



*The Black Hound of
Dartmoor*

The Black Hound of Dartmoor

The Storyteller - J S Morey

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The Black Hound of Dartmoor

A tale of moorland myth, legend and romance

Chapter One

The farm was asleep, baking in an afternoon sun.

A panel in the barn door cracked in the dry heat, disturbing the border collie from her slumbers. She lay in the centre of the yard - in full sun - sprawled on her back. She soon closed her eyes again, breathing heavily as sleep overtook her. Seconds later she was yelping and kicking furiously, eyes open but without seeing - in her mind, racing across some imaginary field, acting out a familiar dream; chasing rabbits. She ceased as they darted to safety into bolt-holes.

Some things never change.

Calm descended again. Peace returned to the old Devon longhouse built into the hillside, deliberately, for its protection against foul weather. But there was no protection from the hot sun apart from a gentle wind. A light summer breeze swept down from the hillside, through a willow's tresses. The fine branches and leaves created a whooshing sound, coming to rest quietly and as quickly as they'd disturbed the silence. The coolness of the air provided welcome relief from the hot rays baking the open moor that afternoon.

'Tis like a cauldron on days like this,' yawned the farmer.

He, too, had been woken by the barn door, which now decided to open and close repeatedly at the bidding of the fractious breeze, as if complaining. Daniel surveyed the pot of cider by his chair. It was nearly empty, then totally so as he drained what was left in a swallow.

Now *he* complained. 'Ugh! Warm.'

'Bit early for that, anyway, Dan me boy,' said Bessie, his young wife. She called him 'boy' but it was she who was his junior, by some thirty years - marrying as she had for security at first but, nevertheless, not without a touch of love, later.

His first wife had been taken early. Scarlet fever.

Meanwhile Bessie continued knitting, her needles clicking eagerly as they seemed to sense her own impatience to complete the waistcoat she'd chosen for him. Daniel pondered thoughtfully on her last remark in the hope of finding some justification for drinking during the day. Or excuse.

He found one, eventually.

'Or late, if you consider to be my lunchtime sup.'

Her 'humph' showed a resignation at his remark.

'Best I go and check the sheep in that far grazing afore supertime.'

Old bones strained to bear not inconsiderable bulk as he rose from his chair. Bessie stayed put, determined to finish at least two pockets before she it was time to prepare supper. They'd both taken rare advantage in the fine afternoon to sit out - together - in the garden overlooking the yard. Daniel had risen early that morning, as usual, keen to lift a few bales while the weather held. But he was still careful to wait until the sun had been up a few hours. It was essential for them to be dry before being stored for winter. The last thing he wanted was to be in too much of a hurry to stack them inside - too green, still damp from the morning dew - only to be awakened in the middle of the night weeks later with the barn alight. He knew it was something to be avoided, even if he couldn't explain it away with any learned scientific knowledge. It wasn't necessary. He didn't *have* to know about the principles of spontaneous combustion from the little schooling he'd received, to understand the dangers of stacking hay before its moisture content was low.

It was now time to attend to evening chores.

He made his way to the end of the Devon Longhouse. It was where his collies lay, also taking a nap. A century or two previously it might have been the winter quarters for a milker and her calf, but now it was home to his three sheepdogs.

'Come on, George, Millie, stir yourselves,' he called out, soon joined by the third, Jenny, who'd been the one asleep in the yard. She instinctively responded to her master's voice.

They took their time going about business as the sun continued to beat down on them; flies were irritating the mare as she shook her head and flicked her ears for some respite.

It was a fair distance to the far meadow on foot across the fields, so he'd elected to take the pony and trap rather than walk. Once a rarity for him to take the easier option in his youth, it was now the norm even on the best of days. It meant taking a different route, along narrow lanes banked high either side by earth, stone and hawthorn. They provided welcome shade for the most part. In all seasons - from frequent blizzards in winter and high sun in summer; like now. The pony and trap saved Daniel's legs if any of the sheep needed carrying back to the farm for treatment. He had the back of the trap always ready to take them home, carrying an injured or sick lamb across his shoulders no longer physically possible.

Oh, and there was a third bonus afforded by the small rig. If he made decent time completing the real task in hand, *and* if there was nothing serious arising during his stock inspection, he might manage a jar or two of cider at The Saracen's Head before going home. He knew he was on safe ground thanks to the kindness and understanding of his beloved Bessie.

It had been the single quality he noticed in her, on their first meeting at the village dance, the evening after Widecombe Fair. Granted, he was just a little worse for wear by ten o'clock - he'd arrived late after a few jars at the pub beforehand - but, as he would often say many a time afterwards (and a saying usually reserved for buying livestock at market) he could spot

a good 'un when he saw one.

It was therefore not surprising she took her time cooking supper, as usual anticipating that a few jars of cider might still be on his 'to-do' list.

By the time Daniel reached the far grazing, cloud cover had turned a balmy day into one where chill air from the north east made him turn up his collar. Fearing it might even threaten rain he looked for its tell-tale signs. His eyes swept the crest of the nearby tors for tentacles of mist creeping towards him.

No. The horizon was clear - for the time being.

'Woah,' he called soothingly to the mare. It was the signal for all three dogs to leap off the trap, anticipating its coming to a halt. They made for the gap at the base of the dry-stone wall next to the stile, put there for badgers as well as working dogs. They shot through, running in circles as they chased each other excitedly, not waiting for their master.

'Steady, you lot,' cursed Daniel, fearful the sheep might get too scatty and bolt. It only took one ewe to lead the rest. It wouldn't be the first time they'd clambered over the stone wall bordering the pound, escaping onto the open moor. That would be most inconvenient and unnecessary, delaying his trip to the The Saracen's where, in *his* eyes, a well-earned couple of pints had his name on them.

He began his inspection at a measured pace. The boundary wall was about 300 yards in circumference, usually taking him twenty minutes or so to complete, allowing for 'stoppages' - should a section of wall ever need a quick repair. The little Dartmoor ponies were usually to blame for the damage. They had a habit of using the tops of the walls on which to scratch themselves. Sometimes any loose stones toppled, lowering the wall sufficient for Daniel's White Face sheep to escape. This time he was in luck. Thanks to the absence of the other fear - bluebottles - none of the flock seemed to be suffering from maggots. Or desertion.

Once Daniel joined the three border collies they quickly settled down, remaining close and ever vigilant to commands their master might bestow upon them. They followed quietly now at a respectful distance until they were back at the place they'd started. Without bidding, they scrambled back onto the trap, ready for the off.

The mare struck a brisk pace, motivated perhaps by her own thirst. After ten minutes, anticipating The Saracens was their next destination, the collies were soon wagging their tails, barking in turn in expectation of a morsel of meat that might come their way. There was usually at least someone in the bar generous enough to share the last of their stew.

The landlord's boy had heard the commotion and came out to greet them, taking the reins of Daniel's pony and leading her to a trough of cool spring water. Daniel made his way into the darkness of the public bar, a line of collies behind him. He tossed his coppers over the counter in payment just as the jar of scrumpy slid across the smooth wooden counter top to where he stood.

'Looks like 'e's ready for 'e,' announced the landlord.

After years of practice, judging the distance from himself to a customer's outstretched hand, the landlord made sure each welcome jar arrived at its destination without a drop spilt. Daniel drained half the jar in energetic gulps before replying, exhaling, then bringing up wind trapped inside his gullet.

'Been a long day,' said Daniel, justifying his thirst.

By now, his eyes had adjusted to the gloom so he could make out the familiar face of each neighbour. He raised his jar in acknowledgement to them in turn before draining it completely, setting it firmly down on the bar for a refill.

He acknowledged each fellow drinker, in turn.

'Jim...Jonno...Mark...'

He tossed another couple of coppers on the counter in payment. But someone was missing.

'Where's Peter? Bit late ain't 'e?'

He spoke too soon. Heads turned immediately door-wards as the latch clattered. Peter burst in out of breath, panting.

'Thought I'd find you 'ere, Dan,' he gasped. 'You better get 'ome real quick.'

Daniel put down his jar, its contents as yet untouched. He waited for Peter to catch his breath, impatient for him to explain.

'What's goin' on?'

'They're at your place. I saw 'em go in. I rushed straight over 'ere. You need to get back.'

'*Who* went in...?'

'King Billy's men. Four of 'em. Armed, they was. Two on 'oss-back, another two with th'oss pulling a meat wagon. They come to arrest 'e, s'far as I could tell.'

Daniel headed for the door, stopped, then turned back, grabbing his full jar of cider to down it in one go. Wiping his sleeve across his wet chin, he hurried outside. His dogs followed, beating him to the rig as he rushed to untie his pony and trap. He leapt onto the bench seat, catching hold of the reins. The weight of Daniel in itself, plus the three dogs, was enough to stir the mare into action. Used to such emergencies from time to time, she responded instantly to Daniel's bidding, starting at a trot then gathering pace as they joined the highway, heading for home.

'Come on, old gel,' urged Daniel, to which the dogs echoed in unison, barking their encouragement at the mare. But he knew she was doing her best and, as always, spared the reins or whip. Was it his imagination or did the mare really pick up speed at the behest of the dogs?

The journey from The Saracens usually took twenty minutes at normal pace, allowing for Daniel to stop on the way to wet the wheel of the trap. He had no time for that diversion now. He made it home in ten. The mare arrived lathered up as

they entered the farmyard. He dropped the reins. Despite his sixty years he jumped from the trap, in haste to find Bessie. She met him half way, emerging tearfully from the kitchen.

He gathered her up in his strong arms.

Chapter Two

'They didn't catch you, then?'

Bessie was drying her eyes with her apron.

'I told 'em you weren't 'ere and sent them up over to Bellever, saying you'd gone to borrow some feed from Jedediah Hannaford.'

'Course they didn't catch us. We'm 'ere ain't us?' He regretted his sharp tone as soon as the words left him. 'Sorry, Bess darlin'. Did they 'urt 'e?'

'No. They were a bit shittern faced when I told 'em you were out. Disappointed they was. Came all the way from Tavistock they 'ad, with an arrest warrant. But once they'd cooled down they were quite kind as if they didn't enjoy what they'd been asked to do. They frightened me, though. They could see I was upset.'

'What's this warrant all about?'

'Said you'd killed a man. They got witnesses. Came to take you back in that there meat wagon.'

'How come they didn't wait 'ere for me?'

'Wanted to get back to Tavy afore dark. 'fraid of the 'airy 'and, I suppose.'

'You tellum that old tale?'

'Might 'ave slipped out.' Bessie managed a guilty smile, she was a bit sheepish, but calmer. 'For once it's just as well you stopped off at The Sarry.'

Cider has a certain smell about it, especially prominent on a person hot after exertion or over-excitement. He didn't bother asking her how she knew about The Saracens. She was looking for more than a confession from him on something she knew he would have done anyway. It wouldn't be the first time he stopped off after work. But kill a man?

'So *did* you?' she asked.

'Did I *what*?'

'*Kill*...whoever it was. You *were* there yesterday. Market day. And you *did* act a bit strange when you got back. Finally.'

'So I was. There, I mean. But I only tapped 'im. Knocked 'im out. Slightly.'

'Knocked 'im out? Slightly?' she asked, not convinced. 'How 'ard?'

'Just a little. Like I said, 'twas just a tap.'

'For no good reason, I suppose?' said Bessie.

'He was cheatin'.'

What had he said? Too late. The words were out. He'd given *himself* away. Daniel turned to hide *his* guilt. He'd promised he wouldn't get drawn into a game or two at market.

But the truth was out.

'Gambling? Again?' Bessie was now about to explode.

'But I was *winnin*'.'

'How much?'

'I spent it,' he confessed.

'On what? Don't see no extra vittles.'

'On this.'

His surprise for her was still in his coat, the same coat he wore to market. Actually, it was also the same coat he wore every day, except Sundays.

Today was Saturday.

He knew she loved jewellery. He reached into the depths of his inside pocket, hoping it was still there from yesterday.

It was safe; *he* was safe. Her eyes lit up.

By the look on her face it worked as planned.

'Ah... it's...beautiful.'

Her tone had now softened, as had her temper, overcome by the brilliance of the cameo brooch he placed so lovingly into her hand. But she quickly regained her wits, spotting his motive and remembering the harsh words they'd just exchanged, and why.

'Worth dying for, maybe; but not worth killing for...'

She made it know he wasn't out of the woods.

'I didn't kill him. He wasn't dead.'

'Just a tap, you say.'

'That's right. Just a *little* tap. After he cheated.'

'Cheated? At...?'

'Devil Among the Tailors,' said Daniel, as if that revelation made everything alright.

'How can anyone cheat at that?'

'He knocked 'em over with his 'and, and I saw 'im do it. So did the others. I got witnesses!'

'So you 'tapped' him?'

'Slightly,' repeated Daniel, making a harmless sweeping of his hand in thin air to stress how gently he'd 'tapped' him.

'But you still won?'

'Yes.'

So where's the rest of the money?' Brooch or now brooch, she wasn't letting him off lightly.

