

PAUL S A REDMOND

THE NEWINGTON QUARTET

BOOK FOUR

SUNSET AND SUNRISE



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All may come, but too late for those who wait

CHAPTER ONE

A soft, warm, breeze skimmed the sea and swept the Downs, stroking and smoothing the long grass in great wide sweeps, and rustling through the boughs of trees. Gently it plucked the late Spring blossom and scattered it liberally in its wake, ruffling and decorating the hair of the woman who stood alone on a small bridge overlooking a large, lily-covered, ornamental lake. The breeze, trees, and blossom bore silent witness to the fact that she, despite now having reached what were referred to as her mature years, which were deemed by some to lie beyond her prime, was undeniably handsome in appearance and must have possessed great beauty in her youth. Even now, when all the graces and vestiges of that youth had departed or been shed, she still displayed a slim, well shaped and proportioned figure that would, and did, turn men's heads or earn the envy of many a younger woman. They also bore witness that she had waited there a long time, certainly longer than she would have anticipated. At first, upon her arrival in the gardens of the Monastery, she had sat on one of the donated seats and looked, in anticipation, wistfully down the line of flowering cherries, first this way, then that. Latterly her face revealed a growing degree of anxiety and she had taken up her present prominent position on the bridge, not that being in this location was more likely to cause the person she awaited to appear any more than the first.

As far as she could see she was alone, the only person there. At least, she was the only living person there for not far away, under their green canopies, the monks who had built the Monastery and worked there, slept their eternal sleep, awaiting the day of judgement. She looked around. It was always possible that one of the workers from the Estate had come up to tend to the gardens. No, she was completely alone. Below her gold carp lazily glided through the olive green water and disappeared under the lily leaves. It crossed her mind to wonder how old they were, whether they were the same fish that had swum under her the very first time they had met on that bridge. Somewhere, once, she had read that some fish could live to a great age and much longer than humans. Could they really have been there all that time, watching and maintaining a silent vigil? How long was it? Twenty-five years? Was this their twenty-fifth anniversary?

She looked around again. Perhaps they were the same trees? But not the flowering cherries. She knew that. A new one had been planted for every one of the past fifteen or so years ever since their first reunion. Soon there would be no room for any further ones along this particular path. Yet nearly everything else, apart from the flowerbeds, was the same; just as the way it was then when he had come and found her. For a brief, elusive, moment she felt that she could have stepped back through an aperture in time and he would be there, approaching her for the first time, again, apologetic, nervous, hesitant and anxious. And if she could have gone back, what would she have done or said that would have been different?

Her heart leapt as she caught the briefest of glimpses of a man's figure over by the main part of the ruins. It was indistinct at first, partly obscured by some of the Azaleas which grew in special beds in the garden. It could be one of the gardeners, come to do a couple of hours' work. It was probable that it was, but now she was standing on tip-toe, trying to suppress the urge to wave or call out. What if it were not him? With relief she recognised his outline and went forward to meet him. He had put on, perhaps, a little weight, she thought, and looked slightly more careworn. That would not have been due to the attention of, or care

shown by, his late wife. She noted that he seemed to be lacking the usual purpose and buoyancy of stride he normally assumed at their annual meetings. Words were tumbling from his lips before ever she was close enough to gather them up and understand them; apologies, excuses; she was swamped and denied any expression of her own feelings, whether they were of joy to see him, or vexation at him being late. Mistress of the situation she sat on one of the benches and patted the wood beside her.

"I am terribly sorry," Michael repeated as he complied with her instruction. "I have so much to say - I don't know where to begin!" She smiled and reached out for his hand.

"I was beginning to get concerned that something had happened to you, or that you could not come for some reason."

"Could not come? As if I would not. Come Heaven and high water, on this day, every year; that's what we said!"

"And now you are here, and we have all day. At least we have the afternoon and what remains of the morning."

"Everything is ready at the cottage," he said, anxious to put the formalities behind him, "but I wanted to call in at the House, and that is what delayed me."

