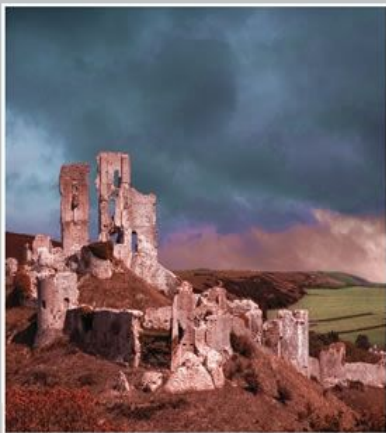


O C A S O P R E S S : A N O V E L

*The Madness
of Summer*



Colin Holcombe

The Madness of Summer

by Colin Holcombe

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THE MADNESS OF SUMMER

— A NOVEL —

Colin Holcombe

Chapter One

So we stayed, the model family at the Buckmayne Annual Pageant, until the curtain fell around nine o'clock, when I saw Megan and my wife off and returned to the Community Centre, squeezing past Council members and performers to where Martins was brandishing 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 charm-ers 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 saw it safely back under the table. '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 Jill's 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 continue.

'Now listen, Whittaker. I'm going to bend your ear with something you wouldn't have dreamt of in a thousand 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 Sainly 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, old sport? 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 pushing ahead. Of course you'll get your 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 shabby 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 now 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. 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 them 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, and then Martins was ambling over. ‘Not dull here, is it?’ he said. ‘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. Old Mrs Rainer nodded as I 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 to come 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 that’s it.’

‘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?'

'Just chilly.' 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 the right person.'

I laughed savagely. 'You can't seriously think that.'

'We'll all be here in two weeks' time. Melissa too. She'll come if Imogen and I haven't found someone.'

'I don't believe it, 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 inviting. 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 re-scheduled the whole weekend round you, and then you decided not to go.’

‘It was too cold.’

‘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 fighter, 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 dis-

cipline. '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 Philip 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 clear in this as the tests waiting for 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, is 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 is what I'm registering.'

'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. Just follow.'

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 bags 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 at my annoyance. 'But you didn't marry her.'

'That's enough, Imogen. I couldn't have done, anyway. She was engaged to someone else.'

'That's rather naughty of you.'

'Not engaged, it was an arranged marriage.' In looking back through the dark windings of that frenetic activity, the warm breasts and the brusque arms, I saw only some foreign country where other expectations and standards held.

'Some dusky creature from the middle East. 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 hot Subhadra, who was a wonder, a meticulously articulated woman who was 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. How many times would she wait, or go back to

collect me, drawing alongside and then bringing me into tandem with her needs. 'I wasn't the only one, by all accounts.'

'Having her fling before settling down to married life?'

'Something like that.' Where was she now, dear Subhadra, in the respectability of semi-detached houses and neat rows of gardens? Many would be wondering that.

'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 make it 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.'

For me it was something else, free of 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 perhaps 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.

'Imogen, I was just a student. And Subhadra was working, as a beautician in fact. I don't think it ever crossed our minds to make it permanent.'

Imogen pulled away. 'That's not what I'm talking about. Getting married doesn't make it right.'

'I didn't say it did.'

Perhaps the irritation showed, as Imogen came back with, 'What's wrong with deciding who we will have, and when we will bring the draw-bridge 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 by then, but warm-blooded women, as urgent as Subhadra, 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 sello-taped 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 superior 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.’

‘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 bare-faced 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 business-woman 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, 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 the child who 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 Colonel 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? Colonel Wooten 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 what will you do, Jill? Keep the place on?'

'Steven, as I have told you, David is just a friend.'

'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.’

The usual complaint, and I looked at her with smiling unconcern.

'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 more 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 in Barnes’s case, 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.