'Ah...,' Daniel said, in a way that told Bessie there was another confession due. 'That's the other thing.'

'You mean there's *more*?' Her patience was being tested.

'Yes. He didn't pay up.'

'But the cameo...'

She seemed puzzled.

'Not all of it,' he explained. 'On the last throw, when he lost, he paid me in silver coin. He got up to go but when I went to pick it up... it vanished. The coins turned into leaves and just blew away as soon as he opened the tavern door.'

Daniel paused, studying her face to see if she had more questions to ask. She hadn't. So he continued.

'That's when I went after him... *and tapped him.*'

'With your hand?'

'Yes, although here's the other thing. My hand just happened to be holding a jar of cider.'

Bessie exploded again. 'You hit him with...?'

'It was empty. I promise. The jar was empty. You don't think I'm stupid enough to waste a full jar of cider, do 'e?'

His air of righteousness was not convincing.

'You really *do* want me to answer that?' she asked, after which they both fell silent. It was a lot of information to take in, at least for Bessie. And a lot to unburden...for Daniel.

Then something dawned on her, something very profound; so much so she shuddered at the thought running through her head. She spoke. But in a whisper.

'You don't think...?'

'Nah.'

He knew what she was going to say.

'Why not?' she continued.

'T'was nearly two hundred years ago.'

'Same name. Tavistock. The *Tavistock* Inn, Poundsgate, right after a bolt of lightning struck Widecombe Church...'

'...and Tavistock is where I struck...,' he concluded.

'Struck the Devil himself,' she said with a sense of finality.

'I'd better confess.'

Daniel was weighing up the consequences.

'What?'

'Why not? Cant' try me for killing a ghost. Who's going to convict someone for killing The Dark One?'

She had to admit he had a point...

It was noon the following day before Daniel and Bessie arrived at the magistrate's office in Tavistock. It was only after a series of debates that lasted all evening and which, even though at times they reached what could be best described as 'argument level', resulted in Daniel being the victor. For once.

After that it was a sleepless night for two reasons.

First, there was the dilemma proving to magistrates it was, indeed, The Dark One who Daniel had 'tapped', apparently

resulting in his death.

The second question was whether the authorities would, in fact, accept it was lawful to kill the Devil himself. They had no visible proof of his identity - assuming they believed Daniel's defence - but they still decided to send soldiers with a warrant for his arrest that day. It was those questions that occupied most of their thoughts as they set out for Tavistock.

'I do hope they got back alright.'

Bessie chuckled to herself as the pony and trap trotted gamely past The Saracen's Head, casting a nervous eye across to Wiseman's Wood. She was especially aware of the myths and legends surrounding the mysterious standing stones at Merrivale and the Prehistoric Settlement, mindful of how she'd sown the seeds of the Hairy Hand, planting fearful thoughts in the King's men the previous day.

Was she feeling guilty?

Not really. They were soldiers, after all. But then her own fears were stirred - Daniel's too - as the mare flinched at something moving behind a large patch of gorse by the roadside.

'What's *that*?' she asked.

He was dismissive. 'Ask the mare. Didn't see nothin'.'

'There it goes again, looks like...'

Bessie had seen something moving.

Now Daniel had, too. '...a black dog,' he added.

'Big 'un, too,' she agreed. 'You don't think it's...'

'The Black Hound? Nah,' Daniel said. 'He's off down Dean Combe way - if he exists at all, that is.'

Whatever it was, the unexplained rustling and fleeting sighting was enough to spook them, as well as the mare. Not only that, it was no coincidence that the haunting by a large black dog - said to be the ghost of Weaver Knowles - was alleged to be a regular sighting at a pool near Dean Prior, albeit quite a distance away, towards Plymouth. It was

uncanny they'd both had the same thought. It could have been no more than a Galloway foraging in the thicket, but it was enough for the mare to gather pace, to put Merrivale behind them. Daniel and Bessie gave the pony her head and, before long, the hour or so journey came to an end ahead of time.

They headed straight for the magistrate's office.

Luckily the coroner was in attendance even though it was a Saturday and, surprisingly he was in a receptive and jovial mood. It was almost with some relief that he welcomed them into his study, showing no surprise to find them seated in front of him. That said, it may equally have been surprising that Daniel wasn't shackled and delivered at the King's pleasure.

Even though the official wasn't able to receive him within the jurisdiction or formal setting of a public hearing, he still listened intently to Daniel's side of events. Much to Daniel and Bessie's annoyance he continued to respond with some levity verging on amusement. This wasn't helped by the fact he allowed Daniel to finish *the whole story* - in finest detail - before he, the coroner, explained the reason behind his lack of formality and rather bemused interest. Bessie, on the other hand, certainly *didn't* take kindly to his attitude and came straight to the point.

'So what's so funny?'

The coroner raised a hand to his mouth to stifle his laughter before replying. 'All this has been enlightening, Mr Sercombe, but for one important factor.'

'And that is...?' Bessie jumped in, on behalf of Daniel.

'As I was about to say, Madam, in order for a - shall we say, death - to have occurred, there has to be a body. A dead body.'

What a strange statement. It drew nothing more than blank looks from Bessie and Daniel, until he couldn't stand it any more. Should he keep quiet or, if he did say any more, would it just make things worse for him? Deepen his guilt?

He decided to risk incriminating himself.

'But you have it. The body. You took him. I saw you carry him off on a stretcher from where I was - across the road from The Queens Head - just before I slipped away to head home. I thought he'd just been knocked out, unconscious but alive. Either way, you've definitely got him.'

The coroner adopted a more official tone.

'I'm afraid - or should I say *I'm happy* to say - that's no longer the case. I have no evidence to suggest otherwise. The person, whoever or whatever you 'tapped', as you so eloquently describe it, has disappeared. Escaped. Vanished. The vault into which he'd been deposited overnight was secure, untouched. Even so it was empty the next morning.

'All they found was a pile of dry leaves.'

Those last words from the coroner chilled them to the bone. The coroner remained unphased, unaware of the significance of what he'd just revealed. He continued in his dismissal of any crime, ushering them to the door.

'Without a body there can be no death. The court's position is simple: no body - no death - no charge to answer.'

'So...?'

'So you're free to go.'

Daniel and Bessie were dumbstruck.

'Free?'

'Totally,' the coroner confirmed, 'and, if you will forgive the pun, *you can take your leaves.*'

He closed the door behind them.

Chapter Three

A month passed since the incident in Tavistock, but questions still remained unanswered. Whatever the truth behind it, whether Daniel *had* encountered The Dark One in that wager in the pub on market day - or not - the mysterious ending still haunted him.

But on reflection, in his mind's eye, it *hadn't* ended.

Was the person he'd simply 'tapped' (as far as he was concerned, and ignoring the fact that he was holding his drinking vessel at the time) was *that* person real or imagined? If so, he couldn't have been the only one in the pub with a vivid imagination. They'd all seen 'the person'. As the King's men stated when they came to serve the warrant, 'there were witnesses'.

But *was* he dead, or simply unconscious? And, if he really *was* the spectre Bessie insisted he must have been, was he simply playing a trick on everyone in general and on Daniel in particular, true to his character? *Pretending* to be dead but actually alive and only *feigning* death just to get Daniel in trouble? Either way, it didn't explain how he'd escaped.

Daniel had a month to turn it over and over in his head. With extended hindsight the more he thought, the more it made sense. By whatever means this spectre of a figure had managed to achieve it, by trickery or otherwise, he'd been able to 'raise himself from the dead'. He'd released himself from the mortuary vaults, escaping into the night.

And there was another clue that supported this theory.

His horse.

The black stallion upon which he, allegedly, had arrived earlier that day at Tavistock market, which he'd stabled at the Queen's Head, was gone the next morning. That raised more questions. A horse of that pedigree and value would have

been a prime target for thieves.

That was one possibility. He was stolen.

However, the stable lad always slept overnight above the stalls and had neither heard, nor seen, anything. That said - and this is pure speculation - it wouldn't have been beyond the wit of someone with the kind of powers possessed by The Dark One, to spirit away his own horse, quite literally, whilst the stable boy slept. The next morning the stall was empty even though neither latch nor lock had been disturbed or broken. There was no sign of entry nor exit by anyone, nor *anything*. No evidence of such, except for a pile of leaves scattered on the otherwise clean bedding. *Dead* leaves.

Should Daniel be worried?

As things turned out he was off the hook and free of any criminal charges, whether for simple assault or even murder. So it wouldn't be from the authorities that he should fear reprisals - not from The Crown, in any case. Not any more.

A full month had passed. No harm had beset either himself or Bessie. Nor did he, nor Bessie, have any close family against whom revenge could be metered.

Apart from one, perhaps?

He'd had a son but, as far as he knew, he was dead. Perished, so the story was told, lost at sea fighting Napoleon in one of the many naval battles. It was something Daniel never spoke about, but he thought about his loss now. But why was that? And why now?

It had been a source of disquiet and unease Daniel felt increasingly over time, linked in part to his being some thirty years older than his beloved Bessie. He sensed his own mortality. When it was time for him to finally depart this earth, with Bessie left to fend on her own - a probability rather than a mere possibility - he had no heir to take over the tenancy.

As the law stood, Bessie would be tossed out onto the street on the basis that no male family member lived on the

farm to run it day to day. It was a condition of the tenancy.

But he began to notice other things, notably a feeling of being watched. His dogs felt it too. They often growled at nothing in particular *as far as he could see*, but he sensed a presence. Sometimes it might be a rustling behind a scattering of rocks on open moor or behind a hedgerow on the road out to The Saracens. It made his skin crawl, especially when the menace seemed so intense that George, Millie and Jenny would suddenly stand up, barking at thin air, refusing to move from the spot when Daniel commanded.

They appeared to be protecting him.

But from what?

The story of a black dog haunting the pool at Deancombe was still fresh in the minds of many locals in the area - including Daniel and Bessie. She used the same knitting yarn as the recently deceased Weaver Holmes, travelling to buy it from the same cottagers near Buckfastleigh, the same locals who previously used to supply the much maligned weaver. She'd dismissed the stories of his allegedly returning from the grave to haunt the aptly renamed Hound Pool. She assumed it was just a story created and circulated by owners of the large country estates to deter poachers.

Now she wasn't so sure; she instilled that fear into Daniel.

And then there was similarity with the tale of the visit of The Dark One to collect his debt from local gambler Jan Reynolds, who'd fallen asleep in Widecombe church during a service. On his way to the church, The Dark One had stopped by at The Tavistock Inn, Poundsgate, to ask directions. He took refreshment, rode away but, as the landlord went to pick up the coins left in payment for his ale, they turned into dry leaves and blew away.

Those similarities were too close for comfort.

Weeks passed without event until Daniel's next visit to

Tavistock market. This time he was only allowed to go on one condition, one to which he'd promised Bessie and was foremost in his mind - that he should abstain from gambling of *any kind*. He kept his word.

Daniel also kept reasonably sober and, by mid-day had turned a profit, having sold all his produce - namely the three brace of partridge he bagged a day or two before on Corndon. He'd had his eye on the birds a few weeks beforehand and had bided his time before bagging them, leaving it to the last minute before adding them to his quota so they would be fresh to market. He sold them all but there was just one drawback.

His prospective buyer, although well-known to Daniel for being trustworthy, insisted that Daniel deliver the birds to his farm, where his wife would see that he was paid. Again, gambling had played its part, the sport having stripped the buyer - not Daniel - of immediate funds with which to settle his account. But Daniel wasn't stupid. He wasn't going to part with his birds without payment. The drawback was that the buyer lived in Yelverton - a little out of the way, but 'do-able'.

It was barely past noon when Daniel agreed to the arrangement. He struck for home early, allowing time for the diversion to pick up payment. The real drawback came shortly after Daniel had left Yelverton. He was free of the produce he'd taken to market, full of funds, now eager to prove to Bessie how well he'd done.

What could possibly ruin such a successful day?

He was soon to find out.

The mare had also fared well that day, taking the journey to market in her stride. On the way home, although hesitating and seeming to challenge Daniel at being driven southwards to Yelverton - rather than immediately east via Princetown - they were making good progress.

That's when Daniel's eagerness got the better of him. A short-cut via Foxtor Mires could trim a mile or two off the

journey. He'd found a track wide enough to take a pony and trap before, and not through the midst of the boggy expanse, but along the fringes. It worked. As long as they didn't stray.

At least today it was clear, in full sunlight.

All seemed to be going well until the once sunny day turned chilly and wet and, worst of all, misty. Within ten minutes Daniel was engulfed in a blanket of cloud, not able to see more than a few yards ahead of himself or the mare, even though there were still hours of daylight left. On they drove but slowly now, any prospect of saving time lost. Their main purpose was to simply get home safe.

It's said that Dartmoor ponies are able to pick their way through the mires, avoiding sinking into the quakers - those deep watery bogs covered with moss and resembling firm ground to the unwary. Ponies trace well-trodden paths to get from one area of solid ground to the other. Daniel was willing to believe it to be true, trusting the mare to choose the right route, east, even if they did stray with no telling where they might come out. It wasn't until they arrived at a fork in the now almost unrecognisable track that the mare hesitated.