"It is safe?" she asked.

"Yes," he said softly, "perfectly safe. It could not be safer." He paused and their eyes met. "We could sit here all day," he added.

"Shall we?" she asked lightly.

"We could, but, no. I have something important to talk to you about, something very important." Her face darkened slightly.

"Nothing has changed," she said defensively. "I am in exactly the same position as last year."

"I didn't have you in mind although I was going to ask you about your circumstances, obviously. No, you know that Christina died earlier this year?"

"Yes," she said softly. "I read about it in the papers. I am sorry, but it doesn't change my position."

"Mr Pennington is alive and kicking?"

"Michael, please don't be frivolous about this. To tell the truth he isn't very well and I did consider not coming."

"Not coming? That would be unthinkable!"

"I know. Our meetings mean more to me than I can ever tell you. I really think that deep down I live from one to the next and do no more than fill in time in between, just trying to keep my mind off things."

"You shouldn't have married him."

"I wasn't to know that your wife would suddenly die, God rest her soul."

"No, nor was I. You think she could have done it a year or more earlier. That was just like Christina, vindictive and spiteful to the end. You wouldn't consider leaving him, would you?"

"You shouldn't be unkind about Christina, especially now she is dead. And, as for Mr Pennington, no, I couldn't think of leaving him. You wouldn't really want me if I did, would you? You might pretend that you did, but there would be those feelings of compromise, broken promises, betrayal, dare I add adultery, most of which might not bother me as much as they would you. Anyway, you made your choice over twenty-five years ago, and you should remember our compact, after the War. We agreed that we would wait until each was completely free to marry."

"Was it really that long ago?"

"It was. I was thinking, before you arrived, that there is hardly enough room for any further trees in the row. We will get this year's in, but as for next year!"

"We might be able to squeeze one, but then - come along, Mr Pennington! We are running out of room!"

"Michael! Mr Pennington has been good to me. He gave me a home, found me a worthwhile job which I enjoy doing, and has not sought in the least to bind me as most husbands might. In his way he needs me and I just couldn't think of deserting him."

"I need you too!"

"You will have to wait. It is no-one's fault but your own! You have said it often enough."

"I know. I am to blame for all of this. There's no point in us going over it all once again. I am just conscious that we are not getting any younger and that each successive year gallops by quicker than the one before it. We must, surely, deserve to have some time together in this life?" Her expression saddened.

"I love you, Michael," she said after a pause. "You know that. You know that you are the only man I have ever loved and you will be the only man I will ever love. Your decision and circumstances cast us apart and that is the way things were, and are. We cannot expect a happy ending. They happen only in novels, like the ones your wife wrote."

"I did hope - ."

"What?"

"Now that Christina is dead - ."

"I am not sure that I really understand you or what you are driving at. What are you suggesting? That I throw over poor Mr Pennington or hope that he dies. You will next be telling me that you actually wanted Christina to die!" Michael shook his head slowly.

"I am not putting this very well. I don't want anyone to die, you know that. I was just hoping that now I am free we could find a solution, something that would let us be together."

"Well, there isn't one," she said firmly and stood. They started to walk, in silence, each deeply submerged in vast oceans of thought, barely conscious of each other's presence.

"It was a great shock," said Michael when they reached the shell of the monastery. "Christina's death. It was so sudden. I didn't have time to prepare for it or think clearly beyond it, at the time."

Felicity did not answer. She had retained his thread of thought as if it were a lifeline as she explored the dark, endless, interlocking, maze that lay deep within her mind. What did she really feel, about his wife's death, about her husband? She owed it to herself, to all of them, to be honest with herself. It was something she and Michael had vowed they would always be, certainly with each other, certainly over their love. She had to admit she did not love her husband. She had always known that, right from the first day he had approached her at night school, through to the day she had conditionally accepted his proposal, right through to now. It was, with him, more a question of loyalty, of honour, of keeping the vows she had given at the simple, short, ceremony.

