

# mystical circles

s.c. skillman



*Juliet, concerned that her younger sister has fallen for the charismatic Craig, leader of the Wheel of Love, sets off for the Cotswolds to investigate. She arrives in Craig's community hoping to rescue Zoe. But intrigues, liaisons and relationships flare and flourish or fizzle out quickly within this close circle and, despite her reservations, Juliet is drawn into the Wheel of Love - with completely unforeseen consequences.*

# Mystical Circles

**Order the complete book from**

**[Booklocker.com](http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/6329.html?s=pdf)**

**<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/6329.html?s=pdf>**

**or from your favorite neighborhood  
or online bookstore.**

**Your Free excerpt appears below. Enjoy!**

**From the reviews of *Mystical Circles*:**

‘intricate tapestry of human emotions and psyches with a romantic thread weaving through.’

Caroline Bailey, *creative arts specialist and ceramic artist*

‘will captivate you from the first paragraph...like any good mystery the more I read the more questions I had.’

Marsha Randolph, *US reviewer*

‘weaves romance...with spiritual searching and emotional needs, powerful universal themes.’

Marie Calvert, *arts psychotherapist and retreat leader*

‘I fell in love with the beautiful house where the story is set and wanted to go there immediately...intense and compelling.’

Eleanor M. Watkins, *author*

‘romantic...colourful...well observed cast of characters at the ... esoteric Wheel of Love...the community’s practices, and their effect on vulnerable individuals, ring true.’

Fay Sampson, *prizewinning author of ‘A Malignant House’*

‘a gripping read ... I wanted to ... find out who were the goodies and the baddies ... and ... what would happen to Juliet and her sister.’

Frances Smith, *Bookseller, Warwick and Kenilworth Books (voted one of the best 50 bookshops in the UK)*



# *Mystical Circles*

S.C. SKILLMAN



*Blue Lily Press*  
[www.scskillman.com](http://www.scskillman.com)

First published in Great Britain in 2010

Revised edition published in 2012 by  
*Blue Lily Press*



Copyright © S.C. Skillman

ISBN: 978-1-62141-758-3

The right of S.C. Skillman to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with Sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright Designs and Patents Act 1988.

Grateful acknowledgement is made to J.M. Dent, an imprint of The Orion Publishing Group, London for *The Bright Field* by R.S. Thomas; Hamish MacGibbon for *Not Waving But Drowning* by Stevie Smith; Faber & Faber for *Valentine* by Wendy Cope; Hodder & Stoughton for Celtic poem in *The Celtic Way of Prayer* by Esther de Waal; Denise Levertov for *Writing in the Dark* from *Candles in Babylon*, copyright ©1982 by Denise Levertov, reprinted by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp; University of Nebraska Press for *For My Daughter* by Weldon Kees, reprinted from *The Collected Poems of Weldon Kees* edited by Donald Justice copyright 1962,1975, by the University of Nebraska Press © renewed 2003 by the University of Nebraska Press; Penguin for *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald; Lenono Music for *Beautiful Boy* by John Lennon; Scholastic for *The Subtle Knife* by Philip Pullman; and Rev. Margaret & Rev. Richard Deimel for *Liturgy for Midsummer Eve*.

All characters in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental. All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means without the prior permission in writing of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

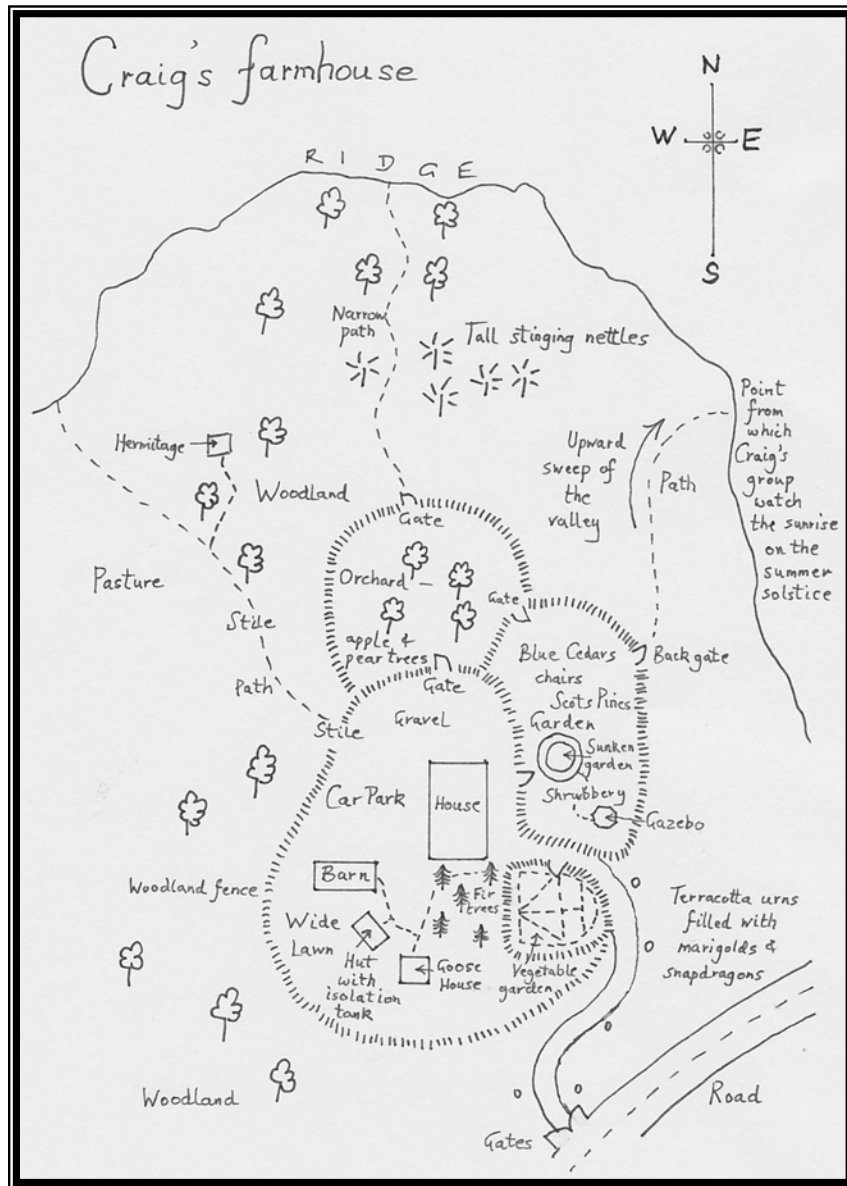
Cover design M.D. James 2012

## *Mystical Circles*

To my father Ken,  
who first gave me a stamped addressed envelope  
to submit my stories to a London publisher  
when I was twelve years old

and to David, Abigail and Jamie for their patience and  
support throughout the creation of this book