Should she fork left? or right?

Her mind was about to be made up for her. She heard, then saw, something through the mist. She blew heavily, steam billowing from her nostrils as an unfamiliar shadowy figure appeared before them. Daniel's heart was pounding in his chest. The shape drew closer and its identity became clearer. Just a little.

It wasn't a *human* shape.

From its size he first took it to be a Dartmoor foal, but he wasn't sure - a foal on its own? With no mare? Then its identity became certain. It was a large dog; a large *black* dog. But was everything really as it appeared to be? His thoughts turned immediately to Weaver Knowles and the hound into which, so the story went, he'd turned when cursed by the local

parson. Should he be afraid? Should he fear for his life?

Strange as it may seem, he didn't think so.

He was surprised at himself as well as at the mare, when a sudden calm came over both of them. Instead of threatening or even attacking them, the black hound turned away from them slowly, taking the left fork in the path. It even seemed to beckon. The mare reacted first, unchallenged and unaided by Daniel as she followed the black shape closely, mists swirling about them. The hound continued silently and confidently ahead of them, only occasionally looking round to make sure they still followed. It was so quiet; so deathly quiet, even the skylarks were silent. The only sound was of occasional hooves on loose stone, and the creaking of the trap as the uneven path strained the loose joints of the tailgate. There were no birds singing, no breeze to disturb gorse, rowan or what few stunted trees there were; only the trickle of small streams and rivulets draining into the mires.

On they walked; slowly.

A group of magpies lay quietly in the wet grassland as if in wait. Some might call them 'a charm of magpies', or others 'a murder of magpies', perhaps depending on their intent. They allowed the black hound to pass before *they* rose suddenly, deliberately startling the mare as the trap drew alongside. It took her offguard causing her to rear up. Her sudden, defensive movement unbalanced the trap - and Daniel. One wheel was now suspended in the air, before tipping sideways, sufficient to topple Daniel backwards into the mire below.

As he was falling the birds swooped over him in celebration at seeing an unfortunate becoming yet another victim of Foxtor Mires. Was it Daniel's imagination or did he hear voices over him chanting the familiar nursery rhyme he'd learnt as a small boy at school, about the the fortune awaiting us on the sight of magpies:

One for sorrow, Two for joy,

*Three for a girl, Four for a boy,
Five for silver, Six for gold,
Seven for a secret never to be told.
Eight for a wish, Nine for a kiss,
Ten for surprise no wise man should miss,
Eleven for health, Twelve for wealth,
Thirteen beware it's the devil himself...*

How many birds were there?

He landed well enough. It was soft; too soft. The weight of his coat and the waters of the bog filled his boots dragging him down. He was stuck. All he could do was cry for help for someone to save him.

But who? The birds continued to dive overhead.

The hound responded first. The mare was purely intent on saving herself by not allowing the trap to drag her in with him. She forced herself up and managed to take a few short steps forward until the weight of the trap was no longer pulling on her down. She looked doomed.

But what of Daniel?

The more he thrashed about the more he sank. Throwing caution to the wind he tentatively allowed his feet to reach down, hoping to find solid ground, but to no avail. He just sank lower. But who was that 'someone' coming to his rescue? It was certainly not someone he expected.

It was the black hound.

He came trotting back to the edge of the quaker into which Daniel had been thrown. But what could a hound do? How could he drag the weight of a fully grown man out of the sticky mass of the bog without getting into trouble himself? Then the inexplicable happened. The black hound changed shape.

Into a man.

The black fur of what once covered an Irish Wolfhound

gradually changed into human clothing: a hat, a black cape, breeches and black boots, clothing of the kind worn by someone of some wealth and social standing. It was clearly no ordinary man and not a peasant farmer or labourer. As the mist cleared slightly Daniel recognised him. But he hardly believed his eyes. From the drawings and sketches he'd seen in the local gazette when they covered stories of the haunting of Deancombe Pool he was now certain, as impossible as it might seem.

It was none other than Knowles - Weaver Knowles.

But he was dead, wasn't he?

'Reach out with the end of your cane,' the weaver called. 'I'll pull you in if I can only find the strength.'

Daniel reached out, as did Knowles, catching the end of the cane and pulling. But it was no good. The sludge and slime of the boggy mire was so slippery, Knowles couldn't keep a firm grip. He tried again, and again but, after each attempt, Daniel sank slowly deeper and deeper. Panic set in.

Thirteen magpies continued their morbid aerial dance.

Knowles was now so close to Daniel that, even as the mist thickened again and swirled around them, he could make out his distinctive features. He could see tears streaming down Knowles's face as panic overtook him, too. He spoke once more, his voice trembling as he sensed Daniel slipping away.

'I fear I am losing you, sir. I am so sorry. It grieves me to fail you in death, just as I failed so many others in life. Since departing this earth I have made it my pledge to help my fellow man, making up for all the wickedness and greed I bestowed on poor cottagers, friends and neighbours when I lived.

'It is now my mission to help the weary or lost traveller, to save crops from ruin by storm, to rescue young lambs fallen into stream or river, and to help the poor farmer bring home the harvest if they lack family or funds to pay itinerant workers.

‘If I cannot save you now, sir, which seems unlikely, is there anything I can do to compensate or to comfort those you leave behind? A wife, perhaps? Son, or daughter?’

‘Bessie,’ shouted the frantic Daniel as the waters of the mire finally closed around him. ‘Give her my love, make sure she never goes hungry or is without shelter and, if the Good Lord wills it, find a way for her to keep the farm. Don’t let them take it away.

‘Bessieeeee....!’

He perished.

It was a miserable fate blessed with a final wish, the vision and the name of his beloved on his lips as he sank. He was gone, disappeared, swallowed up in the murky depths of Foxtor Mires. Like so many before him.

The thirteen magpies were nowhere to be seen.

Chapter Four

As wicked, mercenary or unpopular as Knowles might have been in life, in death his spirit still lived with the sole (or should that be *soul*?) purpose of providing succour and spreading goodness. For the sake of convenience, and so that he remained largely unrecognised and undetected, he'd assumed the shape and existence of a black hound. Most of the time. It also meant that in the main, folk would leave him alone - out of fear.

On this tragic occasion, remorse at not being able to save the drowning man swept over him as he knelt in prayer over the spot where Daniel had met his cruel fate. Eventually he rose, going over to where the mare still stood, oblivious to the tragedy that had befallen her master. As natural as such an unnatural act could ever be, he changed back into the black hound, but out of sight of the mare for fear of frightening her.

Once he'd returned to the shape of the hound, he made his way to the pony and trap, taking the reins in his teeth. He led them safely away from the perils of Foxtor Mires. So at the time, he assumed the form of the black hound - the mare unphased by the presence of an animal. In whatever guise the weaver chose, Knowles could rely on survival instincts and senses most suited to negotiating the wilds and dangers of the remote moorland.

Less than an hour later the farm came into view. By that time the mist had risen, allowing them clear vision, sun and warmth, as they completed the rest of the journey in safety. They did so but without Daniel and without his body, which was never found. Years later Daniel still hadn't resurfaced.

As for Weaver Knowles, on that day, after the tragedy, he entered the farm gates *as Knowles* but not looking forward to delivering his account of Daniel's sad demise. In life, his ability

to persuade, negotiate, and to spin a plausible tale had been part of his success. He applied those skills when explaining Daniel's fate to the distraught Bessie. As awful as that task was, for both Knowles and for Bessie, she appeared to accept his death with relative calm after the initial shock. A few glasses of port and brandy also helped. She even offered Knowles supper followed by a soft mattress for the night in the guest room. It had been the room of Daniel's boy, William, before he'd left home. It was midnight when Bessie and Knowles retired.

Separately.

Dawn broke with Bessie rising early as usual, to the crowing of the Rhode Island Red cockerel. Her first task was always to feed George, Millie and Jenny. After that she braved the chilly morning air, crossing the yard with the collies in train, to fetch a fresh warm pail of milk from her favourite Devon Red milker. Ten minutes later she had eggs, bacon and tomatoes - plus foraged fungi - frying away on the stove with a kettle boiling for a pot of tea.

She wasn't exactly quiet whilst preparing breakfast - deliberately so - and therefore surprised not to hear the boards in the guest room creaking overhead. She assumed the noise and smell of bacon would stir Knowles into going about his ablutions. She called up the stairs. No answer.

She waited - and called again. In the absence of a sound *of any kind* she climbed the stairs hesitantly, calling as she ascended, finally arriving at the closed door to the guest room.

She knocked gently. No answer.

She knocked again, slipping open the latch as she did so, entering the room. To no-one. The bed was undisturbed, the room empty.

Knowles had gone.

She cast her eyes around the room for any signs that he'd

actually been there, but there was nothing. No clothes. Strangely enough, he'd arrived without luggage. The only clue that anybody *had* been there *at all* was the empty glass into which his nightcap - a tot of brandy - had been poured.

Under the tumbler was a note.

It was an account detailing how he, Knowles, had come across the unfortunate Daniel, had tried in vain to save him, but confirming that Daniel had died at the scene but with no body as evidence. Knowles had thought of everything. Although he'd already described in some detail how he'd come across Daniel by chance, but had been unable to save him, at least Bessie also had written proof *from an eye witness* of the tragic event. It was addressed to 'The Coroner, Tavistock'. Next to the written declaration he'd left another note to Bessie, saying: 'you might need this'. It referred to the fact she might need proof of death so that a death certificate could be issued. Otherwise, she would have to wait for a statutory seven years before he was officially dead.

He signed it using only his initials followed by an address: 'Deancombe'.

A church service was held to celebrate the life of Daniel William Sercombe two week later, blessing his memory. There was no body and, therefore, no grave or gravestone, so it was agreed there would be a commemorative stone laid for him.

The service was well attended by neighbours and people Daniel knew from the market. They'd travelled from Tavistock. 'Neighbours' could be described as anyone from as far afield as five miles from the farm. That was usual on the moor although, to expect people from five miles - as the crow flies - to be referred to as 'neighbours' - in the city - would have been impossible.

In this part of the moor, as is usually the case anywhere so remote as Dartmoor, you knew everyone for as far as the eye

could see, even though you might not meet them or engage them in conversation more than once a year.

In this case, that event was usually Widecombe Fair or Sharberton Horse Sales, or afterwards at The Forest Inn.

But Daniel's passing was more than the end of a life. Much more. Without an heir, it would be the last page in the long history of a family who'd always farmed the moor. It was a line that stretched back more than three centuries of Sercombes or, as they were often called, Southcomb, or Sharracombe - whose farm buildings still stand today a few miles from Bishopsteignton, a village in-country near Teignmouth.

Bessie returned to the farm after the service - alone. She dreaded her first night in an empty house. George, Millie and Jenny would be with her of course, but they only added to the sense of loss. It was days before severe hunger forced any of the collies to touch a morsel of food, pining as they were for their beloved master. They clung to Bessie - following her around the house so closely she was in danger of tripping over them. She was wracked with sadness, just managing to carry out daily chores; the essential ones, at least.

When Daniel was alive any thought of the dogs setting foot up the stairs was totally out of the question. Now they volunteered and she encouraged them - keeping her company in what had been the master bedroom, spending each night at the foot of the bed. A few days after the service Bessie's cousin did come over from the north moor to help her cope, and to use the guest room; but she soon had to return, adding more to the feeling of emptiness.

At some stage she knew she'd have to attend to the full demands of running a farm - tending to the sheep in the far grazing as well as the Devon Red milkers closer to home.

As for harvesting, the casual labourers Daniel traditionally used would always be ready and willing, expecting to be

called in as and when the workload demanded. This included Romani families who travelled the moor on a year-round routine, picking up spells of employment at farms during the ever-changing seasons. They had perfected the skill of turning up at exactly the right time, exactly when needed.

It was one such 'knock on the door' she'd expected when the dogs began barking furiously on a late summer morning.

But the caller was no gypsy.

'Mrs Sercombe?' The caller stepped back as she opened the door. The dogs rushed past her skirts to see who it was, sniffing the coat tails of the middle-aged man as he raised his hat in polite greeting.

'Am I addressing Mrs Beatrice Sercombe?'

'Why...yes,' she replied, hesitantly, since she didn't recognise the caller but remained puzzled that *he* seemed to know *her*.

'My name is Barker - Clarence Barker. I represent the estate of the Duchy of Cornwall. It's a matter of business. May I come in?'

With the collie's showing great interest in the visitor, Barker himself seemed reluctant to invite himself inside, but Bessie agreed, at the same time reaching for one of Daniel's canes. Out of habit. She showed him into the kitchen. In the absence of Daniel she was, for the first time, very aware of her need to be careful.

'I'm sorry to turn up unannounced,' he began, 'but I felt a personal visit would be more appropriate than a simple letter, in the circumstances, in case you had some questions.'