There had been times when she thought Michael would have been prepared to have left Christina. He had certainly said as much. Maybe he did not really have the same concepts of loyalty and honour that she did? Perhaps he had demonstrated this flaw from the very beginning? Yet had he left his wife, she knew they would not have been happy together. There would always have been a fear, a shadow hanging over them. And there were those who would argue that her own conduct did not exactly display a sense of loyalty but, then, her degree of freedom had been part of the conditional acceptance. Mr Pennington had never contained or wavered in his affection. All she could give him in return was her presence.

And what of her relationship with Michael? Was that, a voice asked her, just another extra-marital relationship? And if it were not, exactly what was her relationship with her husband?

It was a mental trap, a neat hole, barely disguised, cut in the floor of her caravan in which she travelled across the plains of life, replete with sharpened stakes on which she would impale herself. It was an insoluble dilemma. It would not be rationalised. It was as if she lived on three levels of existence; a primeval one in which she loved Michael above anything else; a conventional one in which she was outwardly an almost respectable, married, woman; and a desperate, reckless, almost Bohemian one in which she might take herself to bed with any man she chose. If only she could reduce it all to just one level and stabilise her life, but whilst she was married and away from the man she loved, she felt free. It was an insoluble dilemma.

"Mark you, she had been ill for some time, on and off, but no-one thought it might turn out to be terminal. In a way I did feel a sense of relief, as if a heavy burden had been

lifted, but most of all I felt guilty.”

“Guilty?” she whispered, coming back into reality.

“Partly because I didn’t grieve, partly because although she was successful, I failed to make her happy. I suppose she was happy in her sort of way, but her life, and my life, could have been fuller. So much of it was wasted.”

“How do you think that I feel, sometimes?” she asked. They had reached the top of a narrow path which descended steeply into a wooded valley trapped between two bare thighs of the Downs. “I am not sure that I will make it down in these shoes!” she said lightly. “It was silly of me to wear them. I had difficulty coming up the hill in them!”

“Do you want us to go back and go the long way around?”

“No,” she said, reaching down. “I’ll try going bare-footed. Goodness! Look at the bourn!” Below them, sparkling through the greenery, they could see the waters of a small, fast-flowing, stream.

“It is the first time in goodness knows how many years it has been this full,” said Michael, offering her his hand. “The locals say that it is a good omen. Something momentous is going to happen.”

“Something good?”

“Something momentous.” Her shoes dropped from her hand and rolled into the undergrowth as he suddenly embraced her.

“Yes!” was all that she could say.

“You said earlier that you had something important to talk to me about,” Felicity said as she poured a cup of tea. “I trust it is about something other than your wife’s death?” Michael sat in the sun on a small flight of steps that led from the cottage patio to a close cut lawn, and studied the sunlit glade beyond. “It is not to do with Christina’s death, is it?” she added, suspiciously. “I do not want to go over it again.”

“It is, but not in the way that you might think. What I have to say is not going to be easy, and I do not want to spoil our day, but I must raise the matter. I feel that I must, and it is not something that can really wait as there is much to be done.”

“Much to be done?” she said, frowning as she came and sat beside him and raised her cup to her lips. “I do not know whether to feel curious or anxious.”

“I want you to agree to something that you probably will not like, and to do something for me that you certainly won’t like, but will you, for the present, just sit there and listen to me? Hear me out? And promise that you won’t get angry?”

“Oh, I feel just like Dorothea!” she said lightly. “Have you read *Middlemarch*? How can I make such a promise when I have no idea what you are going to ask of me? It is quite unfair of you! But, then, the day has turned out so pleasant, how could anyone reasonably get angry?” Michael sat in silence and studied his tea leaves. He had been with her once when someone had read tea leaves - . Did they have any meaning? If he now inverted his cup would he be able to predict whether her reaction would be as he feared, hostile and negative. “Well?” she prompted.

He had rehearsed it many times since his wife died and this idea had first taken hold of him. He had been over the arguments and the structure of the arguments, the phrases, the very words he would use. He had mentally practised what he would say and how he would say it, and tried to anticipate what she would say and how he would answer that. “Where shall I begin?” he asked himself.

