The Tree of Eliza

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PART 1

Chapter 1

August 2006

As the small Anglican church came into view, we edged closer in low gear with the windows down. The crunching of gravel and the steady murmur of the Volvo's engine rumbled the silence. Like a conductor guiding the wind section, Ella's outstretched arm played with the breeze. 'Where have all the birds gone?' she whispered, as Stonelake House emerged through the beech and elm. We parked on the green below a sycamore tree, close to the church's entrance.

'It does seem quieter than usual. Maybe the birds know something we don't. No ramblers today – it looks like we have the place to ourselves,' I said.

At the side gate of the churchyard, Ella leaned on me to negotiate the deep step down into the graveyard. The step was smooth and concave; it must have been a busy place at one time. On both sides of the path, the Benham family name dominated the gravestones. As she walked, Ella read out the inscriptions on the tombstones and memorials. Listening to her, I looked back to Stonelake House. Although it was positioned lower than the village and its roof had collapsed, Stonelake House still looked imposing. Its symmetrical design gave it a sense of order and the Tuscan pilasters that dominated the entrance lent it authority. It had been built in the mid-eighteenth century so the sandstone blocks were still solid and true. I knew that from each of its fifteen windows could be observed the church and anyone who passed into it. Although the six chimney-stacks were still intact, the slated roof had all but gone bar the framework and supporting beams. A dilapidated summerhouse could be just picked out from the foliage at the side of the house,

close to what had been the kitchen area. I imagined the kitchen and scullery, bustling with local banter and gossip as the Benham family entertained the rich and famous; Edward IV's mistress was known to have stayed there.

The church clock incorrectly informed us, and Stonelake, that it was seven minutes past five. The clock's faces looked out of place; they were sky blue with golden hands and twelve gold studs. Above the spire was a spinning sword buckle, dented and punctured, it is said, due to having been used for target practice by the Canadian army during their stay here in the Second World War. I wondered whether, while they were targeting it, they knew it was the sword buckle of a defeated French king. The church windows were stained with biblical scenes but very little colour emitted from them. Embedded in the cassock-coloured walls, split flint stones shed amber and tawny browns. The grounds were enclosed within an ornamented wrought iron railing. A low cherry tree stooped over six or more gravestones, touching a donated bench close to the railing, a bench on which Ella and I often sat. At the back of the church there was a pond, surrounded by sarsen stones and partially shadowed by a weeping willow, its leaves tickling the water. Ducks would navigate between the hanging branches looking for shelter on sunny days.

Two young yew trees shaded and protected the Benham graves, creating dancing shadows that leapt from one grave to another. The trees seemed to generate the breeze, their long branches swaying and gusting us closer to the dominant tree that stood at the other side of the church. We followed the path round to the church's locked doors, the arched entrance darkened the oak panels that were unbleached by sunlight. From each side of the arch a face protruded and looked down on us, chiselled from stone. From there, a short path led to the road; three strides and you'd be at the gate, with its foot-high step up to the road. We continued

past the entrance and there, directly in front of us, was the tree. It stood between the church and the well house, overshadowing both. With each visit, I was taken aback. It wasn't just the sheer size of the tree; it was the tortuous twists and turns of its contorted trunk, which bent and twisted back on itself, forming a hotchpotch of torsos and limbs. Within the cavity of the tree, a knitted bough in the shape of two legs rose from the earth, forming the bottom of a torso that melded into the tree. Like slapped skin in tattered stockings, torn bark revealed patches of cherry red. I'd been told this was the oldest tree in Sussex, and I had no reason to doubt it. The hollowed heart was wide enough to take two people. My eyes followed the twisted limbs that snaked out of its torso and climbed towards the light, its open arms welcoming Ella. Some called it the healing tree, some the dream tree, some the wishing tree, and Pamela, a colleague of Ella's, referred to it as the Reiki tree. Ella knew of the tree and Stonelake before she met me but never referred to it as a Reiki tree that is until Pamela suggested that Ella should go inside the tree. 'It's a special tree,' she'd said. 'There is a positive energy in and around it. Ella, I'm sure it'll help.'