# Craig's farmhouse





# 1

## *Arrival*

*Juliet was trembling. It had all happened so fast. The explosion of anger between the two men. The rush for the car park. The engine roaring into life. As the rear lights picked her out, she dodged aside just in time. The next thing she heard was a loud bang. And the sickening crunch of metal giving way. And a fountain of fragmenting glass.*

*He'd slammed on the brakes too late.  
And it was all her fault.*

\*\*\*\*\*

Juliet's palms were slippery on the steering wheel; she wiped the sweat away from her upper lip. The air conditioning might offset the strong heat of this June day, but not the burning anxiety she felt. Even the spectacular beauty of the high limestone hills and deep valleys as she headed west from the A417 had failed to calm her. A sign half hidden by the trees proclaimed that she'd found '*The Wheel of Love*'. She turned in at the entrance.

Further down the valley, she could see the two steeply pitched gables of the farmhouse with its mellow honey-coloured stone. It looked idyllic. But that held no pleasure for her; her stomach twisted with apprehension for Zoe.

She drove round the house to the gravel parking area at the back. A Bentley and a Saab were parked up against the woodland fence. She was about to nose her Renault Mégane in between them then realised there wasn't quite enough room, and reversed into the space on the other side of the Saab. She drew to a halt and turned the engine off.

She pulled a copy of an email from the door pocket. A few phrases leapt out at her with the same force as when she'd first read them.

*Hi, you in crowded, stressed old London from me in the peaceful, perfect Cotswolds...massive change of plan...I'm in love...Craig invited me out for supper...got to know him a whole lot better...gorgeous, sexy, intelligent...all I ever dreamed of...moved to his place...fantastic farmhouse a few miles from Cirencester...group called Wheel of Love...changes people's lives...won't be coming back...glad to leave London...paradise here...staying for ever...why not visit?... Material for a documentary here!...I'll tell Craig you're ringing...know what you're like with a story.*

*See what you think!*

*Love Zoe.*

Juliet bit her lip, folding the sheet of paper. Zoe's tone still needled her as much as when she'd first read it. Zoe knew her sister wouldn't be able to resist coming to find out what was going on. And the suggestion about a documentary had worked out just as Zoe had proposed. Still, Juliet didn't like it, not one bit.

She was deeply suspicious of this Craig guy, for a start.

But friends and colleagues hadn't been at all sympathetic. One had said, *Hey, the love of her life and the truths of the universe all wrapped up in one package – great!* But Juliet knew she needed to come and see the situation for herself.

Another colleague had advised her to wait and see if this infatuation would blow over, despite the tone of the email. Not a hope. Not if Juliet knew Zoe. Too late now, anyway. She was here.

She had, in the limited time available, done a bit of research into whatever powers Craig might produce. Psychological powers, she thought most likely. Mind control. That sort of thing. But, as she'd discovered when she'd googled the subject, *Knowledge is power.*

Prepare yourself: that was the key. Know what you're up against.

So thinking, she stuffed the copy email into her shoulder-bag, pushed the door open and jumped out. Ahead of her she could see the north-facing wall of a fine tithe barn. The stonework all looked in perfect condition.

*Mystical Circles*

The atmosphere closed in around her. She drew a deep breath and felt strangely unsatisfied. Going to the back of the car, she opened the boot to lift her suitcase, laptop and portable recorder out. Setting them down on the ground, she locked the car.

As she turned, a champagne cork in the gravel drew her eye. She picked it up and twisted it in her hands, pondering. Then she glanced towards the back door, and saw the discarded bottle lying there. Going across, she took hold of that too.

She was suddenly aware of being watched.

A silver-haired man appraised her. "Found the champagne so soon?"

She straightened. "No. The bottle was empty when I saw it on the ground."

Might this be Craig? Did Zoe now prefer her men lined and wrinkled? But his Yorkshire accent soothed her. It hadn't seemed anything like so pronounced over the phone.

"Who are you?" he asked.

She put the champagne bottle and cork back down. "Juliet Blake. Zoe's sister."

He held out his hand to shake hers. His grip was firm, businesslike and brief. "McAllister's the name."

So it *was* Craig. She was about to ask where Zoe was, when he broke in.

"You caught me on a rare break. I've been slaving over a hot computer up there."

"Oh? How hot?"

"Scorching. Sweated over one cursed Excel spreadsheet all morning. Income and expenditure for the last year. Decided to take a break for the sake of my sanity."

"Auditing the accounts? Bit late, surely? We're more than halfway through June."

His glance sharpened. "Why? Not an accountant, are you?"

"No." *I introduced myself to him on the phone only yesterday. Surely he remembers.* "You know I'm a freelance radio journalist."

Silence cut between them.

“Journalist?” She could hear his breathing for a few moments. He moved a little closer. His eyes penetrated hers.

Why was he playing this game with her? She indicated her portable recorder. “It is still OK for the interviews?”

“Interviews?”

*Is he testing my nerve, pretending he doesn't remember?* Juliet gave a brittle laugh. But her BBC training five years back had taught her to get on with people of all types, and she was adept at disguising her true feelings.

“Want to start with me then?” he said.

“That would be a good idea,” she replied. “After all, you’ve already enchanted my sister.” *And you can begin by explaining how you managed to lure Zoe to your group.*

He stared at her and then burst out laughing. “Me? Enchanted her? Wish I had! No, you’ve got me wrong. That’s my son Craig you’re talking about.”

“He’s your son?”

“Expecting character instead of youth, were you?” he asked.

Her cheeks burned. She clenched her fists, rammed deep in the pockets of her combat jacket. How would she manage to keep up this restrained image? But she visualised Toby, her programme editor contact at Radio 4, who she hoped to sell her documentary to, and it helped.

“So he agreed to your coming to investigate?”

“He did.”

“You fixed a fee?”