'Circumstances? Questions? Not sure I follow you, Mr...Baker?'

'Barker. Clarence Barker,' he repeated. 'From the Duchy.' Barker handed over his card and the envelope he'd been carrying, adding, 'It's all in there.'

Bessie took the mysterious envelope from Barker, breaking

the Duchy seal before taking out the document. She put on her spectacles to examine its contents, reading the first few lines before skipping to the middle part in bold type. It showed dates and reference to 'severance' and 'vacated by' but without really explaining its significance.

'What does it all mean?'

She peered over her wire rims to Barker, who already seemed ready for the question before it left her lips.

'I'm afraid it means you have to leave.'

'Leave? Leave where?' She dreaded the answer.

'The farm. Here. You have to leave the farm. By December 21st to be exact. All of it.'

'All of it? What about...?'

'Your stock and belongings?'

His readiness with answers told her he'd obviously done this before.

'Well, yes.' It was just then that she realised she was more worried about George, Millie and Jenny than anything else - than any material possessions.

'You must take whatever is yours, anything you wish to keep, by December. Anything of value can - or should I say, will - be sold at auction. At Rendells. That's why we're giving you notice well in advance. To make arrangements.'

As many times as Barker had performed this unfortunate task he still found this part upsetting. He was not a cruel or unfeeling person. But he had a job to do.

'Why? Why do I have to leave?' she pleaded. 'What have I done wrong?'

'It's not what you've done, Mrs Sercombe, it's what your husband...'

'Well, you got that wrong,' she bit back indignantly, 'he can't have done nothing. He's been dead these past five weeks.'

'Exactly,' said Barker. 'That's the problem. He died - and, please accept my condolences for your recent loss - but he

died leaving you with no man to run the farm.'

'Don't need no man,' she retorted. 'I can cope.'

'I'm so sorry,' he leaned forward to catch her hand, hopefully to console or reassure her. She snatched it away. He continued. 'I'm sure you can...cope. But that's not the issue. It's the law. The terms of your tenancy. You have to have a man - a husband, son, or male relative - working the farm with you. Living here with you.'

Again, his words only served to bring home how alone she was and how desolate her plight. She buried her face in her apron as the tears flowed. Barker, too, felt the hopelessness of her situation, blowing his nose as emotion got the better of him. It wasn't the first time he'd moved someone to tears.

He hated himself. 'I wish I could...,' he began.

But the words failed him.

Bessie sat, straightened herself in her chair, dried her eyes, then requested Barker to sit too.

'How long have I got?'

He was unsure where this was taking him.

'How long before...what, Mrs Sercombe?'

Clarence Barker had left the farm some half an hour later, a little calmer as well as refreshed by a cup of Bessie's dark brown Ceylon tea, enhanced by a liberal helping of brandy. By the end of his visit he'd been more in need of it than Bessie. He was certainly impressed by her sense of enterprise and her questions, both of which proved to him that there was a woman ready to consider all her options before admitting defeat. She was far from a lost cause.

As Barker had said, *she had to find a man.*

The solicitor's chambers were dark and musty, lit by one solitary oil lamp, morally supported by a thin strip of sunlight from the narrow window. William's eyes had yet to become

accustomed to the darkness, so he was understandably startled when the cloak in the shadowy corner of the room actually moved. A lined, thin-faced figure rose from behind the desk, removing his top hat before reaching across with outstretched hand.

‘You must be William Sercombe?’

‘I am the same.’

The stranger’s hand was cold.

‘Dare I ask if you carry any proof of that?’

‘You may,’ William replied, ‘and I have.’

He handed over an envelope, sliding it across the leather inlaid desktop. Its contents were his most recent discharge papers from the King’s Royal Navy. But William was still mystified by the figure, wondering why he’d tried to trace him, and puzzled by the wording in the classified ‘Notices’ column of the Bristol Post. William paraphrased it.

‘It said in The Post a meeting would be financially rewarding and that you’d reimburse my travel expenses.’

‘Both are correct, young man.’ The dark figure chuckled at William’s directness. ‘I met your late father I’m sorry to say *just* before he died. *He was the one* who asked me to find you.’

‘My father’s...dead?’

The loss of his father was news to William. He was stunned, his blood running cold and draining from his face.

‘Do you mind if I sit?’

The cloaked figure pointed to the seat opposite.

It had been fifteen years since William and Daniel had spoken, or should we say argued, a disagreement that would lead to William leaving the farm to join the navy. It was all coming back to him. It wasn’t until later - after he’d had time to cool down and grow up - that he realised he’d been wrong.

But now it was too late for reconciliation. Daniel was gone. *William was the sole surviving heir.*

Chapter Five

Pride, and the service to the King that he'd signed up to, prevented him returning to make amends with his father. He'd been young, inexperienced, and no more than a boy but he was ambitious and had great ideas for the farm. Daniel, either through lack of desire or faith in his son, had refused to listen. To Daniel, progress was keeping things as they were and how they'd always been. How many times had William promised himself he'd return one day? Now it was too late.

'And my mother?'

'Gone, I'm afraid. Ten years ago. Scarlet fever.'

'The farm?' William questioned.

'Lost, too, unless...'

'Unless what?'

'Unless you go back - *and soon.*'

'Could I ask to whom I'm addressing?'

William was amazed at his own politeness and calmness.

'They used to call me Weaver Knowles.'

'Used to...?'

'It's a long story,' said Knowles. 'One that doesn't concern you.' Instead, he placed two tickets before William. 'One is for the stagecoach leaving at noon. For Tavistock.'

'Two tickets? You're coming with me?'

'Only in spirit,' said Knowles. 'I want no payment for the service of acquainting you with your late father's estate, but there is a reason for that. In Tavistock you will contact Willesford's. They're handling his will. All will be made clear.'

'As for the *two* tickets, once you've concluded business in Tavistock I wish you to do me a favour. I have a request, and I must have your word you will carry it out to the letter.'

William was now more mystified than ever.

'That rather depends on what it is,' he answered.

‘Very well,’ said Knowles. ‘But it’s simple enough. It involves a hound.’

‘A...hound?’

‘Yes, a hound. But a very special hound that I wish you to feed, look after, and keep with you always at the farm - assuming all goes well at Willesford’s and you do take over the tenancy. But you must act quickly, or you’ll lose it.’

‘Yes, of course.’ The task seemed simple enough to William. ‘Where is this...?’

‘Hound? It will be waiting for you at the Coaching House in Buckfastleigh,’ said Knowles. ‘The second ticket will take you there. To Buckfastleigh. But there’s one more thing I wish you to do, which is *the* most important part of it all.

‘Before you take possession of the farm, or even go there, I want you to walk with the hound around the town of Buckfastleigh. Choose a Sunday, either before or straight after the church service when most people are out and about. There I want you to take three circuits of the town, on foot, with the hound beside you on a firm lead. Everyone must see what you’re doing, but you must speak to no-one about *why* you are doing it, nor discuss this with anyone, before or after.’

‘But...?’

‘You don’t *need* to know why, but I will tell you anyway,’ said Knowles. ‘The people in the area have been made to fear a large black hound. There are several false stories circulating about the pool at Deancombe being haunted, and of travellers being terrorised by such a hound at the dead of night. It’s all untrue, of course.

‘The only way to dispel such rumours is by demonstrating to the townsfolk that there *is* a black hound, but that it is harmless. That’s where you come in. Simply walk the hound in full view of everyone so that they can see he is as docile as a lamb. You may allow them - any that are brave enough - to approach the hound and even stroke him, but *you* must

remain silent. And if they ask, whatever you do, say nothing of our meeting, how you came by the hound, and - at all costs - *never mention me by name.*

'Do we have a deal, Mr Sercombe?'

'Uh...yes. I suppose we do,' said William, but he couldn't disguise the fact he found the whole affair weird. He sealed the arrangement with a final handshake, but not before taking an oath on the Bible that he would keep his word.

William had an hour to spare before the stagecoach was due to leave Bristol, long enough for him to collect enough clothing and essentials from his lodgings. Until this... opportunity... came along he'd taken only temporary diggings with the intention of signing up for the next suitable merchant vessel bound for America. His military rank qualified him for a position as Second Officer, at least, so it was just a matter of time before the right ship came along.

Now this venture had interrupted his plans.

Or should he say 'adventure'? But what did he have to lose? All he had to do was see what fate awaited him at Willesford's, and follow orders. He was used to that, at least.

There were no coachmen to be seen so he guessed - and he was right - they were inside the lounge bar enjoying a jar or two of ale before embarking on the first stage of the journey. It would take the best part of three days before they arrived at Tavistock. Three very dry days. He checked to make sure he had the tickets safe in his waistcoat pocket before getting straight onto the coach, happy to wait for the noon departure. And the chance to think. Eventually two coachmen emerged from the Coaching House with just three minutes to spare. After checking his ticket they climbed up to their seats, stirring the team of four into action. They were on their way.

The three day journey involved two nights in coaching inns

as well as frequent stops - 'stages' - to pick up passengers and mail from towns along the way. The first part of the route swept gently down from Bristol into the Somerset levels, then on to the coastal towns of Weston-Super-Mare and Burnham-on-Sea before heading inland to Bridgwater. Next it was Taunton then southwards, missing Exeter to take a less travelled road across country to Crediton and the moors. From Okehampton they dropped down into Tavistock by which time William - as well as the coachmen - were glad to reach the end of their journey, looking forward to a two night break.

That suited William, enabling him to complete business at the solicitors before rejoining the same coach on the third day, to Buckfastleigh via Plymouth.

The rolling of the coach had been no test for William since he'd suffered much more turbulence, pitch and yaw of naval vessels for the past fifteen years. In fact, initially he'd felt rather at home again with the constant motion helping him to doze. But during his waking hours - especially the long days of empty countryside - his mind had been filled mainly with past memories as a farm boy growing up on Dartmoor. He recalled how those blissful hours and early years with his mother and father *had* been filled with love and happiness after all, and it was the good times that occupied his thoughts the most. When he left home, they were lost.

Less happy times, those immediately before his departure, were now reflected upon with a double sadness - partly filled with regret for having caused so much division in the first place, partly because it was now too late to make amends.

Then there was the loss of his mother. How *had* his father coped after the loss of his wife? He regretted not being there to comfort Daniel. Before he left, William had reached an age where his value as a labourer, not short in strength and stamina of a grown man, was something upon which Daniel had begun to rely. Daniel's latter years were lost to William on

so many counts, especially since - as he was soon to discover - Daniel had remarried, after a respectful period of mourning. Other 'discoveries' might still be out there waiting for him, but only if his appointment at the solicitor's went well. It was there he would hear his father's last will and testament.

'Technically you are dead, of course, Mr Sercombe,' Willesford the solicitor began. 'The Duchy have petitioned that all rights to the farm, in essence the tenancy agreement, be nullified and returned to them. The reason is due to you, apparently, being lost at sea for a period exceeding seven years. Which we now know to be false,' he added, 'as long as you can prove that you are your father's son.'

'Here are my papers, my discharge papers from the King's Navy together with a record of my severance pay. Note my signature on the receipt.'

'So you can write, Mr Sercombe?'

There was air of disbelief in the solicitor's tone, so used to non-professional people having to resort to a mere 'X', rather than a written signature under their name.

'And read,' William confirmed, if only as a warning that he was fully capable of checking the terms of the will for himself.

'Very good,' replied the solicitor clearing his throat, 'then you'll be familiar with this confirmation in writing of a verbal oath you have given to a Mr... errr... Knowles... errr... concerning a dog.'

'Hound,' corrected William. 'I understand he's an Irish Wolfhound. I'm to collect him in Buckfastleigh.'

'Quite.'

Willesford was unused to be corrected on a matter of fact, merely pointing to a place at the base of the document for William to sign.

'So the farm comes to me now?'

William had assumed that his entitlement to the tenancy

was what Knowles had meant by 'financially rewarding' but, in the way the solicitor was about to describe his circumstances, it wasn't so straightforward.

'Yes and No. Did you know your father remarried, Mr Sercombe?'

William did. Knowles hadn't told him beforehand, making it a double shock. Knowles had informed him his birth mother had succumbed to scarlet fever, but he'd said nothing about a step-mother - a *new* wife.

'So the farm's not mine? But hers... this...'

'Beatrice Sercombe? Not quite. Let me explain.'

Willesford did. He was speaking *to* William but also speaking *for* his deceased father, interpreting Daniel's letter of intent in his capacity as solicitor and executor of his will.

'So you see,' concluded Willesford, speaking in terms that William would understand rather than the legal jargon of the will document, 'you have control of the farm - as well as having to meet the conditions of the tenancy agreement, including rent - but your... step-mother retains full rights of occupancy.'

'You mean she can live there?' asked William.

'If she so wishes which, as I understand, she does. And she is to receive a living allowance. Most importantly, it was an express wish of your late father as outlined in his will.'

'But why is she not here - now?' quizzed William.