So there we were again. Looking for what, I wasn't sure, but there was something about the place, something that drew you in. Ella ran her hands down the aged bark on either side of the trunk's fissure. Inside the hollowed trunk, light tunnelled through cavities in the tree, only to be swallowed by dark bark and twisted crevices. Its floor was soft with needles, berries and musky leaves at least two inches deep. Slightly bowing her head, as if in respect, Ella entered, clearing the lip that protruded above the cavity like a porch. Within the hollow was a raised step that positioned you into a niche where you could look straight up through the trunk, through the canopy and into the sky above. I followed the roots that clawed at the surface soil; they touched the church wall and every corner of the graveyard. The

tree was in front of me, above me, below me; it was all around me, God the Father, God the Son and the Holy Ghost. I was standing in its shadow and in its light.

I wondered how old the tree was. The heart was hollowed out, therefore there were no rings to count. It was taller than the church and wider than the well house. They say one metre in width is equivalent to a thousand years, so it had to be older than that. It had outlived generation after generation. Mothers, fathers, daughters and sons were laid in this sacred ground in the hope that they could rest in peace; protected by church and tree.

I jostled my feet to make sure that they hadn't become rooted to the earth, and glimpsed Ella's trouser leg within the tree. I refocused, wondering where she started and the tree ended. I slipped my hand into the dark crevice of the tree and placed it on Ella's stomach, which was slightly bloated because of the steroids. Her abdomen rose and fell in controlled movements. She often said, 'the longer the breath the longer the life'. I knew she was looking for her father more than a miraculous cure.

'Cal! There's energy from this tree, I feel it.'

Saturday after Saturday she slipped into the tree to look up through the hollowed trunk and deep into the canopy, beckoning for a sign of her father's presence.

As I waited, I took a closer look at the three headstones that faced the yew tree. They were so close to it that I wondered how there could be space for Edward and Harriet Hayne and their daughter Eliza. I paced out the distance from tree to headstone: just five feet. They can't have been a tall family but even so, why so

close to the yew? Edward Hayne died on 22 July 1868 from sun-stroke, aged sixty-two.

Chapter 2

The harvest − 22 July 1868

His back ached as the sickle cut low. In the middle of the harvest field, he'd no protection or shade against the July midday sun. Determined to finish his task before dusk, he swung and sliced through stalk after stalk. Precious moisture was being drawn from his skin, which was blistering to piglet pink. He felt dizzy but carried on. The back of his shirt should've been wet with perspiration but his sweat was lost to the relentless heat. He had harvested two thirds of the crop, which gave him the incentive to carry on. Scanning the field, he wondered where he had left his hat. He shook his water bottle and uncorked it. Closing his eyes, he swallowed a little and let the last drop evaporate over his tongue. He lifted his sickle and cleared the serrated blade, grasped six stalks and sliced clean and low, tossing the wheat behind him. He didn't dare look up, worried that he'd waver due to the scale of his task. With bowed head and arched back, he worked his way through the wheat, clearing all that stood ahead of him. His heavy boots systematically thundered into the baked soil, sending clouds of dust into his squinted eyes and tightened lips. The small cross around his scarlet neck swung in time with his sickle; his tight chest heaved under his damp shirt and waistcoat and his nostrils flared as they drew precious oxygen through the swirling dust and grain. He picked up speed, unaware of the butterfly he'd sliced in half, the field mouse he'd crushed or the grasshopper he'd decapitated. And on and

on he slogged, blinkered by the heat and penetrating sun. Hour after hour steamed past. Through a cloudless sky, the sun edged west with him but although it was lowering, it offered no respite. His final swipe shot a bolt through his forearm as the sickle clashed with a sarsen stone, sending a burst of sparks into the crisp dry wheat. For the first time, he stood up to survey his progress. He blinked with disbelief, letting his sickle drop into a bed of wheat, for he had finished the field.