“Yes. Half payable on recording, the balance payable on broadcast.”

“That’s something.” He nodded. “A step in the right direction, any road.” He considered her. Then he deftly changed the subject. “Which matters most? Your keenness to quiz the group? Or your fears for your sister?”

She flushed. “Well, naturally, I’m worried about Zoe.”

“No need. They’re not axe murderers. Mad, I grant you; but harmless. Does that help?”

It didn’t really. “Mad in what way?”

*Mystical Circles*

"Best you find that out for yourself. I won't tell you what to think. Last person to look to for that. Though you and I may have something in common."

"How so?"

"You're unhappy about your sister. And I... my problem's my son. He's created his own philosophy of life. Knows why we're here and what for. Always beat me. But when it comes to the practical stuff..." He shook his head. "No money sense at all."

Their eyes met and held. The atmosphere hung heavy between them. "You don't cast Craig in a very good light," Juliet said. "But he's mesmerised Zoe."

"True. Special ability he has with young women. He can be very charming."

She resisted an urge to follow him up on this subject. *So, Craig's charming is he? I'll be the judge of that, when I meet him.* "Good to have met you, Mr McAllister."

"Call me Don. Can I give you a hand?"

"Thanks, but no. I'll be all right." She walked back to her car, picked up her recorder case, and slung the strap over her shoulder. She was just about to grasp the handles of her laptop bag and suitcase when she saw Craig's father had followed her, and was standing close by. "Well, Don, I'd best be getting in."

"How long are you staying?" he asked.

"Few days at the most."

"You'll find the bookings diary in the front hall. Table near the stairs."

She nodded.

He studied her. "Good luck. You'll need it."

She stifled a smart reply.

"No sense in false pride," he said. "Let me carry your bags."

She moistened her lips. *You need to get on with him or you won't last long as an interviewer.* "All right."

As they reached the back door, her mobile phone buzzed. Digging it out of her pocket, she took the call, aware all the time of Don's searching gaze as she spoke to Toby's personal assistant.

"How are you getting on, Juliet?"

"Just arrived," Juliet answered in a low voice. "Can't say yet."

"Met Zoe yet? And Craig?"

"No to both. Tell Toby I'll call later."

"Fine. Bye – good luck."

"Thanks."

Don had the door open for her. Before she could step through, however, her way was blocked. Someone was coming out: a man. Early thirties. Tall. Dark haired. She swallowed. Was this him?

"Well timed," said Don.

"Oh, thanks, Father." Craig wore a deep-raspberry polo with white cotton twill trousers. He closely resembled a former English cricketer turned television personality. He looked athletic and relaxed, faultless in the role, completing the effect with gleaming Reeboks.

His eyes were fixed upon hers, dark and intense. He took her hand, and pressed it. "You must be Juliet. Delighted to see you here."

Her mind went blank. It was as if all thoughts cut out, for one second, two, three...

Craig broke the silence. "Did you have a good journey?"

"Yes thanks." She heard herself breathing. Almost as if she'd stopped, and restarted. Bizarre. What had happened just then?

He still had not released her hand. It seemed as if only she and Craig stood there, with no other person present.

Then, swiftly, she found words, as he dropped his hand back to his side. "Thank you for agreeing to the recordings."

"You're welcome."

"You impressed Zoe with your talk in Cirencester last week. She seems set on a long stay here."

Craig smiled. "She certainly is."

"May I see her? Is she around?"

"No, she's in the barn doing a group meditation."

"Not to stop before time's up. On pain of death," said Don shortly.

Craig switched subjects. "Like the house, Juliet?"

"I love what I've seen of it so far. To find a house so old in such beautiful condition..."

"Thank you," said Craig. "It was a bit run-down when we found it. But we've done some good work since then."

*Mystical Circles*

“Yes, haven’t we?” said Don. She could have sworn he was trying to suppress mounting rage. “Very different state when we first saw it.”

She looked from one to the other. It had taken only the very briefest exchange for her to register an odd blurring of the boundaries between father and son in the matter of who owned this place.

“See the date above the door there?” said Craig. “1532. As you might expect, a fascinating history. The first family who lived here were Catholics. This property was used as a safe house for displaced monks. Feel free to look around when you’ve settled in.” He held her gaze for a few more moments.

“That’s kind,” she replied. “But I’m most anxious to see Zoe as soon as possible.”

“Absolutely. I’ll let her know you’ve arrived, once she’s out of meditation.” He still contemplated her. Then his manner became brisk. “As I said on the phone, take as much time as you like to explore the community. You’re welcome to speak to anyone you wish.”

“Good. We must have a briefing, Craig. When’s the best time for us to talk? We need to discuss the contract, and get it signed. And then I’d like to learn something about your group members. And draw up a schedule of interviews.”

“Of course, Juliet. Four o’clock suit you? Fine.” He turned to Don. “You two clearly met a few moments before I turned up.”

“We did.”

Craig rubbed his hands together. “Would you please show Juliet round then, Father? I’m just off to deal with an urgent call. See you later.” And without giving further details, he shot away, round the north side of the house.

Juliet turned back to Don.

“Come on,” Don said, and they stepped into the house.

They stood in the passageway. The stone walls were whitewashed, and a variety of corn dollies hung along their length. To her left Juliet could see the utility area, and to the right a rack containing an assortment of boots and walking shoes.

“Aha,” she said. “So the group are keen on walking then?”

“No doubt about that,” said Don.

“Just as one might hope, among these rolling hills.” She could hardly wait to get out there, crossing stiles and streams, following woodland trails that might lead her to the top of a high escarpment and open onto stunning views.

Don continued to look at her. *He’s trying to read my thoughts. Such as – ‘at least they do something normal like going for country walks’.*

Don led the way forward until he reached a right-hand turn. At this point, a door ahead banged open and someone charged out. She stopped just in time: a small, slight woman in a flimsy voile dress.

“Oh! Hello, Don,” she said.

“Watch where you’re going, Laura.” He jerked his head towards Juliet.

Laura assessed Juliet with birdlike eyes, and Juliet returned the scrutiny. Laura could have been in her twenties, or her late forties, for all Juliet could tell. Her hair fanned around her head like a gorgon. *Looks like she hasn’t brushed it in days. Wouldn’t impress in a BBC production office. Not that she’d be likely to enter one.*

“You’re Zoe’s sister, aren’t you?” Laura spoke in a breathless voice.