'Ah, since you've asked, I felt it inappropriate for me to see her before you or, rather, *more* appropriate that I explain things fully *to you, first*. I've known your dear father for many years now and I wanted - for my own personal peace of mind - to be sure that you'd stay faithful to his wishes. Mrs Beatrice is in a very fragile state right now, as you must appreciate, so you must give me your word you will treat her kindly.'

William was struck by the change in the solicitor's tone, his compassion, and demonstrable fondness for his father.

Or at least he *had* been.

William didn't hesitate in accepting the terms.

'Yes. Of course I'll look after... Beatrice.'

William set out for Buckfastleigh the following day ready to meet his obligation to Knowles regarding the hound, feeling positive towards his obligation to his step-mother. It had been his father's last wish so he'd do his best to honour it. It provided him with a connection - one final connection - with his father, to add to the fond memories he still held. But things might not have gone quite as smoothly had it not been for the intervention of Knowles in the first place. Thanks to him, William was fulfilling Daniel's dying wish to save the farm for Bessie, even with his final breath.

The air was crisp as he boarded the morning stagecoach for Buckfastleigh. September sunshine soon took over, bathing the moor in a softness that brought out the best of its colours - the yellow of the gorse contrasting with the heather and the rich greens of the bracken. He remembered how even the air smelled differently once they'd left Crediton a couple of days earlier. He might even have said 'tasted', its balmy scents were so pungent. Two hours later they were crossing Roborough Downs before their descent into Plymouth, heading to The Barbican.

The city was a hive of industry and brought back memories to William. It almost felt like home, or a second home at least, even though he'd lived there previously for just a few months. But it was the *fond memories* that made him feel so; cherished memories of the first girl he'd ever loved - and still did, if he was honest. She'd been his sanctuary and the refuge to which he'd escaped, or so he'd regarded it during those first days immediately after leaving the farm, some fifteen years earlier.

As the coach pulled in for its stop-over, he took advantage

of the break in the journey to call in to one of his favourite haunts - The Dolphin Hotel. In truth, it was little more than an inn offering limited accommodation for sailors and merchants passing through. But the bar was where he'd found solace and companionship - largely from those also on an itinerant path, looking for work and opportunities of less noble a nature. But William had found something else much more appealing - *someone* else.

He'd noticed her as soon as his eyes had grown accustomed to the dimly-lit saloon. She'd served him with his first jar of scrumpy, fascinated as to how a young man so young, well-dressed and well-spoken - and so handsome as she admitted to him later - should be found in a place frequented by those less fortunate. For it was true, his education for the years prior to his leaving to work on the farm had been at Tavistock School. His higher education could be credited to the scholarship he'd earned.

It proved to be a poisoned chalice, however, as his advanced understanding of a wider world nurtured ideas that created the division between himself and his father. It was the same division that led him to drinking with the strange mixture of rough trade, most of whom were simply biding time until the next sip. (Sorry, *ship!*)

She was the landlord's daughter and, like himself, was barely sixteen years of age, thrust rudely into the world of those much older, and much more worldly. It was hardly surprising they formed an immediate friendship that led, inevitably, to romance. Now, fifteen years later, he reflected on those troubled days, but days laced with happiness, their time together all too short - walking out with his first love.

He'd always known her as 'B'. He had no idea what it stood for. She wouldn't tell him but it was what everyone called her. As a joke at first, but it stuck, he also referred to himself as 'B' - short for Billy. And so there they were - the two 'B's' - with so

many anecdotes, adjectives and adverbs about birds and bees at our disposal to describe how their relationship blossomed. But just as fierce, strong and passionate as their romance grew, so it was short - *cut* short by accident and circumstance beyond their control.

Isn't that always the case?

Chapter Six

His original intention had been to sign up to the first merchant ship bound for the Americas. Meeting 'B' changed all that. Even if he'd wanted to leave she, as she said on many an occasion, wouldn't let him. He didn't take much persuading but he needed work, which he found easily on the docks. Up to that point, life on the farm had made him fit and strong and used to long hours. Loading and unloading merchant vessels proved to be easy.

He'd forgotten about a career at sea, but it seemed that life at sea hadn't forgotten about him. Fate took a hand. A day's labour on the docks was thirsty work which, coupled with his thirst to see his beloved 'B', often meant he spent most of his time, between working and sleeping, at The Dolphin. He now felt at home with 'the rough trade' as he called it. Fellow drinkers accepted him so he became complacent about the dangers lurking under the surface of a seaport - a threat from those with less than good intentions.

Those dangers included notorious press gangs.

War with France was raging and the Royal Navy was always short of crew for their warships. They had little option but to 'impress' fit and able men to crew their ships. But enthusiasm for earning the King's shilling could only be obtained by force, exerted by gangs looking for an unfortunate, worse for wear after an evening's drinking. Hence they'd 'press' them into service and be rewarded by the Crown. *Kidnap* might be a more appropriate term.

And so it was that fate decided to separate the two 'B's', dictating that William should fall victim to the press gangs. It had been just another evening after work, with William spending his time drinking at The Dolphin so that he could be close to 'his B'. He was waiting for her to complete her

evening shift, after which they planned a stroll along The Hoe. But it was not to be. He was relieving himself of his first two jars of cider in the alleyway behind The Dolphin when the press gang struck.

There were five of them, used to over-powering their prey using two advantages - surprise as well as their combined strength. Not that he knew anything about it until he awoke much later with a lump the size of an egg on the back of his head. The hold of the ship was dark until his eyes became used to it. There were others lying next to him, also shackled. Then he felt the unfamiliar rocking of the vessel into which he'd been 'conscripted'. The HMS Undaunted was powering its way out of Plymouth Sound helped by the outgoing tide and a stiff westerly breeze. After the blow on the head he'd been drugged to keep him quiet longer and to make it easier for him to be carried onboard.

He'd only regained consciousness *after* the ship sailed.

'B' was frantic when she heard from one of the regulars what had happened, but she knew his plight was useless. It was like a prison sentence from which there was no escape. He'd be held a virtual captive like so many others until resignation and acceptance of their fate took over and, with months and sometimes even years between docking at a home port, they forgot about home.

William had fallen victim to the same fate.

And, so it was he became lost - lost to the one he loved, missing her so much it almost felt like a bereavement. At first he languished in self-pity, a place where he found many a companion with whom to share his plight. His only salvation was his youth and strength, as well as his determination. He vowed that he would find her again when, as he told himself, 'it was all over'. But when would that be?

With destiny no longer his own, he decided to realise his original ambition, at least, and to learn the ropes. Literally. It

paid off. He found he was a natural sailor, able to read the weather - courtesy of growing up on Dartmoor - as well as understanding the sea with her tides and currents. Also, partially due to his intelligence and education gained alongside those who might be considered his betters, he developed natural leadership qualities.

This was soon recognised by his superiors who harnessed his skills and enthusiasm by promoting him to a higher grade. As a result, even if it didn't totally mask his nagging loss and yearning for 'B', at least it gave him some ambition. But one day he vowed he would escape. The irony was, some years later when he wasn't on board a fighting ship and no longer a prisoner, he would become jailer himself. He was on shipboard escorting the captured Napoleon to exile on Elba.

From there he was commissioned for more duties in the colonies. Ultimately, it meant that he would almost become used to life without, and beyond, the green fields of England with its unique smells, tastes and sights. Including those of his beloved Dartmoor.

And without his beloved 'B'.

For her part, she learned to forget - she *had to* forget - Billy; her 'B'. But it was equally hard. Her loss, too, was almost tangible, with no respite. No relief or release, despite her vain attempts to trace him. Or ability to send word to him. So, when her cousin sent word for her to join her for the summer to help out on her farm, she leapt at the chance. Billy had already told her stories of his former life on Dartmoor and on the farm, so she hoped it would make her feel close to him again. He'd described so many people and places to her, as soon as she arrived on the more she felt at home. Although she didn't understand why at the time, it would be a feeling that never left her.

Billy - *William* - had been gone a year.

Chapter Seven

The first summer on the moor passed quickly for Bessie, with September and Widecombe Fair soon upon them. It was the highlight of the farming calendar for most. For some, it was the one time of the year they might see a distant neighbour to actually talk to, and the only time they might spend any amount of leisure time, even with those who farmed nearby.

The opportunity to enter a prize bull, calf or White Faced Dartmoor for Best of Breed came second to the main purpose - catching up with the news (a year's worth for some) not to mention the dancing and drinking. For a few, that might even lead to meeting a future wife or husband.

Taking place on the second Tuesday in September, the Fair was an all day event culminating in a dance in the village hall next to the church. But it was to The Old Inn, first, that Bessie or, to give her full name, Beatrice, arrived with her cousin and husband for a couple of jars, intending to cross the square to the dance, later. The hall was packed but she barely knew anyone - apart from one face that looked familiar. Even though they'd never met, she was drawn to him. She forced herself not to stare, but on one occasion he caught her out, caught her just as she was looking at him. It was enough.

He was coming over!

Her cousin stepped up to greet him first.

'Bessie,' she said, 'this is Daniel Sercombe. He owns the farm across the valley from ours. Just outside Pauntry. Daniel; this is my cousin, Bessie.'

Bessie flushed, unable to hide her embarrassment at being caught out. Daniel put her immediately at ease, taking responsibility for their fascination in each other.

'Forgive me for staring,' he said, 'but not only are you the

most charming young lady in the room, but I feel I know you. Have we met?’

Bessie flushed even more, if that were possible.

‘I don’t think so, not unless you frequent Plymouth.’

‘Not at all, I regret to say,’ said Daniel. ‘Never been there. Is that where you come from?’

‘I’ve lived there all my life. This is my first visit to Dartmoor.’ She was becoming more at ease.

‘Not your last, I hope.’

‘No, sir, I’m enjoying it immensely, and even more now that I’ve...’ she broke off immediately, amazed at the admission she was about to make.

Daniel made it easier for her. ‘Just as I am so pleased to have met you...Bessie.’

But *why* did Daniel look so familiar to her? And how come *he’d* been so drawn to *her* - notwithstanding that she was the most attractive - unattached - girl at the dance? They chatted, oblivious to anyone else in the bar and it was quite obvious they saw *something* in each other. What that *something* was, seemed unclear at first, even though Bessie was the most attractive girl in the bar. It was a feature not lost on local lads who normally knew all the girls in the area, as well as some further afield in Ashburton, Bovey Tracey or Princetown.

They were envious and mystified as to how this old fellow, who must be in his mid-forties at least, could hold the attention of a maid not yet in her twenties. Even Daniel himself was amazed at his good fortune to meet someone with whom he made an instant connection.

‘Where did you say you were staying?’

Had he already asked that? Daniel waited for her reply as she took her time, all the while wondering why she felt him so compelling; so familiar to her.

‘Ummm... oh... I’ve been staying at my cousin’s for the summer - working, actually.’

But her mind seemed to be elsewhere. It wasn't just his face, his mannerisms and expressions, but his voice that she recognised. There was even a touch of sophistication in the way he spoke, despite his distinct moorland dialect.

'Then I might be seeing more of you,' he added with a hopeful note in his voice.

At that clear indication of his interest in her, she seemed drawn into him even more, replying without thinking what she was saying, words escaping before she knew it.

'Yes. I truly hope so.'

At that point her cousin came over to break into their conversation, but unaware how totally absorbed they were in each other.

'We're off to the dance shortly.'

Bessie held his gaze, fixing her eyes on Daniel as he, too, continued to take in all her features. Breaking the spell she turned to her cousin. Suddenly the dance held no fascination for her whatsoever. She had to come up with an excuse.

'Sorry. I've such a headache. Do you mind if I go home?'

Before her cousin could answer, Daniel took his opportunity. 'Perhaps I can escort you.'

'It's quite a long...'

'I have the pony and trap with me. We don't have to walk.'

How could she refuse even if she wanted to? Her cousin didn't believe her one bit about her alleged headache but still went along with it, knowing Bessie would be safe in his hands.

The couple made their way through the crowded bar to the back door leading to the where Daniel's rig was waiting for them. It was a typical September evening, if there could such a thing as typical on Dartmoor. Away from the glare of gas street lamps of the town, on a night of low dense cloud, it could be so dark, some nights you couldn't see more than a yard in front of you, even at a walk. On the other hand, on a full moon and and with a cloudless sky, it could be so bright

that you could, literally, read a newspaper by its light. Bessie and Daniel were blessed with the latter. It couldn't have been a more perfect setting for their first precious hours together.

They were married the following Spring.

Initially Bessie's father was wary at the prospect of his beloved daughter becoming betrothed to someone his own age. However, given that Daniel was a man of means and, after several social meetings had proven himself to be sincere in his intentions, he gave his consent.

Over the course of their courtship, Bessie did learn that Daniel had a son, but that he was lost to him. She dare not delve too deeply into how he was lost, merely accepting that he'd perished while abroad. His loss still haunted Daniel.