His body swayed. He was aware of smoke, and through the smoke he saw a young girl in the distance. He mouthed, 'Eliza'. The sun blistered low behind her. She wore a gown of orchard pink and swept through the wheat like a skater on ice. She called to him. He fell to his knees and reached out to her. The sound of crackling became louder but he heard her call again, 'Father, it's time. You can let go now.'

In the flint stone farmhouse, a large oak table was set out for his late return. A royal blue porcelain jug was filled to the brim with buttermilk that was gradually changing from chalk white to clotted cream. His wife Harriet soaked a linen napkin and laid it over the jug. Its laced border fluttered slightly in the hot breeze like the mourning veil she would soon wear. Three thick slices of pressed ox tongue were placed in an orderly fashion on a chipped ceramic plate. Half a loaf was hardening beside the large serrated knife that was neatly positioned on the breadboard, while the butter softened. A cooking apple sat on a side plate, waiting to be peeled and sliced. The stale kitchen air swelled with the smell of tomato chutney and pickled eggs; Edward was no lover of bland food, always seeking combinations of intense flavours. Harriet missed Eliza's laughter in the house and how her eyes widened when Edward popped and swallowed his pickled eggs, one after the other, before tackling a beetroot, followed by a pickled onion. The way her face scrunched, tight lipped and one eye closed, when he filled his tankard with sour buttermilk to wash

everything down. If Edward hadn't forgotten his lunch box and flask on that day in May, she wouldn't have sent Eliza to the well house until the afternoon when the village men gathered to help draw the water. She went over to the window by the sink and, without shifting her gaze from the distant field, lifted a potato and picked up the peeling knife from the basin. Frantically she peeled potato after potato, the cuttings becoming thicker with each potato, the end results smaller and more angular. She looked down for the first time and blinked with disbelief; there were no more potatoes to be peeled and those she had peeled looked like turnip cubes. Raising her head, she caught her reflection in the glass; with the heat, the grey in her hair had frizzed up like tumbleweed. She had never felt so tired and old. She dropped the peeler and watched a single tear follow it into the basin. Although she did not know it, at the same time, Edward was dropping his sickle.

Harriet dampened down her hair and dried her hands on her apron. She cleared her eyes with the back of her forearm and then gazed through the window. The sun was low but it still raged burnt orange. She squinted. Beyond the tree line and hedging, smoke spiralled upwards like incense. She undid her apron and briskly walked out of the kitchen, through the hall and into the garden. Next door, Jack Rayton stood in front of his gate with his hand on the latch. 'Harriet, that's Edward's field,' said Jack, 'I'm sure the smoke is coming from his field.'

Harriet dropped her apron and quickly unlatched her garden gate. She ran, Jack following briskly behind her. The village tripped into life as the word, 'fire', flashed across thresholds. She ran past the stables and Sam, ignoring the horseman's call. At the field gate, she caught her breath. Sam and his stable boy bolted the stable doors and walked hurriedly towards her. At the top of the field, close to the fire, she could see Edward slumped over the sarsen stone.

Jack was the first to reach Edward. He dragged his limp body thirty feet clear of the flames. Harriet fell to her knees, and called to him, she called to him again and again. She put her ear to his lips and listened. Feeling Jack's firm hand on her shoulder, she looked up and shook her head. The village men arrived and started to make a break around the burning wheat, methodically clearing the stalk and grain to starve the fire. The church bell tolled. In the well house, above the bricked well, the younger men turned the wheel while the women filled buckets.

Harriet adjusted Edward's tattered hair, took off his cross and chain and kissed it before placing it around her pale neck, under her lace collar. 'From Eliza to you, and now from you to me,' she said. 'It is our cross to share and now my cross to bear.'