“Well?” she said again.

“Well,” he started. “I said that Christina’s death came as quite a shock coming, as in did, right on top of her mother’s. It made me think - about my life - about our lives - and about a promise I made, not to you, but many years ago. Damn! I am not doing this very well.”

“I’m sorry. Keep going. I am listening and I am not the least bit angry, even if you have been making promises to other people.”

“The promise was made to Lady Newington and is not one that need cause you any concern. Shall I put it bluntly? I want to do something for my daughter - for Stephanie!”

“What?”

“For Stephanie,” he repeated.

“I do not know what to say! We have been over this so many times before I am growing tired of repeating myself!”

“You are angry - I can see it - but this is different.”

“I am not angry! I am surprised! I mean, that you are raising it all again!”

“I know what you are going to say, but this time it is different. The position we find ourselves in is different.”

“I am not sure what you mean by “we”. And you don't know her. You don't know what she looks like or what she is like!”

“I know what you are saying,” he said patiently. “I want to put all the years and the things that have happened behind us. I can never compensate you or her for all the things that have happened or the way things have turned out. And I do not plan to interfere directly in your life or hers. As for what she looks like, I have seen her, and I would describe her as beautiful, but not as much so as you were then or are now. As for what she is, she is what we and others have made her.”

“We? She is what you made her. I would never have married the man had it not been for you!”

“Felicity,” he implored.

“And stop calling me Felicity! I am Joyce when you are talking about my daughter.”

“Our daughter; and I have already said that I do not want to go over old ground, or upset you. Just listen to what I am proposing. I want to compensate for some of what has happened to her, not due to you, not due to me, just the way things have turned out. I know we have agreed that I would never become involved with her, but with Helen and Christina both dead, things are different now. I cannot change the past but I can influence the future - her future and, in time, ours.” Joyce breathed deeply and sighed.

“I did not expect this,” she said lowly. “Not now. Not ever again. I thought we had an agreement and that you would honour it. You have even been to see her?”

“A couple of months ago. She wasn't all that difficult to find.”

“Did you speak to her?”

“Of course not! Nor was she aware of my presence. I have to confess that I hired a private detective to find out where she lives and photograph her. Then I went down to see her.”

“Actually to Bromley? Goodness, you came that close to me and I didn't sense it!”

“You cannot imagine how tempted I was to come to the school and ask to see the Secretary! But I thought of our agreement and that I would not break it in every way imaginable. I would leave the core intact.”

“Thank you,” she said tersely.

“So, armed with a couple of photographs I went to the flats and simply waited for her to come out. There are some tea-rooms and they gave me all the cover I needed. It was the first time I have seen her since just after the War. You can't imagine how I felt.”

“Better than I would have done, I dare say. She didn't approach and attempt to proposition you?”

“No!”

“I expect she was tempted!”

“She didn't know I was there and, in any case, I think you are wrong. The detective reported - well, never mind what he reported. I waited for her to appear, she did, and I saw her!” Joyce gave a little snort of disgust and watched two yellow butterflies spiral above the lawn, one seeming to seek contact, the other seeming to evade.

“Well?” she said, more sharply than she intended. “What about Stephanie?”

“I propose to give her the house here, at Newington.”

“What?” she cried so loudly that several birds flew up from a nearby tree.

“I propose to give her Newington,” he repeated as if it were necessary to reassure himself. “No, you cannot see it from here,” he added as she appeared to be looking around.

“I do not understand you, Michael!” she cried, leaping to her feet and impatiently thrusting her fist into her palm. “Give her Newington House? Why to her? Why now? Why

on earth not to me?"

"Well, for a start, I really could not give it to you, could I? How would it appear to Mr Pennington if I were to do so?" He spoke sharply, and regretted having done so. He had expected her to react this way. He should have better controlled his temper. Joyce was now standing rock still with her back to him and he could not tell whether she was crying.