“Yes, I am.”

“Thought as much. Recognised your hair. You look so like her.”

“Yes. People often say that.”

“You’re a freelance journalist, aren’t you? Zoe told us. And I was expecting a big power-dressing media type.”

“Were you?” said Juliet, amused.

“Let me introduce myself. I’m Laura. Laura Greevey.” She held out her hand, which Juliet took at once.

“Pleased to meet you, Laura.” Laura’s fingers felt light and insubstantial.

Disengaging her fingers from Juliet’s, Laura turned to speak to Don. “You’re taking Juliet through, are you?”

“Looks like it. Craig landed me the job.”

“I’ll do it if you like,” Laura offered.

“Oh no,” he said. “Suits me fine. Want to join us, Laura?”



*Mystical Circles*

"Be happy to." She looked at Juliet. "Zoe's booked you a room. We'll show you up there."

Juliet followed Laura and Don into the dining room. Shafts of light slanted across the flagstone floor, and the finely blended scent of ancient oak timbers and beeswax polish came to her nostrils. She gazed at the dark exposed beams and the deep window recesses. Her heart lifted, despite herself. This looked and felt like the sort of place you might dream of staying in for a country house weekend break.

Other elements combined in the fragrance. Looking about her, she recognised the source of these as the basket of apple logs in the fireplace, together with two shining bronze bowls of freshly cut roses.

"What an inviting room," Juliet said.

"Yes." Laura indicated a small black door to the left of the inglenook. "Beyond that's a secret spiral staircase. Not so secret any more of course. Winds up through the thickness of the wall, and takes you to the Monk's Room. I love it there."

"Good place to hide. If it all gets too much," said Don.

"Hope I'll have no need for that."

He chuckled. "Expect you will."

Juliet's spine tingled.

Without qualifying his last statement, Don nodded at the oak refectory table set beneath a low-hanging wrought-iron chandelier. "They eat here in the evenings."

Juliet turned to Laura. "I see you can seat sixteen."

"That's right. Enough to accommodate the permanent members, and any visitors like you. Come along." Laura led her past the table. Juliet stopped. On the wall before her hung a large tapestry panel. She gazed at it, her favourite medieval scene, from *The Lady and the Unicorn*, with its rich colours and exquisite details. There stood the lady at the entrance to her tent, beneath the words: *A mon seul désir, my heart's one desire*, jewels spilling from her hands as her maidservant held out an open casket. She was flanked by the seduced unicorn begging at her left, and the lion to her right. How appropriate for Craig to choose this, for the Wheel of Love.

They passed through the doorway and entered a sitting room. Late morning sun streamed through the leaded window panes, tinting the

oak floor timbers gold, and enriching the colours of the silk long-fringed rugs.

"Another lovely room," murmured Juliet. But something wasn't quite right. Though she couldn't say what.

A gold-painted grandfather clock dominated the opposite corner. A number of flame-red velvet armchairs invited the three, from their position in front of the oak wainscoting.

Laura chattered on. "We won't sink into them now. We all gather in here for drinks before dinner."

"That's right. A whisky or two guarantees survival in this group," muttered Don.

On the surface, it all looked perfect to Juliet, with or without the addition of a cocktail hour. And it was clear why Zoe loved this place. And yet she still felt something was not as it should be. She managed a polite smile.

They passed through a further doorway into the entrance hall, again with low ceilings, polished oak floors and wainscoting.

Don fanned the pages of a bookings diary on the circular table. "Here's your room," he said. "It's up in the loft. I'll take your suitcase. Let's go."

"Oh," said Laura, "and have a brochure while you're at it." She lifted one from a pile beside the diary, and tucked it into Juliet's pocket.

They began to climb the oak staircase, which creaked with every step. Laura and Don led her past the first floor.

"Keep climbing," said Laura. They went up a steeper, narrower flight of stairs to the attic, which had been converted to provide extra accommodation.

"Here you are." Don opened the first door on the left. "Two more bedrooms along there. Can't think for the moment who's in them."

"I look forward to finding out."

"Now I come to think of it, might be Zoe's in one," he said. "There's a bathroom up here too. Settle in." He put the suitcase on the bed. For a moment he looked around thoughtfully. "Not bad up here. Me, I'm in the goose house."

"The goose house?" she asked.

*Mystical Circles*

He laughed. "Been converted into a bedroom and bathroom. Round the south side of the house, past the barn."

"And very nice too," said Laura, behind Don. "Almost wish I was in it myself. But I'm down on the first floor." She giggled. "Near Al's room."

Juliet looked at her. What did this signify? Who was Al? She'd make it her business to find out before long.

"Make yourself comfortable," went on Laura. "You'll find lunch in the kitchen. See you down there." And before Juliet could ask again when she might expect to see Zoe, Laura and Don disappeared.

Once in her room, Juliet sank onto the bed and took several deep breaths.

Well, she'd arrived. But she did wish she'd met Zoe. Her instinct was to set off and search for her sister at once. She had so many questions. What might Zoe's plans be for herself and Craig? Did the pair of them, in fact, have any plans? And the group: mad but harmless, Don had said. What did that mean? And did Zoe agree?

Unpacking could wait. She jumped to her feet again. Then she remembered the brochure. Quickly, she pulled the tri-fold format publication from her pocket, and opened it out.

*If you've been searching all your life, but have so far not found what you've been looking for, you've come to the right place. Here at the Wheel of Love, you may sharpen your subtle knife and cut a window into heaven. There are no limits to what you can achieve here; only those you impose upon yourself. You've chosen to come so we promise to supply the necessary tools. If you accept these tools and use them well, you'll enter a freedom you've never dared dream of.*

*Craig will reach deep down into your spirit and touch a part of it you never knew was there.*

She closed the brochure. *Creepy*. She didn't need him to reach down into her spirit, or provide her with tools to enter heaven. Nor did she trust the word *freedom*, until she knew how he defined it. How did Zoe get caught up in this?

But she had to admit the place didn't look like her idea of the headquarters of a weird sect. More like a luxurious English country retreat.

And there was Craig's father. A brusque Yorkshireman auditing the accounts. Sharp-tongued and clearly not a hundred percent in sympathy with his son.