Chapter 3

Eliza

I pushed myself off the tree and looked at the gravestones. I knelt down and wiped the middle headstone with my handkerchief. Eliza Hayne, beloved daughter of Edward and Harriet Hayne. The date was difficult to make out so I prised up a piece of flint that was protruding from the soil and scraped the moss away so I could read the inscription. I stood back, blinked, then wiped the stone and read it again. Eliza had died at the age of twenty on the seventh of May 1854, fourteen years before her father died in the harvest field in July of 1868. That date, seventh of May, was one that Harriet and Edward would never forget. I would never forget it either; it was Ella's birthday.

My back against the tree, I stared at the gravestones. Edward had been a farmer who ploughed the fields, yet he could afford to lay his family to rest with inscribed headstones. And Eliza. What happened to you on the day you died? On that May morning, were you ill, in pain, unconscious? Were Edward and Harriet damping down your hot forehead and was the priest praying at your side? Or was it a day full of promise? Did the morning light kiss your forehead, tickle your cheeks and tease you to rise?

Ella leaned on my shoulder as she slipped out of the tree. She noticed me looking at the grave stones.

I said, 'There, on the headstone, Eliza Hayne. Look at the dates.' The date stood out, the area I'd cleared with the flint fragment glowing in the low sun.

‘No… it can’t be.’ She knelt on one knee and with two fingers traced the inscribed date. She turned to me, ‘The seventh of May! My birthday!’

‘And Eliza’s death day,’ I added.

‘How strange. And she died so young. I wonder what she died from.’

Shrugging my shoulders, I said, ‘Life expectancy was lower in those days. Pneumonia, cholera, consumption, who knows?’

I looked at Eliza’s gravestone then back at Ella, ‘This may sound corny but I think there is a story to be told. We’ve been drawn to this place like hundreds before us because we believe the tree is a spiritual healing tree. What if it’s not about healing so much as solving?’

Her lips tightened as she frowned. ‘I’m not sure what you mean.’

‘You know, like an unsettled past that needs to be resolved.’

‘For someone who’s not superstitious, you’re sounding a bit illogical.

‘There’s more to this place than meets the eye. You know that already, or you wouldn’t be here every Saturday. I’d like to find out a little bit more about the families who lived and worked on the estate in the 19th century. Especially Eliza.’

Ella’s face softened. ‘She died so young. Then for her father to die of sun stroke... he was sixty two years old, you’d think he would have been accustomed to the extremes of weather and protected himself against the sun. Unless it was unprecedented.’

‘It doesn’t figure. The inscriptions on the headstones very rarely mention how a person died. I wonder why his does.’

Ella looked behind me, her face two-toned like golden light on grey water. ‘The sun is going down. I think we’d better get going.’ She rubbed her nose and flipped her collar.

‘Okay darling.’

We made our way to the car and I opened the Volvo’s door for Ella and just before she got in, her eyebrows perked up.

‘Cal, I wonder if the temperature records go back to the 1800s?’

Chapter 4

Eliza’s wish.

‘Eliza, can you take your father’s lunch up to him? He’s forgot it again. I’ve never seen the likes. If his head wasn’t screwed on he’d lose it.’

Eliza tucked a strand of blonde hair behind her ear and smiled. ‘That’s just father, he’d work all day without a bite if you’d let him. I don’t know how he can drink that buttermilk in the morning, I tried it once and it’s horrible. Mother, look, he’s left behind his hat and water bottle as well.’

‘That reminds me, can you fill a couple of pails before you go? And be careful.’

‘Yes, Mama.’

Eliza put on her father's hat and tipped it back to reveal misty eyes like wakening bluebells, lifted a pail in each hand and sauntered out into the May morning. She reached the garden gate and looked to the right. Through the trees, an amber glow lightened the path to Stonelake House and turned its pillars to gold. She could work there again if she wanted, maybe as a chambermaid, but if she did it would shatter her belief that one day she'd be a lady. Lady Eliza, married to a gentleman, living in a manor house like Stonelake. It wasn't a childish fantasy, it was her destiny. She knew it, and so did the tree, the church and the tree that shadowed Stonelake House and its garden. She looked up at the spire and the canopy, a slight smile pinching her cheek. Today was her day.