Nor did she fully engage with the notion that Daniel's son was one and the same as her 'Billy'. For reasons known only to Billy himself, he'd lied and given her his surname as *Southcomb*. A small change, and a misspelling so common in many family records at the time. But it may have served to preserve his anonymity in case his father sought to find him. When press-ganged into service and still unconscious, his captors had searched his pockets to find the identity of their captive in order to claim reward money. The only evidence was in the form of a prayer book from Tavistock School and the inscription within which bore his name.

So he became William Sercombe again. But neither Daniel nor Bessie knew anything of this even though, ironically through a cruel twist of fate, it was William who was the invisible link between the two of them.

Daniel declared later to Bessie that he'd been captivated by her from the start, and that it had been easy for his to fall in love with her. It was a genuine admission, not founded on loneliness at the loss of his first wife who, he also admitted, he

would never stop loving, even in death.

Similarly, Bessie's feelings for Daniel went beyond economic or even emotional dependence, anchored as they had always been in her discovery in Daniel, of the same attractions she had found in her Billy, before he was so cruelly taken from her. She'd searched for him through ports' and ships' records, only to be informed via the Royal Navy that most of those conscripted, at the time she specified, had joined the sixteen gun HMS Seagull. It had been captured by the sloop Lougen off Christiansand, but there was no news of the fate of the crew. They were presumed lost, too.

So she'd assumed the worst.

Little did she know that Daniel had also made similar enquiries at the time about his son, only to be given the same response. They were in mourning for the same William, simultaneously, without knowing, but for different reasons.

In many cases during extended conflicts between nations, naval ships were captured by one country and then recaptured - sometimes by an entirely different country - to maintain the strength of a nation's fleet. Over its lifetime, the same ship could often end up flying under a succession of different flags. But crew members themselves had no value other than to be traded or used as 'swaps' between warring countries. That was the fate that had befallen William whilst he remained signed to the navy. He was captured and traded.

Some ten years after his initial capture (by the press-gang), then his subsequent capture (by the French allies), followed by his recapture by - or return to - the Royal Navy, his visit to Plymouth and The Dolphin, where it all began, had left him in sombre mood. In particular, memories of his beloved 'B' were flooding back. But he had to put them behind him for now.

Weaver Knowles had given him a commission.

His next task in hand, that of collecting the hound at the

coach house in Buckfastleigh and parading him around the town, had given him fresh focus. It had been a strange request and seemed even more strange the closer he came to his destination. But he'd given his word and actually signed an oath, promising to fulfil the obligation.

As he approached the drop-off point in the town he could see the hound waiting, held on a short leash by a handler. Was it his imagination or was the hound already wagging its tail in warm greeting? Indeed it was. The large black Irish Wolfhound was responding affectionately to William's voice. He gave in to a natural instinct to scratch the dog's ears.

'Hello, boy,' he said, taking over the leash from the handler whilst continuing to fuss over the animal. He turned to the handler. 'What's his name?'

Knowles hadn't mentioned a name and there was no name tag on his collar.

'No idea,' came the reply.

'Right,' said William as the handler bade him farewell. He addressed the hound, 'then I will have to name you myself. I think I will call you... Colin. Yes, that sounds right.'

'Is that OK with you, Colin?'

More wagging of his tail seemed to suggest he'd chosen well and, with that, they began their first circuit of the town. He had three tours to complete after which they could both head home or, at least to the cottage that Willesford's had rented on his behalf. The temporary accommodation would be just until he laid official claim to the farm - by moving in. Renting Grey Cottage would be a base from which to start and allow him time to make the acquaintance of his step-mother.

In turn it would give *her* time to get used to the idea that her late husband's son was returning from the dead (or so she imagined). It would be hard for her to see a stranger take up residence of what she had considered would still be her home - and hers alone - for the rest of her life.

But first he must parade the hound - Colin - as instructed by Knowles, around the Buckfastleigh. It began well, with most men tipping their hats respectfully and women offering a discreet bow as he passed them in the street. In less than half an hour he had covered most of the town, including side streets and alleyways. By the time he'd begun a second circuit there were more people. He assumed it was because word had spread and they were curious to see this unusual stranger. More especially it was to see if it really was the large black hound that, some said, was the very spectre, or ghost, of Weaver Knowles. Not that William would have a clue on that score because he was forbidden to engage townsfolk in conversation.

By the third turn of the town virtually every street was lined with locals. They stood at the front step of their cottages to view this bizarre spectacle. Some ducked back inside while he passed whilst others crossed themselves as a precaution against unworldly danger, but they still stood their ground. It wasn't until he passed the entrance to the church that a more prominent resident of Buckfastleigh presented himself, waiting for William to appear.

If accounts are to be believed, this prominent person was the one who started the whole thing.

The local parson.

Chapter Eight

The local parson emerged from the entrance to the churchyard ready with incense and holy water to bless both himself and Colin, in a fashion that resembled an exorcism, seemingly addressing and denouncing evil spirits.

Unknown to William, it *was* the same parson who'd placed a curse on the alleged ghost of Weaver Knowles some years earlier. William thanked him as he passed, whilst Colin gave a brief 'yip' rather than a bark, wagging his tail in acknowledgement - *and recognition* - of the clergyman. But the parson's blood ran cold. He recognised Colin, retreating quickly indoors.

The rest of the final circuit went without incident.

It was late afternoon when William and Colin were able to take their leave of the town. The stagecoach upon which they'd arrived was long gone, travelling northwards to Exeter and beyond. It fell upon him, therefore, to seek out a local, private carrier with the means and the will to take them to Pauntry at short notice.

'It'll cost you double,' said the driver as William and Colin mounted the carriage. It was small and drawn by a single pony, but sufficient for a short journey.

'How come it's double?' William questioned.

'I gotta come back - so it's two trips for me.'

The logic of the argument was lost on William.

'In advance,' added the driver.

Colin growled his disapproval; whilst William paid up.

'And make sure that devil hound is secure.' The driver had been well-briefed by his fellow townfolk.

After passing through the neighbouring town of Ashburton it was a steady climb up onto the moor, with further gradients - both ascents and descents - to challenge the pony. But she

was a young mare and used to the terrain. Like most local horses she'd developed a natural fitness to match the country, as well as the ability to pace herself. They rested for a short time at the new bridge at Hannaford. From that point, the driver asked both William and Colin to walk behind the rig for the steep pull up to The Tavistock Inn at Poundsgate, then once again for the last extremely steep stretch uphill to Leusdon Common, at which point the ground levelled out.

Once safely at Pauntry they sought out Mrs Westabrook who was to furnish William with a key. Grey Cottage was a small thatched two-up, two-down next to the mill house, and the temporary accommodation arranged by Knowles, through Willesfords. He was heartened to discover that Mrs Westabrook had a pot of stew prepared for his supper. She'd covered it with a tea-towel where it sat on the kitchen table together with a loaf, butter, bacon, eggs, black pudding and mushrooms for his breakfast.

But it had been an exhausting day. Most of all he needed his bed. He fell asleep in an armchair in front of the fire, his meal half finished, the hound at his feet, also sound asleep.

Colin remained indoors overnight but that was to be a one-off occurrence. Knowles had given him strict instructions not to keep the hound shut inside the house - *any house or barn* - overnight. Colin was to be provided free access in and out of the farmhouse, allowed to roam at his own pleasure even for days on end if he, the hound, so wished.

The only reason Knowles gave was that the hound was a hunter by nature and used to fending for himself. William didn't question the request at the time but, the more he heard tales of a black hound and it's alleged haunting of Deancombe, the more he wondered about the true identity of the animal in his charge.

William rose at six o'clock the following morning but only to

let Colin out to 'do his business'. The amount of travelling over the recent few days had caught up with him so, after placing a few more logs on the dying embers of the fire, he returned to the armchair and slept until noon.

A late breakfast followed, courtesy of the rations left by Mrs Westabrook, but he decided the remains of the stew would suffice for Colin's next meal, as and when he returned to the cottage. That turned out to be shortly after one o'clock in the afternoon, at which point William himself went for a walk. The air was distinctly chilly and the nights had started to draw in. Summer was coming to an end. After a bright start to the day low cloud descended, blocking the sun but without obscuring his vision at ground level. It was a reminder that autumn was just around the corner.

The next day, Tuesday, was the actual Widecombe Fair but Monday was preparation day. Those who weren't making produce to sell on Tuesday, or rehearsing their routines for entering cattle, sheep or other farm animals for the 'Best of Breed', were finishing off essential tasks around their farms on Monday. They had to condense two days into one so they could enjoy a so-called day off. Committee members and officials were also busy erecting tents and stands and marking out show rings at the show ground itself. Everyone seemed to be doing something for, or connected to, the show. After all it was the highlight of the local calendar and seemed to involve everybody. Even children had the day off school.

William still had his own boyhood recollection of past days at the Fair. He, too, was looking forward to the day and, for all sorts of reasons, had decided it would be inappropriate to make himself known to the widow at his father's farm until Wednesday, at the earliest. For now, at least, he would enjoy a relaxing walk, taking in the places, if not the people, he remembered from his early days. He decided on a circular walk, clockwise, striking an easy pace uphill to Sweeton Farm.

Crossing 'the splash', or 'Forder Bridge' as it was referred to by the locals, since you could either cross *by ford*, or *by bridge*, he climbed the stile immediately after to take the path by the River Webburn. It ran behind Grey Cottage until reaching the small hamlet of Jordan. There he rejoined a road taking him to the main lane at which point he turned right, back to Pauntry. Luckily, the Post Office Store was open where he was able to buy enough fresh provisions for an evening meal and breakfast. This he preferred, rather than a trip to The Tavistock Inn for fear it would lead to a late night.

Dawn broke on the Tuesday with a clear sky and bright morning sun promising a dry day. He told himself he would take Colin with him although, judging by the independent streak demonstrated by the hound so far, it was more of a case of whether Colin would *allow* himself to be taken. Either way, they rose early to energise themselves with a decent breakfast before setting out on the two mile hike to the show ground. They arrived soon after eight thirty to find the fair already buzzing with activity. Most of those participating were already there, seeking out friends and neighbours who, in some cases, they only saw socially but once a year.

Uncle Tom Cobley was on his old grey mare, represented this year by one of the Coker family. The village centre and the lanes into Widcombe were lined with carriages, all from outside of the area. Locals elected to be dropped off from whatever means of transport they could organise, to be picked up later at the end of the day. Or they walked in or rode.

Folk were arriving from as afar afield as Newton Abbot, Buckfastleigh and Ashburton, Chudleigh and north of the moor from Princeton, Tavistock, Moretonhampstead, South Brent and Chagford. Even *groups* from towns, villages and organisations had turned up, transported in privately hired omnibuses. They had to be pulled by four horses rather than

the usual two, owing to the steep gradient of Widecombe Hill.

Not that it mattered if most of the people came from in-country, he knew none of the locals in any case; not even his closest neighbours in the village. But *they* seemed to know *him*, no doubt because they knew he was coming and he was expected to be there. News travels fast in small communities assisted by a variety of means - notably estate agents, land conveyancers, machinery suppliers and, of course, solicitors. It was a built-in security process evolved by, and serving, all who lived locally; a safety mechanism in case any unwelcome outside influences appeared on the horizon.

Some had even heard of the black hound itself and William's recent short visit to - *and through* - Buckfastleigh. He could thank the carriage driver for that. His tongue had been loosened, ironically, by the cider purchased by the fare with which William had graced him and which, on the way home, he had treated himself liberally at The Tavistock Inn and, later, at The Bay Horse in Ashburton.

William was now recognised as *the stranger with the black Irish Wolfhound*. Colin had even earned a reputation and notoriety of his own, thanks to the rumours and accounts filtering up from Buckfastleigh. William repaid them with a stint of people-watching. This diversion of his included matching family members with each other; brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts and uncles. It turned out to be not so difficult as he first imagined, given that the extended family was an essential part in making any rural community work. He also played his own game - although he was the only player - where he tried to guess *who* might be married to *whom* or - and this was more difficult - which couples might be just '*seeing each other*'.

He also found himself taking this game one step further, speculating on which players were engaged in liaisons that were less noble (some would say), and relationships not connected by family, marriage, or betrothal. This then led to

the inevitable: namely spotting those ladies of a certain marriageable age who were unattached. And (ideally) pretty.

But he wasn't prepared for what was to follow, a chance meeting and discovery that not only brightened his day, but changed his life.

Forever.

He heard a familiar voice behind him.

'Billy? Is it really you?'

Without even looking up to see who it was, he recognised her purely on the strength of those first few words, but he didn't actually believe his ears until he turned to face her. Then he couldn't believe his eyes.

'B'? Is it really *you*? What are you *doing* here? And so far from home?'

When someone is lost to you but still commands your thoughts frequently and over such a long time - becoming a deep memory - seeing them when you least expect, simply doesn't register. Not at first, especially if they appear out of context. But it *was* her, as beautiful as he could ever remember, standing before him.

'I thought you were dead,' she said, with almost a hint of anger and sense of betrayal in her tone.

But not in her face.

'I was,' he replied, 'at least, for a while. Captured, first by the English press-gang then by the French, in battle, after which I was returned to the English who sent me abroad again. Either way I couldn't escape.'