"Why give it to her?" she said lowly. "You know how things are and what she is? It will look as if you are rewarding her and punishing me."

"I know that nothing has changed that would stabilise and change her life," he said. "This might."

"I am not that sure that she wants to change her life. There was a young man," Joyce said softly. "A nice, clean, well-bred young man." She paused, wondering whether to tell him what she knew about the young man's parents and the connection to them both, but that would take the conversation off in a different direction. She would tell him later, if at all. "There was even some talk of marriage," she added, "but he must have found out. Something went wrong. It's all over now." She suddenly turned to face him. "But why? Why?" she demanded.

He could see the tears glistening on her cheeks and he felt saddened. Yet he could not abandon his quest. "I thought it might upset you," he said, "but I had to tell you, you understand that much?"

"I am not upset," she said feebly, wondering if it had actually been in his mind to proceed with his plan without ever telling her. It would have been so easy for him to do that, she thought, now that he had found their daughter. "I am just surprised, disappointed, even. And I do not understand why you are doing it. Why now, after all these years and everything that has passed?"

"Well, you know why not before. You have always told me that I should not interfere in her life, and I have not. If, at the end of the day when we have exhausted all the arguments, you insist, I still will not. As to why now, I couldn't do anything whilst Christina was alive although I have thought of it for a long time. On the very day we met here after the War I promised Helen that I would take care of the House and ensure that it survived. It has been difficult, as Christina has always opposed every penny spent on it, almost to an irrational degree. So, whilst she was alive, little was done, and it deteriorated. I repeated my promise to her mother on her death bed and assured her that I would restore the House to its pre-war condition and find someone to take care of it. And, paradoxically, it was Christina who gave me the idea of making it over to Stephanie in one of her books. A girl who thinks she is an orphan is left a semi-derelict stately home and a fortune with which to restore it. So, for years, I have cherished the plan that, possibly, my daughter would go to live in and look after the House, and fulfil my promise to Helen. You know that I would do as much for you, far more. I will do, when you are free, but neither of us want to be tied to amount of work that will go into the restoration of Newington. Do you understand what I am saying? Do you believe me?" Joyce looked away, searching the garden for the butterflies, but they were gone. She would never know whether they had established physical contact and bonded, or whether they had failed and gone their separate ways.

"We have always said that we would be honest with each other," he continued. "That we would be open and frank. I am telling you what is in my mind and what I propose to do - would like to do - for our daughter. I think it could be the saving of her. I would have thought that you, as her mother, would have supported me and welcomed the idea once you had thought it over. Will you let me fully expand my case?" Joyce smiled weakly.

"There is no need to chastise me, or be pompous or lecture me. You know how things are between Stephanie and me. You know how it started and why, and the history of it, but I will listen to you. I said I would."

"Well, I don't think we have ever met here since the War and you have not told me that you were worried about Stephanie and the way things were going, even after she moved out and set up on her own. I think we have always agreed that something should be done about her, although we could never agree what. I am hoping that if I give her the House and the task of undertaking its restoration, she may be able to change her ways - be in a position to escape from her present life and make a clean break."

“Assuming for the moment that is what she would want, how will she be able to live in it, leave alone afford to restore and maintain it?”

“The House is now fairly dilapidated, mostly as a result of what happened during the War when some Canadians were billeted there. That is why I talk of restoration. Since the War Helen has lived there, but only in a small part of the House. The Estate, however, now has a healthy income and I will make a settlement to bring this up to the kind of level that she will need to maintain the House and live in a reasonable manner.”

“It could cost you a fortune!”

“I have a fortune. I have several fortunes several times over. You know that, and you also know that I need to do something beneficial with the wealth I inherited from my Father, but this is slightly different. I have given my word to Helen that I would save the House. And it could help Stephanie. It seems to kill a number of birds with a single stone. How do you think she will react?”

“How do you mean?”

“Will she change her life style, the way she carries on? You know her better than I do. The private detective said that there were signs that she has cut down on her clientele, if that's the way of putting it.”