Eliza walked past their neighbour's cottage, crossed the road and went through the church gates into the graveyard. The church doors were open but she didn't go in as she was inappropriately dressed and it was known that the Benhams didn't approve of villagers frequenting the church during the week. On Sundays there were two masses, one at nine o'clock for the Benhams and another at half past ten for the villagers. The Reverend would greet the Benham family under the arch on their way in, and again on their way out. The villagers were greeted inside the chapel, where the exchanges were cordial but brief; Lord Benham didn't want queues of villagers outside the church. It was said that he had once asked the Dean to sanction a second entrance to the church to allow the villagers to enter unseen by Stonelake House but his request was refused because of the great age of the church. Shortly afterwards, the church burnt down and the Benhams offered to rebuild it, which they did, with the entrance facing the road, away from Stonelake House.

Eliza remembered the night of the fire, the dancing figures on her bedroom wall, the sound of smarting wood and the sharp hiss of water thrown into the heart of

the fire, then the quelled yelp of the bell as it thundered into the charred ground. The smell had reminded her of burnt potatoes charring in a pot. A westerly wind had pushed the flames and smoke towards the black pond that rippled with orange and red streamers. In the heat she had a sudden backbone chill; across the field she'd noticed the still shadows lined up in front of Stonelake House that one by one had disappeared into the house, leaving a solitary dark figure, which had remained there until the last beam had fallen.

Eliza looked to Stonelake again and despite the spring sunshine she felt a tiny shiver race up her spine. She shook her shoulders and put down her pails, a silver cross glistening as it swung just below her neckline. With one hand, she dropped the cross under her blouse and with the other tipped her father's hat right back. She bent down to pick a daffodil, a golden star that wasn't beyond her grasp. She held the flower's stem like a flute of champagne and swirled it, releasing a pocket of pollen. She thought of tiny bubbles rising from a glass and bursting under her chin, smiled and wiggled her nose, trying to shake off the itch from the stamen.

Eliza had never tasted champagne but she'd once served the men and ladies of Stonelake during their summer ball. With each glass the ladies had become more playful with the men, and the men more daring. She wished that she could dance like they could dance, elegantly and confidently, waltzing in those magnificent dresses, enough material on the base of their gowns to make five Sunday dresses. She remembered the heat in her cheeks when Harold Benham had discovered her practising the waltz with the other maid, Charlene, in the butler's pantry when he'd come to make sure there would be enough champagne for the guests. He'd smiled and said, 'If only I had a dance partner as graceful as you, I then could dance without having my shoes dulled by clod hoppers.' The girls had frozen, their mouths open.

The olive green cabinet and shelving made the pantry seem smaller. With just a small window above the cabinet and a single oil lamp, there was very little light to be shared. Eliza wondered how they'd managed to dance in the confined area.

'That said,' Harold Benham had continued, 'you have to be light and balanced on the foot to serve my thirsty guests, which brings me to my reason for being here. Can you inform Mr Buxton that the champagne is being consumed rather rapidly than I had anticipated. Please ask him to make sure any boxes we kept in reserve are also chilled.' The girls had genuflected and in unison said, 'Yes, sir,' and made for the door. 'It doesn't take two to inform Mr Buxton, Charlene, if you inform Mr Buxton, Eliza, can take another tray of champagne and tend to my guests.'

'Of course sir.' Charlene genuflected and left. Eliza stepped forward to leave through the door behind Harold but he remained in front of the door, 'One moment,' he tweaked his beard and lifted an eyebrow and asked, 'Eliza, how old are you?' and she had dropped her eyes and said, 'Sixteen, sir'. 'Sixteen.