She speculated about Craig's community. She'd only met one member so far, Laura. Quaint little lady. Elfin features. *Seems to have stepped out of a nineteenth-century children's novel. Probably meet her again later.*

Then she focused on her surroundings. A compact room, purple curtains, lilac carpet, fitted out in antique pine, perched beneath the black rafters. The dormer window had diamond leadlights and golden sandstone mullions. From where she was standing, she could see down to the front of the house, onto the gravel forecourt.

Then movement before the front door attracted her eye. Zoe. As Juliet watched, her sister made her way round to the back of the house. Juliet hurried from the room. If she was quick, she'd catch up with Zoe in the car park where she'd met Don earlier.

Retracing her steps back through the rooms Laura and Don had shown her, she went along the passageway to the back door. Opening it and stepping through, she just avoided tripping over the champagne bottle, and hastened forward.

"Zoe!" she called.

*A Seductive Voice*

Juliet grasped Zoe by both shoulders, and looked straight into her shining eyes.

“Juliet! When did you arrive?” Zoe flung her arms around her.

“An hour ago. And I’ve found my room.” Juliet squeezed Zoe.

“Cool. Oh, Juliet, you’re going to love it here.”

“It all seems great so far. And you’re looking pretty good yourself.”

“That’s probably because I’ve been doing yoga relaxation and creative visualisation this morning.”

Juliet gave her sister a quick inspection. Somehow she’d imagined her looking different in this new life of hers. Though she wasn’t quite sure what she’d anticipated: shaved head and druid’s robes? She’d already seen the way Craig dressed, a clue to the fact that she’d have quite a few of her expectations defeated here. Zoe’s brilliant red-gold hair – a colour both girls shared – was worn loose and wild as ever, and she wore a navy and white tie-dyed cotton skirt. Her cream cheesecloth shirt flapped open, revealing the black lycra leotard she wore beneath.

“Who knows what could happen?” said Zoe. “You may want to stay long term, Juliet.”

“Hmm. Unlikely. It’s a big enough deal to have interested Toby in this project. I can’t afford to waste these next few days. I’m here to work, not to have a good time.”

“Your plans may change. Be prepared for anything,” said Zoe.

Juliet bit her lip.

“How are things going with Craig?” she asked.

“Fantastic. Couldn’t be better.” Zoe scuffed her trainers against the gravel, then pointed north. “Come on. Let’s go round the house to the front garden. We can sit there and talk.”

“Sure.” Juliet hurried after her sister.

Unlatching the gate, Zoe went through, and Juliet followed. Before them appeared a flight of stone steps leading to a sunken lawn with a water-lily pond.

“This is stunning,” she said.

“Isn’t it?” Zoe indicated the Scots pines and the blue cedars over to the north of the sunken garden. The two girls went towards these. Scattered beneath were a number of white cane chairs.

As soon as they sat down, Zoe burst into excited speech. “So Juliet, what do you think?” Her eye fell on Juliet’s pocket. “You already have the brochure.”

“I’ve started reading it. Craig makes big promises, doesn’t he? They certainly lead you to expect huge rewards.”

“And you’ll find them,” declared Zoe. “Wait till you meet him.”

“I have met him.”

“That’s wonderful. So you’ll know. He’s perfect.”

“Well, I’m not quite sure about...”

“Whose side are you on?”

Juliet leaned forward, and took hold of Zoe by both shoulders. “Hey, I can see why you’ve fallen for him. He’s the best-looking guy I’ve ever met.”

Zoe visibly relaxed.

“If he feels the same about you as you do about him,” continued Juliet, “then that can only be good news.”

A smile of relief spread over her sister’s face.

“You’re here for the best of reasons, Zoe. And I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt. Let’s suppose Craig is everything you believe he is. But even so – what’s with the Wheel of Love? Sounds a bit dubious to me.”

“We’re not like that Heaven’s Gate sect, you know.”

Certain key words hammered into Juliet’s brain. *Sharpen your subtle knife...cut a window into heaven...freedom you’ve never dared dream of...* “This heaven stuff he goes in for... the bit about *freedom*

*Mystical Circles*

*you've never dared dream of, and him reaching deep down into your spirit... What's that all about?"*

"You'd need to live as one of us to understand."

"Give me a break, Zoe. I won't do that."

"If you want answers to your questions, read the rest of it."

"OK." Juliet took the brochure from her pocket, and opened it out.

*She skim-read: express all your emotions, good and bad...interpretation of dreams...dynamic meditation...guided fantasies and group therapy...self-evident truths... destiny lies in our own hands...no such thing as chance or accident so far as human beings are concerned...any further questions, ask Craig...here to guide you. Use him. He wants to be used.*

"Doesn't that fill you with hope?" cried Zoe, "and inspire you with a vision of new life?"

"Can't be sure. Craig says we must *express all emotions, good and bad*. Bad? I don't want to express mine. He seems to think *our destiny lies in our own hands*. I don't accept that. I'm here because I'm worried about you. How can he say there's *no such thing as chance or accident*? Though, of course, I look forward to interviewing him about it, and finding out."

"Don't be so negative."

"I don't mean to be. Sorry it seems like that to you. Look, why not spend this week here, then return to London with me? If Craig cares for you, he'll stay in touch."

"No. I don't want to go back to London. I want to stay here."

"But you have so much ahead of you. And your job applications... don't give up on them, will you? You have a good degree."

"I know, I know. But..."

"You don't want to waste it."

"Whoever said I was going to?"

"Why are you so stubborn?"

"Because you don't understand how I feel about Craig. Your mind's closed."

"No it isn't. I'm here to learn the truth, just as you are."

"A different truth."

They glared at each other.

“Craig’s hypnotised you, hasn’t he?” said Juliet.

“How dare you suggest that?” Zoe sprang to her feet and flew across to the gate.

Juliet jumped up too. “Zoe! Stop! I didn’t mean...”

Snatching the gate open, Zoe turned. “You’ve already made a judgement, haven’t you? Call yourself a journalist.”

Juliet opened her mouth to protest, but Zoe was racing across the gravel forecourt. Juliet tried to steady herself, shaking.

Looking about, the place still seemed deserted. Where was everyone? Then a figure appeared from round the north side of the house, crossing the forecourt to the garden gate: Don.

They might have had a sharp exchange that morning; but he was the only person she’d met so far here who had his feet on the ground.

“Your sister didn’t look happy,” he remarked, as he closed the gate behind him.

