and open with you. I wanted you to accept me, which you did, almost.'

'You can tell me anything you like. Even what happened to that reprobate of a father. It's all in the past.'

'Better left that way', said Penny, coming to sit with us. 'Caused enough trouble already.' She smiled and took our hands. 'Think he'll go native, become one of the shameless Lawleys?'

'If he goes hard at it. Playful as rabbits across the country green.'

'I hope not. Listen, Eddie's looking for you.'

When Imogen had left, Penny took the other hand. 'Steven, just promise that you'll talk to me first.'

'I'm not straying. One summer madness is quite enough.'

'Is it?'

'Imogen and I have agreed to be friends. In love with you but friends with her, whatever happens.'

'In this landscape of summer?'

'If you'll have me.'

'We shall think about it, Steven Whittaker. Only we'd better be getting back now.'

'With providence all before us?'

‘Something like that.’ She laughed. ‘Though I’d prefer the happy rabbits.’

‘And all their offspring?’

‘That we shall have to think about.’ She got up and took my hand. ‘But probably. Yes.’

We came out into the floodlit dance floor, smelling the trodden grass and the air soaked with the evening chill from the trees. Barnes was dancing with Jan, though not happily, and Imogen was managing the bar with Eddie. Penny took me round to make our goodbyes, and by stages we went back to the cottage, where even in the bedroom afterwards I could sense the music seep into the beams and whitewashed walls.

Penny was a warm and living presence again, with whom I should be as permanent as those summer showers that continually drift over the Dorset landscape, leaving it just as it was, open to the elements and the seasons marked by their stone circles and vanished festivals. If there was anything in my mind as I settled, imagining the band’s last numbers drifting into nearby farms and

cottages, it was not Leyton Centre with its busy teams of professionals, nor our rural happiness, but the oafish Barnes blindly searching for what he cannot have: the mischievous Imogen who speaks to him wherever he looks but is always gone. Even now the sprite would be motoring away, with Eddie and the warm night at her heels, as Barnes went quietly home with Jan, and I wrapped Penny's arm around me and was a long time falling contentedly asleep.

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