'You may give my compliments to your father and mother; they have brought up a lovely daughter.' And then, taking two waltz steps, he had stood directly in front of her, paused and then lifted her chin with the knuckle of his index finger, her cheeks getting redder by the second. His knuckle had felt cold. 'I don't know if anyone has ever told you but you have beautiful eyes.' When he whispered, the smell of warm brandy and cigar had made her feel light-headed. He'd bent his arm around and behind her, his cheek so close to hers she'd wondered if he could feel her heat. He'd picked up the lamp and raised it to her face. 'Sapphire, they are of the most radiant sapphire.'

Unable to bring herself to look at Harold, Eliza had tightened her lips. It was not that she thought him unattractive – on the contrary, she found his looks striking. He was tall but not dangly. He often played cricket in the green in front of Stonelake and when bowling, unlike his peers, he'd have his sleeves rolled up, and he'd run straight and true like an engine on a track. His unruly hair puffed up like train smoke. Unlike his father's sunken chin, he had a door wedge chin that looked thicker than it was due to his trimmed beard. His eyes were an intense blue that at times she found unsettling, but his smile was relaxed and reassuring. His finely cut jacket and v-shaped waistcoat made him look more muscular.

With her eyes lowered, Eliza had had time to study his sturdy legs in their well-fitted trousers. She'd also noted that his shoes were gleaming and not dull as he had implied. She'd been able to smell his hair wax, tangy-sweet like stewed gooseberries. She'd quelled an urge to adjust his bowtie, which was slightly skew-whiff; on most Sundays she had to adjust her father's tie. She'd wanted to say something, but there were no words banked for a moment like this. She'd wanted to genuflect, pardon herself and scuttle away but his knuckle and focus prevented her from doing so.

Then the kitchen door had opened and in walked Mr Buxton. His head had jerked as he came to an abrupt stop. Harold had stepped back and Eliza genuflected and said, 'Certainly, sir, I'll take a tray and see to your guests straight away,' and scurried off into the kitchen under Mr Buxton's watchful eye.

Later that evening, while she was serving drinks, Harold Benham had touched her on the bottom, sending her and the tray of champagne into the bosom of his mother, who'd cried out, 'You stupid wench!' The words had turned Eliza's stomach

like a plough. She'd looked to Harold in the hope that he'd accept responsibility but instead he'd raised his glass towards her and smiled. The band had stopped playing and all eyes were on her. She'd tried to dab dry Lady Benham's cleavage with the tray cloth but was brushed away with the words, 'Get your hands off me, you're making it worse! Who on God's earth allows these feral peasants into our household? Away with you now, and send in Mr Buxton to sort out this mess.' She turned to the ladies who had gathered around her and shook her head. Her scarlet dress was now darker below her pale cleavage. 'I would not have had a care excepting the fact that this is rather good champagne.' The ladies chuckled.

Regret had quickly been transformed into abhorrence. Eliza's eyes were stinging wet; she'd wanted to give Harold Benham a rebuke but held her tongue due to her station. Instead, she'd picked up the broken glass and for the second time that evening scurried out of a room due to the inappropriate behaviour of Harold Benham.

Eliza tipped her father's hat sideways and, lifting her chin, swept towards the yew tree in the centre of the graveyard, imagining the remaining limp daffodils trumpeting her entrance. She slipped the hat off and placed it on the lip just above the hollow, then entered the tree. Raising both hands but still holding the daffodil, she undid her hair and shook it free, the corn-coloured hair flowing between her shoulders like sand in a timer. She closed her eyes and let the tree take her.