“No,” said Juliet. “She thinks I’m unsympathetic.”

“And are you?” he enquired.

“Of course not.”

He rubbed his chin as he looked at her. “Been thinking over our little chat. Bit abrupt. Like to apologise.”

“That’s good of you.” She stuffed her hands into the pockets of her combat jacket.

“Take a seat?”

“Why not?”

They went over to the white cane chairs, and settled into two placed opposite one another.

“You and me – we’re both outsiders,” he said.

“Yes. I’m here visiting Zoe. And you’ve come to look at the group’s finances.”

He gave a curt nod. “Cash-flow problem.” He studied the ground, then looked up again. “This is by way of an annual holiday. Not how I planned it, of course. But that’s by the by. Call it a family visit.”

“So what line of business are you in?”

“Property management. For me, this place is a sizeable investment.”

“Oh – I wouldn’t have expected Craig to have such connections.”



*Mystical Circles*

"That so?" His voice was barbed.

"Property business, you say. Is yours a demanding role?" she asked.

"Company director and chairman." This time his eyes remained fixed on hers. "My father ran it before me." Reaching into his inside pocket, he pulled out a business card. "Here."

"Thank you." She studied it. "Ah. Family firm. I'm surprised you decided to come here to your son's community, and take on the worry of troubleshooting his problems. Couldn't you have delegated that? Appointed an accountant perhaps? You must be a very busy man."

"Glad you appreciate it." A little of his tension evaporated. "Not sure Craig sees it that way." He probed the cane weaving on the arm of his chair with his fingers for a few moments. "But I had to come." He volunteered no further information on the subject. "And you, Juliet? Who'll broadcast your stuff?"

"BBC I hope. I'm offering this to an independent production company and they'll pitch it to Radio 4."

"And if they don't want it?"

"A local radio station might pick it up."

"You work for yourself?"

"I do." She slipped her hand into her own pocket, depositing Don's card, and finding one of her own business cards. "Here you are."

Taking it, he scanned it for a few seconds before looking up again. "So Craig's giving you your big chance here."

"You could put it like that." She hoped her newness to all this wasn't glaringly obvious. She'd never sold a documentary before. Just filler spots for features programmes and regional news items. And (until Zoe's email had knocked her off balance) her sole focus had been to win national acclaim with a documentary.

"So. Bit of a testing ground for you here," he said, adding Juliet's card to his own collection.

She nodded.

"Craig's scored one credit in his copy book, any road," said Don. "For having you to stay."

"Thanks."

"And he'll let you record what you like?"

“Certainly. He expressed no objection.”

Don looked sardonic. “Might be coming. Once he’s thought things through. You wait and see.”

They both turned as they heard the garden gate being unlatched.

“Ah, Llewellyn,” said Don. “Welcome.”

“Our in-house poet,” he explained to Juliet.

A young man approached. “Don,” he declared, brushing a thick wing of hair back from his forehead in a theatrical gesture. “Just the man I wanted to see. I need marketing advice.” He drew up sharply at the sight of Juliet. “I do apologise. Hadn’t realised...” He regarded her with lively interest. “Hope I haven’t interrupted anything.” He stuffed an apple into the rucksack he carried over one shoulder.

“See you’ve fixed yourself a packed lunch,” said Don.

“Yes. I’m off up to the ridge for a few hours.” He extended his free hand to Juliet, and grasped hers firmly. “Don’t think we’ve met.”

“No.” His accent put her in mind of the Welsh hills.

Don moved forward. “Juliet, meet Llewellyn. From Anglesey.”

“Pleased to meet you,” she said.

They shook hands.

“So, you’re Zoe’s sister. And you hope to make a documentary?”

She nodded.

“I’m surprised he’s agreed to it.” He glanced at Don.

“Me too,” said Don.

“As I’m sure you both realise,” she said, “I aim to be fair and accurate.”

Don grunted. “I’ve spent thirty years doing that with Craig. And look where it’s got me.”

“You sound jaundiced, Don.”

“Juliet’s right there.” Llewellyn laughed. “If only you had as much faith in people as I do, Don.”

“Hmm,” said the Yorkshireman. “Well, you must think something of them, else you’d write no poems at all.”

“Ah yes.” Juliet looked at Llewellyn. “Don did say you were a poet.”

“That’s right.”

“Turn your back, and he runs up a verse,” said Don.

*Mystical Circles*

"I've had a fair measure of success," the Welshman conceded modestly. "Won a couple of poetry slams. Performed at literary festivals – Cheltenham, Hay-on-Wye, Oxford... Brought out two slim volumes so far."

Juliet wondered why someone with such a record of achievement had turned up in a group like this, which promised tools she fully expected he, as a poet, already possessed.

But before she could ask, Don intervened. "Did you want marketing advice?"

"Yes," said Llewellyn.

"What's your product?"

The Welshman opened his rucksack again, and pulled out what looked like a rolled-up news sheet.

"Take a look. And you too, Juliet." He handed it to her. "Delighted to have the thoughts of a newcomer like yourself."

She spread it out on the table and glanced at the front page. The image of a saffron pathway winding up a viridian green mountainside to a sunlit peak, enclosed within an electric-blue sphere, made her think of something one might produce in a creative visualisation workshop. She could almost see the legend scrawled beneath it: *I am choosing to be successful*.

Pulling herself smartly back to the matter in hand, she read the masthead: *Wheel of Love Weekly News*.

Don came and glanced over it with her. "Might work," he said. "Planning to run off a few copies? Got a mailing list?"

"No," said Llewellyn, "Thought I'd sell it on the street."

"What's your cover price?" asked Don.

"One pound ninety-five pence." The Welshman moved close to Don, massaging his shoulder in a matey manner. "So, the two of you, just imagine you're window shopping in Cirencester, and I pounce on you with this. Would you buy it?"

Don and Juliet leafed through it together. The centre page spread was entirely taken up with *The poems of Llewellyn Hughes*.

"A money spinner, I do assure you," murmured the Welshman.

"It's a fundraising idea. I'll give it that," remarked Don.

"What do you think, Juliet?" asked Llewellyn. "Could it sell?"

"People might well be attracted to it."

"I thought so too," cried Llewellyn. "It's bright, it's positive, it's life-enhancing. The illustrations are all in full colour."