“I do not know,” said Joyce, coldly. “It is not the kind of thing she would confide in me about. You will have to ask her. What about this cottage, our cottage?”

“Oh, we keep it. You never know, we may want to live there one day. You said once that you would prefer it to living at the House, do you remember?”

“I do, very clearly. That was a long time ago, a very long time ago. I could say that things are different now, or likely to be if you go ahead with this ridiculous idea. Couldn't she come and live here and you go to live in the House?”

“No,” said Michael. “This is ours and only ours. I won't ever give it up unless we can be together somewhere else, and I have no desire to live in the House any more than my wife did.”

“So,” Joyce said, inhaling. “Stephanie is to be presented with Newington; the House, the Estate, the farms, everything?”

“Except this cottage. That is what I am proposing. The question is, will she accept it?”

“She would be a little fool not to!”

“But will she? You know her best. From what you've told me she has a strong, independent, streak. I think it comes from you.”

“I don't know where it comes from. How do you propose to tell her?”

“Ah,” said Michael thoughtfully, “that is the crux of it.” He stood and walked onto the lawn, then turned back to look at her. “I don't think for one moment that I could do it myself. I am not sure what kind of reception I would get if I went to the flat, or stopped her in the street, and told her that I was her long-lost father, the one that was the cause of the argument that resulted in her rowing with her mother and leaving home. I do not know how she views me or what she thinks of me. I have tried to put myself in her place and I think I would feel pretty uncharitable towards a father who suddenly appeared some twenty-five years after I was born, what ever the reasons. She could simply refuse to talk to me, reject me out of hand. And I don't think an approach through my lawyers would be any better. Certainly neither method is guaranteed to succeed and I have to be sure that, if she is minded to, she will accept it and see it as a gift, not a bribe.”

“Then how *do* you propose to do it?” she asked, doubting but curious. Michael swallowed. From her tone he gauged that she was totally unsuspecting, trusting. He had saved the most bitter wine until last.

“I was hoping that you would do it,” he said slowly. Joyce appeared to flinch and recoiled, her face colouring as she searched for words. Michael watched her closely, his gaze meeting and deflecting hers. He knew it would not be easy to persuade her and anticipated a hostile reaction, but he had rehearsed this part of the argument so many times that he ceased to be excited by the thought of it. It had become an accepted fact that this was the only way. It was a creed to which he assented and to which he had now to make a fresh conversion.

“Me?” she exclaimed. “Me? I think you must think I am mad, or I think that you are! How on earth do you think I am going to do it, after everything that has passed? What are you suggesting?”

“That you go and see her.”

“That is ridiculous, absurd, out of the question. I cannot imagine what ever induced you to think of it. The whole thing is crazy; utter madness!”

“No, it is not,” he said firmly. “And, if you sit and think about it calmly for a few minutes you will see that it is not.” He crossed to the patio, placed the cups on the tray and carried it into the kitchen. “Do you realise,” he called through the open window, “that this is the first time we have been able to meet here without any fear of discovery? We have the place to ourselves, completely to ourselves.” She did not answer. From the window he could see her, stood on the lawn looking down at the grass. Every now and then she gave a dark, furtive, glance towards the cottage. She knew he was watching her. “Shall we walk down the valley?” he called. Joyce shrugged by way of an answer, which he took as an affirmative. Her hand relaxed as he took it.

“You are completely crazy,” she said softly after they had gone a short distance into the woodland. “Why do you not send your lawyer? They are good at that, telling people that they have inherited fortunes.”

“I instinctively feel that would be too impersonal. It would be wrong.”

“It couldn't be more wrong than sending me!”

“I am sorry. It is hard to put it into words. She would have no relationship, no bond, with a lawyer. She might think that I was trying to - say - purchase her favour.”

“Isn't that exactly what you are trying to do?”

“No, it is not. She is my daughter and I am trying to help her find a new and better life. Where do you think her present one will eventually lead? Do you remember me telling you about Jenny Forbres, the girl who had acid thrown in her face and where she ended up?”