The chandelier glistened with a hundred flickering candles in a ballroom, the most beautiful of all rooms. The subjects in the huge paintings on the walls were indistinct and set in ruby backdrops, yet the elaborate gold frames were animated with detail: gymnasts, performers and Mai dancers. Eliza was waltzing with a

gentleman she didn't know. His Venetian mask was silver with black spirals and his black tricorn hat was trimmed with silver lace. They danced to the whispers of ladies and the swanning looks of men, the tails of her pink dress sweeping other dancers aside as they waltzed across the polished floor. The Chippendale mirrors dazzled with light from the flickering chandeliers and as the pair passed each mirror, twelve carved birds of paradise flew out of the frame. They twirled past the six Georgian windows, draped curtains fluttering around them as they went, and finally to the centre of the room where they spun together like a carousal picking up speed until all colours merged. In her golden mask, Eliza felt liberated and anonymous next to the others there, who were unmasked. By the time the waltz finished she was almost out of breath and for a long moment the only sound was of her gentle panting and the flutter of ladies' fans. Then a clap and another until the ballroom walls pulsated with applause.

Eliza smiled and then moved deeper into the tree. 'Today is a special day. Today is my day. Today I would like to make my wish. I've been coming here since I was seven. Here I have had magical dreams that have taken me to places far beyond this place. Yet I've never wished for anything. Father says that you are a special tree and that you can grant one wish, providing it is not for money, wealth or ill deed.' Eliza placed the daffodil in a crevice within the tree, stepped up into the niche and looked skywards. She closed her eyes tight and, straightening her arms, placing her open hands against the bark behind her. It felt balmy and sticky, and yet the tree comforted her as light funnelled its way down, radiating and warming her face. 'I wish for a new life, a life beyond here, a life where I can be free to do whatever I want. To dance without a care, in a dress made from the finest silk, pink and tight around my waist and then blooming out like a bellflower. I wish I could waltz

like an angel dancing on clouds.' A low breeze unsettled the bed of leaves and surged upwards, fluttering her dress and hair and carrying her wish into the juddering canopy. And then: stillness.

Chapter 5

Edward's wish

The grass was pearl damp, so to Edward's pleasure the plough was cutting deep and true. The field was owned by the Benhams, who had been reluctant to rent it to them; Edward's father had argued that he'd work it more efficiently than an employed hand. Edward could remember the day Lord Henry Thomas Benham had come to the cottage to offer his father the position of estate manager. His father had nodded to him to take his leave, but Edward wanted to stay to help convince Lord Benham to rent the field to them. He was sixteen and wished his father would include him in those decisions but instead he was dismissed with a half nod like an agitated bull trying to shift a fly. He banged the door behind him and thundered into the garden. Lord Benham lifted an eyebrow and Daniel indicated that he should take a seat. Lord Benham hesitated, dusted the chair with a white linen handkerchief and the two sat down opposite each other. A fire glowed between them.

Daniel nodded towards the door, 'He's a good lad, headstrong, needs reined in every so often but handles a plough better than any man.'

Lord Benham took off his tweed cap and tapped it on his knee, dispersing the last remaining droplets of snow. 'Mr Hayne, you are renowned in the village for your work ethic. That is the reason for my visit. I'd like to employ you as the estate manager. You will be paid well and will no longer have to worry about where the next meal will come from.' He looked around the tiny kitchen. 'And the main cottage will be made available for you and your family, free of rent.'

Daniel followed Lord Benham's gaze. The room looked smaller than usual; their legs acted as barriers to the fire and the grey light from the single window fell short of the oak table. Lord Benham watched and waited. His opportunity came with the bite of a bottom lip, 'Mr Hayne, I need a driven man like you to motivate and direct my workers.'

Lord Benham sat upright like a hunt master at the start of the chase. As Daniel straightened, his chair creaked like a snapped twig above a den. They were level.

'Lord Benham, it is a fine and generous offer. Any other man in my position would be mad to turn it down.'

They both leaned forward, the farmer's chin protruding as he sucked in a breath through his teeth. Lord Benham raised his prominent nose and stroked the groomed hairs on his chin. His beard edged along his jaw like a snail's trail. His pasty skin caught a flash of red from the fire, which spurted when a draught forced its way down the chimney stack. Turning towards it, they watched a leaf fall and then vanish in a burst of flame.