Don laughed. He handed the news sheet back. "Could give it a go."

"Glad to see you have faith, Don."

"Ah. Faith. Not so fast. You know me. I'm lacking in that department." Don dug his hand in his trouser pocket, brought out his handkerchief, and blew his nose. She suspected it was a device to cover his awkwardness, rather than because he was starting a cold.

"The only way to prove something true or false," Llewellyn said, "is to suspend disbelief, and agree to conduct an experiment, as if it were true."

Don shook his head. "Don't believe it. Recipe for a self-fulfilling prophecy."

Juliet gazed from one to the other. How would Llewellyn counter Don's argument?

Silence fell instead.

The Welshman's hair stirred in the breeze. "Perhaps you should take part a little more, Don," he suggested. "You haven't done that yet, have you? And you've been here nearly a week. We've all noticed. Why don't you join in?"

Don lifted his hands, as if raising a shield against an oncoming charger. "I'm here to sort the finances, not attend my own son's classes," he said. "Though he'd be keen enough to show off his skills, I'd be bound."

"Come to Dynamic Meditation in the barn tomorrow evening," said Llewellyn. "You don't want to miss out. I hope you'll forgive me for quoting one of my fellow countrymen. The poet R.S. Thomas speaks about seeing *the sun break through to illuminate a small field*. That might be the experience you're having now."

"Nonsense," said Don. "Expect me to swallow that?"

Juliet couldn't resist a smile.

"In the poem," continued Llewellyn, "he goes his way and forgets it. Years later he discovers it was *the one field that had the treasure in it*. Do the same, Don, and you might spend the rest of your life searching for it again."

*Mystical Circles*

His gaze swung round to include both of them. *"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy,"* he remarked.

"Thought you'd quote that," grunted Don. Then he sighed. "Idealism of youth. Tell me. What do you know about gullibility, cheating and lies?"

"Plenty," Llewellyn said softly. "Put away your cynicism."

"You're persuasive, Llewellyn," said Juliet. "What's Dynamic Meditation?"

Don broke in. "They let all their emotions hang out. Be warned."

"You come too, Juliet," said Llewellyn. "It might open something up in you. Try it. It could help you understand what we're about."

Then he said his goodbyes and walked back through the gateway, leaving her alone with Don once more.

"So, Don?" she said. "What do you think?"

"Oh, I've heard a silver tongue or two in my time."

"But what about Dynamic Meditation?" she persisted. "Will you go? I certainly shall, to make recordings. Why not join me?"

"Perhaps. If I do, Craig may even..." He stopped short.

"Craig may even do what?"

"Nothing."

She felt rebuffed.

Then he said, "You'll want a bite of lunch. Come along." He set off towards the garden gate, and she followed. "Might meet a few more of them," he flung over his shoulder. "Won't join you though. Just show you the way."

Hmm. No more clues from him then, for a while. But never mind. She'd meet some others.

As they passed through the gateway, and emerged onto the forecourt again, a door on the north side of the house banged shut, and they heard voices raised in argument.

"What's that about?" she asked. "I thought this was a place of love and serenity."

"Did you?" Don crossed to the front door and held it open.

"Yes. Isn't that what Craig's brochure promises?" She walked through into the hallway.

"Look more closely," said Don, closing the door behind them. "Might find something very different."

"Oh?"

He nodded. "All that talk of heaven. And freedom." He went through into the sitting room, and as she joined him, he swung to face her.

"I'm well aware those two words are much misused," she said.

"Even more so here. *Express all emotions – good and bad*. That's what he tells them. And so they do. Especially the last."

"What do you mean?"

"Ha! Best not go into it." He held her gaze. "Wait till you've tasted it yourself."

Then she heard a sound like a nut being cracked behind her. She spun, and gasped. She was staring into the eyes of a parrot.

He balanced on his perch on one foot. His cage occupied the corner of the room next to the leadlight window.

"Meet Groucho," said Don. "He's Craig's."

"How did I manage to miss him before?"

"Ah. Keeps quiet when it suits him," said Don.

He waited while she went over to stroke the parrot's plumage of cobalt blue and deep yellowy orange. Then he moved alongside her.

"Pricey he was too. Craig wouldn't have any other."

"Oh?"

"Yes. Set him back a thousand. And don't forget maintenance costs. He'll likely live to sixty," he added darkly.

They watched the parrot scattering bits of walnut shell over the floor, and using his blunt tongue to extract the nut-meat. She reached out, and scratched his wing. At this, he hopped off his perch and onto her hand. He walked up her arm, and began to rummage in her hair with his beak. She was so engrossed by him that several minutes had passed before she remembered Don again.

He touched her on the shoulder. She gave a start, causing the bird to rise to the ceiling in a flurry of sapphire and gold. He settled on the top of a bookcase, quizzing them with a glittering eye.

*Mystical Circles*

She turned to see Laura had rejoined them. How childlike she was. The dress was probably meant for a thirteen-year-old. Though Juliet reckoned Laura might be in her forties.

"Ah, Laura." Don took his opportunity. "I'll be off then, Juliet. Laura will show you where to find lunch."

"Thank you, Don."

He gave a curt nod and left the room.

"Come through into the kitchen." Laura led her to the farther door. "There are two others in there I can introduce you to."

"I'd like that."

As before, though slightly odd in her manner, Laura seemed friendly enough. Encouraged, Juliet followed her through the dining room, and out into the passage, where they turned left into an open doorway.

The kitchen she found generously supplied with copper implements, brightly polished, hanging from the beams overhead; and the whitewashed walls between the black timbers were decorated with large bunches of dried flowers. A pale youth in his late teens sat at one end of the oak table, stirring a spoon round and round in a soup bowl. At the other end stood a thickset man in a lime-green shirt, busy sawing at a granary loaf.

A list of rules pinned to a cork noticeboard above the fridge began with the statement: *On the following days, silence will be observed at breakfast and lunch.* She wondered if Craig liked to keep up a myth that the group had rules to be adhered to. But there again, she knew nothing to suppose it didn't. However, that day, Friday, was absent from the list.

Both men had stopped what they were doing to stare at her.

"Sam and Al," cried Laura, "meet Zoe's sister, Juliet."

Ah, thought Juliet, so one of these two is Al. The man whose bedroom was near Laura's, a fact which had caused giggles when she mentioned it. Which one was he?