“Yes, I do, but that's hardly the same!”

“Are you happy with what she's doing? The way she earns her living?”

“No I am not!”

“And she is our daughter!”

“I am not sure what that signifies. You do not even know her.” Michael thought of saying that as a father he must love his daughter but that implied that Joyce, as her mother, should love her too, and he was not certain of this. He had heard her accounts of the deep animosity that lay between them but, then, he had heard only one side and Joyce's attitude towards their daughter had often appeared to be ambivalent. Yet he hoped that if he could penetrate below this stratum of hostility, he would still uncover maternal love. He could not count on it. There were risks.

“We are the only family she has, you and I,” he said. “And I do not count for much; at least I haven't to date. She could show every bit as much animosity towards me as you say she does towards you. As far as I know she has no friends. Other than us she is completely alone. This offer has to come from someone close to her, someone who can talk to her intimately, someone who has feeling for her, someone she can trust, and someone who, in her eyes, might have a genuine interest in her well-being. It cannot come from someone who is indifferent.”

“I am sure that I would not take umbrage and refuse if a solicitor turned up in my doorstep and told me I was to be given a fortune.”

“Perhaps not, but even if it was from someone who you'd never really seen, who had been the cause of your separation from your mother who might as a consequence well hate you now with all her heart - your father?”

“There is no point in sending me if she thinks that I now hate her. And what makes you think that I am not indifferent?” she said after a pause.

“I am banking on you not being indifferent. I am banking on a hunch that you really want a reconciliation. I know you, Felicity. I cannot believe that you could bear malice against anyone, least of all your own daughter, our daughter.”

“Maybe,” she said reflectively. “So, you want me to go around to Stephanie's flat,

ring the bell, and tell her that her mother has come to see her?"

"What could be more simple?"

"She probably won't even open the door to me and, even if she did, there is no guarantee that she will listen to me, leave alone show me the door when I say I have come on your behalf. It is ridiculous! I cannot do it."

"Please, Felicity. Do it, for me, for Stephanie. We both owe her something, me the most as her long-absent father, you as her mother. I can't undo the past. Neither of us can do that, but we can attempt to put right the future. I don't expect her to love me, or even thank me. I don't expect - I don't want gratitude. I just want her to have this opportunity for starting a new life. I just want to feel that I have done something right by her and, in doing so, fulfilled my long-standing promise to save the House and deliver it into safe hands"

"And me?"

"You are always on my conscience, but we have agreed that there is little I can do for you or that you will allow me to do for you. I mean, if there is anything that you want - anything?" She shook her head. They had emerged from the woodland onto a steep, grassy, hill-side, watched with great curiosity by the sheep and the occasional rook. They started to climb, winding their way up the hill until they reached the summit and passed through the gap in the stone wall to, once more, stand in the gardens. Away to the West, the sun, now low in the sky, was bisected by a blade of cloud. Below them, in the town, one or two lights had been turned on. Soon the curtains would be being drawn. "Our day is nearly over," he said.

"Couldn't we go together?" It was her last, desperate, fling, a wild suggestion. She knew the battle was over, the moment they crossed through the gap and a torrent of memories overwhelmed her. The battle was lost, although she was not exactly sure how or why.

"Can you imagine the reception that might get? If you going alone could be bad enough, what is she going to do when confronted by the two of us? I mean, she does at least know you."

"A rather nice way to put it," she said dryly. "I suppose I know what you mean. It would not be easy if the two of us went. It will not be easy if I go."

"But you will go," he pressed, sensing a change in her tone and manner.

"I suppose I shall," she said, resignedly.

As their shadows lengthened, Michael filled the walk back to the cottage with minute details. As she asked questions, so he answered them. He described the Estate and the House. He reiterated his commitment and that he was looking for Stephanie to have the same commitment, the same responsibility. It would be hers to live in and enjoy, and to own, except there would be a covenant. She would not be permitted to sell it or any part of it during his lifetime without his prior, written, consent. All his calculations suggested that with the allowance he would make her, there would be no need to sell anything. It was a big undertaking, but he thought she would find it interesting and rewarding, enjoy the life and escape from her present position.