Outside, Edward was heading towards the tree and the church. The snow made the church walls and headstones look darker and more baleful than usual and yet the tree seemed more alive and vivacious. Edward crossed the road and suddenly found himself slumped deep into the snow behind the church gate; he'd forgotten how low the step was from the road to the church path. On the verge of cursing, he bit his tongue in mid-syllable as he caught sight of two stern faces looking down on him from the arch of the church. He was surprised to see that the ground around the yew tree was clear of snow; the lip over the hollow should have been covered in snow but it, too, was clear. Even from where he stood he could feel the warmth from its heart. The skin under its shedding bark looked itchy red. He made his way to the snowless ground and looked into the heart of the tree, aware of a warm musky smell. He edged closer and laid his hand on the red flesh, and wondered if the pulse he felt was his. Stepping into the hollow and to the left, he raised himself into the niche and looked up, into the hoary sky. 'I've one wish,' he said, 'that the field will be ours to work, seed and harvest'. Edward felt a thermal gust twist around his ankles. An ascending warmth pricked the back of his cold ears. He watched the smaller branches shimmy above him and a single leaf fall in the direction of the cottage.

Edward shook the memory around his head wondering about the validity of his recollection. They'd had a good harvest last year so Edward had a positive feeling about the forthcoming crop. It was early May and the soil should have been turned in late February but he'd sold his oxen to buy the shires and had held back until he got a better purchase price for them. He gripped the plough, called to the shires, and the team began to cut and turn the soil, occasionally stalling to clear a stone or swerving to avoid a sarsen block. They'd spent weeks with his father clearing stones from the

field but they never moved the large sarsen sandstones. For whatever reason, long before the cultivation of the land, the stones had been deliberately transported and laid there so his father believed that it must have been for a spiritual purpose. It was probably superstitious nonsense but all the same, Edward left the stones undisturbed and furrowed the land like his father had done before him. He couldn't believe how quickly the years had raced past, forty eight years later and he was still ploughing the field. The sun edged through a split in the clouds, he looked to the gatepost for his hat and realised that he'd left it in the cottage with his water bottle. A frown was transformed into a half smile for he knew Eliza would be on her way, waving as she worked her way up the adjacent field stooping every so often to adjust his hat.

Chapter 6

The Well House − 7 May 1854

Eliza fastened her hair and slipped out of the tree, and was startled by Harold. He pushed himself off the church wall and walked towards her, his hat tilted at the same angle as his smile.

'I wondered where you'd disappeared to, Eliza' he said. 'The locals say that tree has magic powers. You surely don't believe in that mumbo jumbo, do you?' To his amusement, she put on her father's hat and lifted her pails. He stood in her way.

'It suits you.'

'Sir?'

'The hat suits you, although it does nothing for your dress.'

'I'm sorry sir, my father is out in the field today, and I've to bring him his hat and some water.'

He tipped his hat and stepped closer.

'I'm sorry, I was teasing you. I did recognise it, I often see your father wearing it. Can I help you with the water wheel? There is no donkey there today.'

'Sir, it is not the kind of work a gentleman like yourself should be undertaking.'

Harlord's tweed suit of checked orange and beige, brown and burgundy was immaculate. Under his high collar of sharp white, a burgundy cravat puffed up like a mallard's plumage. He straightened his jacket sleeves; there were three chestnut buttons on each sleeve of the three-button jacket. They looked like polished conkers.

‘Nor a lady. You can call me Harold. I’d prefer it if you did.’

Without waiting for a reply, he took the pails and walked to the well house. His strides were long and he was there in four steps. Eliza stood blushing; she’d never been called a lady before. Harold Benham was handsome in a confident way but she was still angry with the way he had treated her in front of his mother and friends.