'I searched for you.'

'I'm sorry. I had no way to contact anyone back home.'

'I heard you'd been taken, kidnapped, by a press-gang. One of the regulars at The Dolphin told me. He saw it happen but they warned him to keep quiet, or else...'

Bessie's tone softened as she recalled her anguish when she'd learned what had happened to him that night, but too

late, and only after his ship had sailed.

'I've missed you so much.'

Bessie's cousin had been standing nearby and broke into the conversation.

'Whose this handsome young chap then?'

She was clearly impressed by William's clean-cut bearing and appearance.. 'Not see 'e before, me 'andsome.'

She'd returned from the refreshment bar with her husband, both were now the worse for wear. Bessie introduced them.

'I'm sorry, this is my cousin, Mary, and her husband, Jack.'

'Pleased to meet you.'

But that was all William said, turning back to Bessie who now had his total attention. How she came to be so far from home mystified him. More to the point, did she have particular reasons - such as marriage or a lover - for leaving Plymouth for a life on the moors? Was she still 'free'?

'Are you visiting... your cousin?'

'Not exactly,' she said, sounding vague, then realising how it might seem strange to him. 'I live *here*, now. On a farm just over Corndon. I own it - at least I used to - until...'

'Then you must be Beatrice. Beatrice Sercombe?'

It was a coincidence that stretched his belief beyond what had occurred so far, and what might still be happening - even further. Until she answered.

'Yes, but how did you know my name?'

'I'm a Sercombe, too. My father was Daniel Sercombe.'

'My late husband, Daniel' she gasped. She thought for a while. Surely this couldn't be...?

'So you're my...'

'Step-son,' he uttered, barely audible, shocked at first before lapsing into laughter at the wonderful absurdity of it all.

'Pleased to meet you at last... mother!'

If the circumstances weren't so strange you could say they *were* laughable - which they were. It was a joke shared by all.

But once normality had returned, Mary and Jack excused themselves, aware the two had much catching up to do.

'I called in at The Dolphin the other day,' he said once they were alone. 'You weren't there. I didn't really expect you to be, but I thought I might see your father.'

'He's been passed away some five years,' she replied. 'Seems like everyone around me has died, or been lost.'

She was referring to Daniel, and then to himself, of course.

'It was a shock to me, too,' he said. 'First my mother, then Dad. I know Dad and I were hardly what you'd call close towards the end, but he was a good man, and a good father.'

'And a good husband,' she whispered. 'I miss him.'

'Then we shall miss him together,' he added.

She caught his hand. 'What shall we do now?'

It was a somewhat ambiguous question to ask.

'I hadn't really thought about it.' He corrected himself immediately. 'That's not true. I had it all worked out, expecting a much older woman, of course, but not expecting my father's widow to be my... *to be you*. But seeing it *is* you, and that we used to...' He stopped for fear of saying something stupid.

He'd run out of ideas. Everything was so mixed up.

'Where are you staying?'

Bessie thought it best to change the subject, or at least bring clarity to what exactly they *were* talking about. It only forced them to think of the inevitable:

Where would she stay, if he were to live at the farm?

'I can have Grey Cottage for as long as I like, I suppose,' he said. 'The solicitor put me there intending to help me settle into the area before taking over the farm, but I imagine I could rent it for as long as I need to.'

The 'taking over the farm' statement seemed a little brutal, too harsh a reality, one he'd been keen to avoid in order to protect his new step-mother's pride and sensitivities.

But Bessie didn't see it like that.

'Or you could buy it,' said Bessie. 'I heard someone say it was part of the estate of some weaver fellow from Dean Prior way. Willesford's is executor. Why don't you ask them - that's if you intend staying?'

Why would she even *think* he wasn't staying? The uncertainty in her voice betrayed the fact that she *wanted* him to stay; not lose him a second time.

'Yes, of course. Good idea,' he agreed.

She then posed the *real* question; dreading the answer.

'Can we sit for a moment, Billy? Or should I call you 'William'?'

'William is fine, Bessie.'

He joined her on a bench overlooking what had been the collecting ring for the novice jumping. It gave them the privacy they needed but, most of all, a quietness away from the crowds. Time to think. She continued.

'You know I can't stay at the farm on my own, don't you?'

'Do you mean that tenancy thing, where a woman can't take responsibility for a farm without a man?'

'Yes,' she replied. 'I've already had one visit from the Duchy. They want to find a new tenant and throw me out.'

'I know.'

Now he took *her* hands in *his* to reassure her; this time she flushed at the sign of familiarity. He explained how he'd been set on this course after his meeting with the mysterious figure in Bristol. He meant the weaver, of course.

'Have you heard of a fellow called Knowles?'

Colin's ears twitched at the sound of his 'other' name, then settled again, now listening more intently.

'Can't say that I have,' she replied.

If hounds could express disappointment, Colin would have made his feelings known. The nearest he came to it was a deep sigh, resting his chin upon his outstretched paws.

William continued.

‘Well, he knew my father, apparently. It was Knowles who told me of Daniel’s dying wish.’ She grasped *his* hands now, and tighter. ‘He wanted you to be looked after with him gone and, at all costs, you weren’t to lose the farm.

‘He put out a search for me in the Bristol Post. Lord knows how he even knew I existed, let alone that I was in the area. *He* told me, explaining that, if I could prove I was Daniel’s lost son, there was a good chance I could lay legal claim to take over the tenancy. But with you still able to stay.

‘If you want to, that is...’

He looked deeply into Bessie’s eyes for the answer *he* needed to hear, and the one *she* wanted to give him.

‘I want nothing else.’ Her eyes moistened as she sensed her torment coming to an end. ‘But how will this work? It wouldn’t look right, two of us living together, even if we agreed not to...’

‘You’re right, for now at least,’ he said.

But what *did* he mean by ‘How *would* it work’?

And why did he say ‘for now’?

She needed something more permanent. Lasting.

Chapter Nine

They continued walking and talking. It made them feel less conspicuous in a way, moving anonymously through the crowd and still able to talk freely, breaking off now and again to take in the show. But they both knew there were still questions left unanswered. William decided to take the lead in resolving all barriers. If she agreed, they could move on.

Together.

‘As I see it,’ he said, ‘we have to make sure the farm doesn’t revert back into the hands of the Duchy. Willesford’s should be able to secure it for us now they can prove that, as legal heir, I am alive.’

‘But, where does that leave me?’

‘I’ll instruct Willesford’s to draw up a declaration for me to sign, declaring that you have full rights of occupancy and enjoyment of residence while I live. It will be your guarantee there will always be a home for you at the farm.’

‘In your lifetime, William.’

He could see her point, and why she hesitated.

‘It’s the best I can do.’

Perhaps he could think of something better. Such as...?

‘And there’s no way round it *unless I have an heir.*’

That lit another spark.

‘Will you stay with me?’

‘Do you think that’s a good idea?’

Even though he knew it was what they both wanted, he realised it would be so frowned upon by the villagers that they would risk being shunned. But there was one solution.

‘I’ll stay in Grey Cottage. Officially, anyway. Permanently.’

She knew he was right.

A week later he was in Willesford's to sign papers and transfer £75 for the purchase of Grey Cottage.

'You know the owner, Mr Knowles, of course, don't you, Mr Sercombe?' The solicitor couldn't help noticing the recognition of Knowles' name by the black hound as he spoke the weaver's name, but he said nothing.

'Knowles?... yyy-es, of course,' stuttered William.

Naturally he knew Knowles, but he was still surprised to learn that he'd been the owner of Grey Cottage. It made sense. Willesford's were the executors of Knowles' estate as well as Daniel's. What made even more sense was for William to buy, rather than rent, the cottage. As the owner rather than tenant of the cottage, he inherited cottager's and commoner's rights. They not only gave him a firmer stake in the community, but he had use of the moor for grazing. More importantly it preserved Bessie's reputation if he were seen to have a separate residence, despite spending so much time at the farm. Neither of them could resist the temptation to renew their relationship as it had been before they became lost to each other, but they still had to be careful not to be seen to be too familiar. But they still took risks.

'I wish I didn't have to go back to the cottage each night.'

They lay back together in the hay loft. There was a corrugated sheet missing on the barn roof above them, affording them a glimpse of clouds scudding across the sky. There'd been a sudden shower so they'd had to run for cover - but not without getting soaked. Not for the first time did the inevitable happen after they'd quickly had to dispense with their wet clothes. They had a lot of lost time to make up for...

'You'd better get out there in any case,' she said. 'The dairyman will be arriving to collect today's milk any time now. I still have the chickens to feed. He mustn't catch us like this.'

She draped a blanket round her before heading back to the farmhouse. He found a dry smock hanging up to replace his

drenched shirt, but had to settle for wet trousers. He crossed the yard to the milk shed where two churns were already loaded onto a handcart. It was a slight sloping driveway down to the front gate where he left the milk each day, so he didn't need to lift them onto the pony and trap.

He'd soon settled into the daily routines, finding it strange at first to be taking orders from Bessie - which he did willingly until he'd learned the ropes. But the hardest part to get used to, for both of them, were the long nights apart. He already knew that 'everybody knew everybody else's business' in a rural community such as this. And, what the locals didn't know they made up, with stories that stretched the imagination as well as the truth. For those reasons he accepted it would be foolish to take risks by sleeping over. But, as winter closed in and the sun rose later in the day, it became easier for him to sneak under cover of darkness earlier than his usual six o'clock, to seek the comfort of her warm bed.

He would stay for his evening meals after most of the daily chores were finished, easily persuaded to stay for 'just a little bit longer' afterwards. They would sit together watching the flames lick round the dry logs in the inglenook; William enjoying a jar or two of their home-made cider; she busying herself with her knitting needles, just as she had done so many times with his father. It was hard to believe those days were just a few months ago, when Daniel was alive and William was still lost to her.

She still wore black on occasions she went to the village, or to Newton Abbot market, or to Leusdon Church each Sunday. It seemed right for her to do so. Whatever she and William had embarked upon - had *re*-embarked upon - her respect for Daniel was still deep. She felt she owed it to his memory to demonstrate that respect openly to others.

'I know you still hold memories of my father,' he said to her as they walked home from church one Sunday. She'd gone

over to the memorial stone she'd laid for Daniel, blessing it after the service. There was no body - it had never been recovered - nor ashes. She'd marked his passing with a stone.

'I understand now that when I first met your father I saw you in him. It was you I was looking for all those years. You *lived* in Daniel.'

She paused to wipe a tear away with her handkerchief.

'When will we be able to...?'

'Tell others about us?'

She anticipated what he was about to say. But she pondered for a while, giving him some hope. Finally she answered as they climbed upon the pony and trap that stood waiting across from the church gates. She had to make sure they couldn't be overheard.

'Soon. But not yet. Not *quite* yet. I'm sure people already suspect that we... you know... but it has to feel right. I'll know when I'm ready. I shall wait for a sign.'

William just wondered how long *he* had to wait.

It was the New Year when the sign came, a one she'd half expected, and half hoped for, having just returned from a rare visit to her aunt in Plymouth. For her, it had been the tipping point. For William it felt unusual in the first place, since she'd hardly had contact with her father's sister, as far as he *knew*. But it soon made sense to him when he learned it had been a visit with a special purpose. She broke the news after a day or two, at first nervous for his reaction.

'I'm going to have a baby.'

She told him one evening after supper. She need not have worried. William was just taking a draught of cider and nearly choked on the news. His response needed no thinking about.

'That's wonderful!' he gasped, holding her so tight she could hardly catch her breath.

'Careful,' she warned. 'You'll squash him...'

‘Him?’

‘Or her.’ she replied. ‘Either way, I wanted to be really sure. That’s why I didn’t tell you. Not at first.’

‘That’s why you went to your aunt’s, and to see a doctor?’

‘I didn’t want our own doctor in Ashburton. The news would spread before had a chance to get...’

‘Get married?’ he whispered, searching her face and hoping it would be the reaction he wanted.

‘I was going to say “get back home”, but yes.’

It was exactly the sign she needed. She flung her arms around him. It was all the sign *he* needed in any case, and the ‘beat, beat, beat’ of the black hound’s tail told them that they weren’t the only ones delighted at the news.

Chapter Ten

They were married within the month.

It was no surprise to her cousin, Mary, whose mother, Bessie's aunt in Plymouth, had already sent word about Bessie's 'condition'. The wedding took place in Plymouth, a civil ceremony performed by a local JP. To have followed the lengthy process of having the bans read locally would have meant that, by the time their wedding day arrived, Bessie would have been showing. That really would have set the Widecombe tongues wagging. So far, she'd concealed it well.

None of their neighbours on Dartmoor were invited or even told in advance. There seemed no point, or need, since her cousin was the only person to whom she felt close enough to invite. Which she did, as one of the witnesses. It took place with very little forward arrangement, after which it was life back to normal with a farm to run.

But only for William.