"You are assuming, aren't you, that she does not want to do what she is doing?" Joyce asked him.

"I am assuming that no woman wants to do that for a living. Least of all, my daughter. Do you think otherwise?" She did not answer.

Would he go to see her? No, not yet. Not until they both felt that the time was right. He would appoint an architect to plan, co-ordinate and supervise the repairs. He expected his daughter to take the decisions concerning decor and furnishings. If she had half the taste that Lady Newington had, the result would be resplendent! His lawyers would have to make some contact with her as there would be papers to sign. No doubt, sooner or later they would meet. A moment would arrive when it would be right, but not yet. Stephanie could determine her own timetable for getting things under way although the settlement would be immediate, providing she agreed. "Am I doing the right thing?" he asked suddenly.

Felicity did not expect this question. For a moment she was tempted to throw back in his face all the things she had said earlier, but that would have been unfair now that she had capitulated. She wondered whether to question, again, his motives. Was Michael really telling the truth, or was he like his father, seeing an angle, looking for something in it for

him? If he was, what could it be, other than to help his daughter? He admitted he had seen her. He would have seen just how beautiful she was, and how capable of attracting any man. Perhaps that was it - all over again?

A wave of shame hit her and overwhelmed her. How could she think such a thing, of this man who had been faithful to her, and only her, throughout his life? She blushed as she surfaced, gasping for mental air, and wondered if Michael had noticed her embarrassment. It appeared he had not. "The right thing," she mused, "and how will she take it?"

"How do you think?"

"I really do not know. I see so very little of her and when we do meet there is barely a civil word between us. Oh, don't misunderstand me, we do not come to blows, but if you saw us together at a party or something like that, you would never dream that we are mother and daughter. We would be more likely to be taken as rivals. She might have been approachable when she was seeing this young man. There was even talk of marriage at one point, but she turned him down. And then she went completely off the rails drove him to marry someone else."

"What went wrong?"

"There was always this other woman in his life," she said guardedly, still wondering how much she should reveal about the affair and whether she should tell him the young man's identity. "You remember Stephanie had got involved with her husband at one stage - they went to the same school and I think he was sweet on her. I even think that Stephanie might have had some genuine feelings towards him. Anyway, he married this other woman, then left her and went to live with Stephanie, but that didn't work out. So he went back to his wife. He was killed in an accident a couple of years ago. His widow then became involved with this other young man and it was probably balanced on a knife edge. Then Stephanie was imprudent, at a party, let her hair down, reverted to type, what ever you like to call it. Let us say she did not present herself to him in at all a favourable manner and he stopped seeing her. Some months later he married the widow. The tragedy of it is I never thought she was capable of really loving anyone and now it seems she cannot fall out of love with him."

"So perhaps my proposal would take her mind off of him?"

"It might. It all depends how receptive she feels. She could still be feeling very bitter and hostile."

"It sounds as if my proposal couldn't have come too soon. It may be the very thing she needs."

"You may be right," she said slowly, "but I am not looking forward to going to see her."

They slowly retraced their steps back down to the cottage. The sun had set behind the hills by the time they reached it and a cool, damp, dusk was descending upon the valley. "Our day is nearly over," she said sadly. "Oh, Michael, this is dreadful! After all I have said today, now that we have come to the time to part, you must tell me that I must be strong and go back. I have never been tempted like this before! Be strong for me. I am so afraid of now being weak!"

He lifted her head from his shoulder and kissed her brow. "It is harder for me, as I have no-one to go back to."

"Don't," she whispered, "don't say things like that."

"But you must go back until either fate releases you from the bonds you have placed around yourself, or you can come to me freely, without any impediment. You must go back to your husband, and to the other Rose Cottage, and to go and see Stephanie. We must both be patient. Everything may not be right now, but it will come right in the end."

"Thank you," she said softly, and they went indoors.