There was also another factor they had to consider so as to avoid gossip. They had to come up with a plan to 'postpone' the *recorded* date of the new baby, if not on paper, then in the eyes of the locals in and around Widecombe. That's where having an aunt so accommodating and far enough away, had its advantages. Near to Bessie's 'time' she took herself off immediately to Plymouth for the birth, but the idea was for her to stay several weeks *after* giving birth. The last thing they needed was for rumours about them 'having' to get married. Bessie had to appear to have gone the full nine month term *after* their wedding day. That was one aspect. But they still had to consider how it looked to the wider world. Would they be seen to have married too soon after the death of Daniel?

Some would say yes, on moral grounds, but they built a

story based on Bessie's need to protect her tenancy. Pressure was mounting from the Duchy which made it prudent for them to become man and wife without further delay, in order to retain the farm. At least for Bessie's sake. As it turned out, her security really was preserved for the future beyond doubt if William were to pre-decease her. There would be an heir inheriting the tenancy. She gave birth to a baby boy, Francis.

They decided to call him Frankie.

As the years passed, he grew up to be a fine lad, following his father's footsteps in many ways. He was strong boned, with a keen brain that was nurtured and developed with a good education thanks to a scholarship to Tavistock School.

Just like William.

But unlike William, Frankie's true heart stayed on the farm, where he relished summer holidays working side by side with his father. As for Bessie, having the two of them with her, William and Frankie, was all she would ever want.

And then there was the weaver.

'Colin' had also found peace, happiness and a home, on Corndon. He was tolerated by the three border collies, even though he didn't actually 'work' as far as they were concerned. William kept his commitment to Knowles (the man) to look after Colin (the hound). But the strange thing was, although George, Millie and Jenny grew visibly older - suffering from arthritis to a point where herding sheep was no longer possible - Colin never seemed to age. His coat kept its sheen, his teeth were healthy and white, his eyes clear, and the hair on his muzzle showed no hint of grey.

He also kept to his routine of going off for days on end, sometimes weeks, on tramps to who-knows-where before returning to the farm as if it were the most natural thing to do. Of course, for a hound it was. William became quite used to it, as did Bessie, to the point where she missed him when he wasn't there. But his excursions were not without incident.

How many times (it was so many that William lost count) would there be reports that 'a beast had been seen prowling the moor late at night?' And how often had William sensed the sideways glances directed his way if he happened to be present when such stories were being told, to become more and more fanciful as time progressed?

Some stories that circulated in local pubs and on market days in, say, Newton Abbot and Tavistock spoke of a black panther, or a large black cat of some kind, allegedly escaped from a travelling circus. Some even claimed they'd witnessed a spectre changing shape from a human to an animal, ready to prey on young children or on weary or lost travellers.

Others suspected the beast - whatever form it took - to be responsible for the slaughter of sheep or newborn calves. This part *did* worry William in case Colin was accused of such menace. If that were the case, they were just as likely to shoot him on sight, even without clear evidence.

All William could do was to be vigilant, to keep Colin close to the farm whenever such stories flared up. He also made sure Colin was with him as much as he could during lambing season. Old George had passed away, as had Millie, whilst Jenny was also looking frail and would soon be unable to work. The collie stayed behind at the farm most days if William had to go out to mend fences or manage hedgerows, if only to keep Bessie company. He was training a new border collie called Young George and made a point to have Colin with them on those occasions. That way Colin could learn the dog-sheep relationship. It gave him a chance to watch Colin's behaviour around the sheep, looking for any signs of aggression towards them especially around new-born lambs.

So far he'd seen nothing out of the ordinary, which at least gave him peace of mind, and justification for defending Colin if any stock had been taken. Owners always needed a culprit. Any culprit. He had to be certain Colin would be blameless.

But quite out of the blue, that changed.

It happened in the middle of lambing but, on this occasion, it wasn't to do with William's flock, but his neighbour's.

As with all close farm communities, they shared the burden at such times as lambing and harvesting. So if one farmer had been out all night checking fields and hedgerows for newborn lambs, as was often the case, it was common for them to take shifts on each other's flocks. To help each other out. It was on one such occasion, early morning after a storm that something happened to changed the lives for all at William's farm.

He knew it wasn't uncommon for a ewe to give birth in the middle of the night. Frankie was with him, riding his grey gelding, Handsome Boy. William drove the pony and trap. As they entered the pound they took to scouting the walled boundary and the patches of gorse on the perimeter. It would be unusual for a ewe to lamb in *open* ground, preferring to seek protection from predators and cover from any weather blowing in, such as the previous night's storm.

On this occasion Colin was with them and had run on in front, reaching the neighbour's field well ahead of the two of them. William was puzzled at the time because Colin, for some reason or was it coincidence, instinctively knew where they were going and, apparently, why. He sat waiting for them when they arrived; as William approached his mouth dropped.

He saw blood.

Blood was smeared all over Colin's chops and had stained his teeth and paws red. It was clear to see as he lay waiting. The black hound was panting from excitement or some violent exercise, and for reasons at which William could only guess, as tragic as those suspicions might be.

'Curse you, hound,' he seethed.

Colin whimpered as if apologetically, but remained still even as William turned towards the trap for his shotgun.

Before he could take two steps, the next words - coming from behind him - chilled him to the bone.

'I had to kill it.'

Whose words were they? They were not from Frankie, who'd trotted over on Handsome Boy to where the carcass of a lamb lay, bloodied and slain. Still not looking round to face the one who had made such a damning proclamation, William continued to the cart. He picked up his gun, checked the two cartridges in the chambers and, dreading what spectre he might be presented with when he finally did face - what? - he now looked up to see who stood before him.

It was nothing like what he expected.

Apart from one feature - that the words had come from a mouth that was smeared with blood - nothing could have prepared him for what he saw. His first instinct was that it would be the black hound as he knew him, and had trained him; the same one who might even sleep at the foot of their bed on the coldest of winter nights. But no. Now he was looking at blood dripping from a human mouth, and clothes smeared red as was the rest of the form that stood before him; and on hands, not paws.

Hands that reached out as if to plead for mercy.

'Knowles?' whispered William, not believing his eyes and the figure - *recognising the figure* - of the man before him.

'But it wasn't me. I didn't do it,' Knowles cried.

His shaggy coat had been replaced with a long black cape, under which his body shook; his skin was that of a human.

'Stay back!'

William was fearful that whatever stood before him, man or beast, might attack him too. His gun was trained on... what?

Just then, and just in time since William was aiming the barrel at the unfortunate figure and ready to pull the trigger, Frankie called out. He was over where a ewe stood by her recently killed new-born lamb, the remaining, surviving twin.

Its sibling was little more than a carcass, barely feasted upon.

‘Stop, father.’

Frankie had also seen the transition of Colin as he’d changed from hound into human; from hound into Knowles.

‘He’s telling the truth,’ Frankie cried.

William lowered the barrel, first looking to his son for answers to such a claim, then back to Knowles for *his* explanation of events. If Colin - or Knowles - hadn’t killed the lamb, then who had?

‘It was a fox,’ said Frankie as he walked slowly towards them, holding something by the tail, also lifeless. ‘It’s a vixen. She must have cubs to feed. She’s dead but still warm. Colin must have come across her attacking the lamb and killed her.’

‘He killed the fox, but not the lamb.’

‘I had to do it.’

Knowles’ confession was a mix of regret tinged with gratitude and relief that the real culprit, and not him, had been discovered. He looked wretched, older, not the confident man that William had first met in Bristol. And he looked tired. It was as if he’d at last arrived at the end of a long journey - not so much a physical one, but one where he’d been hiding from his true identity - in torment - neither one thing nor the other.

Neither man, nor beast.

‘I... I don’t understand,’ muttered William.

‘I don’t expect you to understand,’ sobbed Knowles. ‘To be cursed unfairly on my death, living the life of a reviled creature as punishment for my past wrongs committed when alive. Wandering alone for so long in animal form. Then to find happiness again with you, Bessie, and master Frankie.’

‘To finally have a home again.’ He sank to his knees.

‘But now this. What am I to do now my secret’s out? You might as well shoot me after all, guilty or not. Put me out of my misery. Please, Mr William. I’m so tired!’

‘I’m not going to do that,’ William reassured him. ‘We’re not,

are we, Frankie?’

‘No sir,’ replied Frankie with a level-headedness and courage well beyond his years. He turned to Knowles. ‘It was you who tried to save my grandfather, was it not? How can we ever repay *you*?’

‘Just keep my secret. That’s all I ask.’

Knowles was calmer now, recovered from the shock of the transformation over which he had no control. Resigned to the fact that his secret was now out, but confident that those who now knew his true identity, would keep his secret.

‘Of course,’ said William. ‘And you must still stay with us, if that is your choice. And however you decide.’

‘My choice? And how? What do you mean?’ asked Knowles. ‘What *are* my choices?’

‘You can choose to be man or hound. You shall decide how to live out the remainder of your life.’

‘But still with us,’ added Frankie.

EPILOGUE

So it was that Weaver Knowles served his penance and, after suffering such ignominy during his time living 'in country' and away from the moor, at last he found freedom and safety as well as certainty in later life on a moorland farm.

At least, certainty of identity.

He retained the name Knowles, but dropped the qualifying term 'Weaver', for fear that those who remembered such a person in his former life accused him of deeds and crimes associated with 'the old Knowles'.

Most of all, he was afraid that the curse laid upon him by the parson would return *to haunt him*.

So how did they explain to the locals who their new guest was, and how he came to be there? Bessie, William, and Frankie decided to explain - to anyone who asked about Knowles - that he was Daniel's long lost cousin. He'd simply turned up unannounced and they found themselves duty-bound to take him in, given that they were his only family.

Who could dispute it?

At last he'd escaped his past - both as man and beast - and now lived contentedly as the former. As a black hound he'd been immortal; ageless. But now, living a life again as a human, the years gradually took their toll. Tales of 'the beast of Dartmoor' still grumbled on in the background, with sightings - alleged sightings, that is - continuing to be the talk at the local inns and fairs, off and on.

Nor did they stop at Dartmoor, but cropped up on Exmoor and, occasionally, on Bodmin Moor.

Whether they were our black hound, a puma escaped from a travelling circus, or what? Who knows? Once myth and

legend are born and embedded into folklore, it is hard to kill them off. They even become more vivid, illustrated, and believable the more times they are told.

At least Weaver Knowles had a chance to atone for his misgivings, albeit in death - his first death. But even he finally succumbed to the merciless passage of time on this earth.

He became more and more frail.

Knowles passed away peacefully one summer afternoon. Young George was at his feet. He was dozing in the carver set out for him to catch the sun's rays in the front garden, gamely holding onto his favourite tankard. The remains of his cider were gradually warming in the heat of the day.

His eyes were closed. William sat opposite, also suitably furnished with a jar of scrumpy. Bessie's knitting needles clicked away on her latest pattern - a cardigan for Knowles.

Suddenly a squall rustled through the leaves of the willow tree, before going on to bang the barn door shut; then open it; then bang it shut again. Open - shut - repeat.

Knowles stirred in irritation at the disturbance and fought to open his eyes. He sighed deeply.

'What is it, Knowles?' asked William.

Knowles ran his tongue over his dry lips.

'Tell your father... *tell Daniel*... I'm coming.'

He then beckoned William to come closer as if uttering just a few words was an effort. There was more.

He hadn't quite finished. Not just yet. William leant forward.

'What is it, my friend?'

'I was never too keen on the name Colin.'

Knowles had spoken his final words. He slipped away peacefully, a smile remaining on his lips and a light in his eyes, though they were soon closed.

ABOUT J S MOREY

His writing reflects much of this sentiment, spirit, enthusiasm and optimism for this counter-culture, and the general 'feel-good' mood of those early post-war years, expressed in story-lines and characters in an honest, moral (without being sanctimonious) and positive way.

He has always remained surprisingly grounded in spite of these liberal influences (in his own words 'I never did drugs'). Whilst, hopefully, never boring and often irreverent, John studied hard in order to forge a successful career in marketing and publishing with David & Charles.

As a final chapter in his life unfolds - and after marketing 1,000's of books by other authors, in countless genres - he has only recently embarked on his own writing career.

Going forward, John is enthusiastic about the prospect of leaving his own literary legacy for family, friends and a wider readership to enjoy, even if he never should make the best-seller lists.

To have one of his books adapted for film or TV series would be the icing on the cake. So, Lou Diamond Phillips, if you're out there and are done with filming the next episode of 'Longmire', take a look at this author's 'Wild Hearts' modern western series.

As his old football coach used to say: 'Even if you're a goal behind in extra time - never give up.'

Further reading:

The series 'Love should never be this hard':

Book 1: The Sign of the Rose

Book 2: The Black Rose of Blaby

Book 3: Rose: The Missing Years

Book 4: Finding Rose

Wild Hearts Roam Free - Wild Hearts Come Home -

Wild Hearts Bright Stars

(Modern westerns set in Wyoming)

Those Italian Girls – set in the hills of Tuscany

Wood-Spirit - an anthology of poems about trees

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