"Juliet, the journalist?" The youth opened his eyes wide.

"Yes, Sam," said Laura.

Sam shrank back in terror.

"The media isn't that scary, is it?" laughed Juliet.

Then she realised what a big deal it was for this group of people to trust Zoe after only three days here to invite her journalist sister to visit. Though she supposed it was Craig they trusted, not Zoe, for he was the one who'd given permission. Odd though, when clearly he had issues with his father, and she'd have thought he'd prefer them not to be aired to a radio audience.

She remembered Llewellyn's words: *The only way to prove something true or false is to suspend disbelief, and agree to conduct an experiment, as if it were true.* She didn't think she wanted to live that out herself.

"Well, well, well," said the big man in a soothing bass. "Media hound or not, you don't look at all like we imagined you."

"Although we did guess you'd look a little like Zoe," said Laura.

Fixing Juliet with a luminous gaze, the man continued. "Same gorgeous red hair, same green eyes. You look more controlled than your sister. Neater. Zoe's a little wild."

Juliet laughed. "You are an American, aren't you?"

"Sure am. Born in New York. Raised in the Berkshire Hills around Pittsfield, Massachusetts. Alan Beckert. Call me Al." He thrust his hand out. It was large and well-muscled, and nearly cut her blood supply off. Fortunately he didn't maintain his grip too long.

"Pleased to meet you," she said, flexing her fingers. "What are you doing here in England, Al?"

"Touring. At least I was. Now I've wound up here. And I'm staying put." He cast a quick glance at Laura. "I'm hooked on you Brits. Love your hang-ups."

"Thank you. On behalf of British people, I'm flattered," she said. Though, when it came to hang-ups, no doubt a rich treasure store of them lay waiting to be found here. But she had yet to meet the other members of the group to confirm that.

"Irony," said Al. "There's something else I love. You've all got it. But back to the hang-ups. Some of you people say I put my finger straight on your problems. That's great. I'll stay just as long as I'm needed." He gave a genial grin.

Wasn't it supposed to be Craig sorting out everyone's problems, not him? She noticed Al wore his shirt with most of the buttons



*Mystical Circles*

undone. This exposed the silver medallion nestling among his chest hairs. He looked like something left over from Woodstock. She'd be none too happy to trust him with her problems.

"You haven't put your finger on mine yet, Al," observed Laura.

Al gave her a lingering look. "I'm pretty much ready to get going soon as you let me, honey." Then he turned to the youth. "You going to introduce yourself to our visitor?"

"Sam. Sam D-D-Dorling. I can't t-tell you about myself, Juliet. I can n-n-never do anything in f-f-front of anybody."

Al looked at Juliet again. "Sam has a bad time of it with his nerves."

"Enforced separation from his twin brother," said Laura.

"His GP green-lighted it," added Al. "Get the picture?"

Juliet didn't really, and took the nearest vacant seat at the table. She was beginning to glimpse what she'd let herself in for.

"So," said Laura, "how do you find us so far?"

Juliet played for time by fiddling with the silver bracelet on her left wrist. Though she was here to check up on her sister, and hopefully to rescue her, she could still feel the attraction of the place.

"I'm not here to judge," she said. "But one thing's for sure. The house is out of this world. It seems to have a personality of its own."

"I was sure you'd feel it before you'd been here long." Laura's face glowed. "Craig wants people to see what he calls *the true reality*, which isn't like the outside world at all."

"But don't you think living here for several months tends to make people not quite *real* themselves?" asked Juliet.

"No. Why should it? Look at me. I've been here since January," said Laura.

Juliet remained silent.

"Go on," urged Laura. "Say what you think. We can take it."

"Please don't misunderstand me, Laura," said Juliet. "But I already have a feeling that it might be a glass bubble, too good to be true."

"Stuff and nonsense," said Laura. "Trust me. It's real, all right."

The door opened, and another group member came in. "Ah, food. Just what I need."

Juliet turned. The newcomer had a circular bald patch on the crown of his head, rather like a monk, but offset this effect by sporting a luxuriant, almost Parisian, moustache. Rising to her feet again, and facing him, she found herself the subject of an unnerving scrutiny.

"Juliet, this is Edgar," said Al.

"Ah! Our media lady." Edgar thrust out his hand. "Very happy to make your acquaintance." His grip, too, was immensely strong, but swiftly released. "Edgar Swinton. In charge of Craig's forecasts, five-year plans, and statistics. I also interview the new recruits. I know what you're here for, Juliet. Craig prepared us well for your arrival last night at dinner. You'll want to mingle with the group and be as it were, one of us. I've a number of questions to put to you which I hope we can deal with quite quickly, perhaps after lunch."

She winced.

"Ah, you're a little uptight about this," smiled Al. "It's OK. Edgar's not from the FBI."

"Maybe not, but I hardly think it appropriate..." began Juliet. What would her fellow journalists make of this? How would they handle it?

Edgar drove remorselessly on. "You'll be thrilled by our little chat. I designed the questions myself. They cover every possible eventuality."

Well, if he planned to include her in his ritual, she'd need to set him straight – without causing offence. She could be treading on eggshells here.

"You've taken me aback, Edgar. What did you want to know?"

"I'm simply curious to learn about your spiritual position."

"I have no position. None that's relevant to you. I'm here as a journalist."

She'd stopped short at using the word *objective*. She knew it would be untrue.

"None of us believe you're objective for a moment," said Edgar, "but even if you want to dispute that, I still need you to provide me with some information about yourself."

"But..." She spoke courteously but firmly. "Afraid not. I'm here in a professional capacity."

*Mystical Circles*

Edgar ignored this. "To help you, I've put all the questions down in writing." He handed over a clipboard securing a wad of A4 paper.

A breathless hush followed. She sensed a power struggle. Perhaps she needed to try a different, lighter approach. "If I answer your questions, will you play your part, and give me an in-depth interview?"

The other three were all watching with a strange intensity.

"Very good, very good," said Edgar. "I can see you're trying to sidestep the issue."

"Don't be afraid to reveal yourself, dear," said Laura.

Juliet met Laura's gaze. "It's not that at all, Laura. I'm sure you understand perfectly."

Feeling it best to humour him for the time being, she scanned Edgar's top sheet.

"We've all come here in need of healing," said Edgar. "Don't be proud. Pride has no place here."

Juliet swallowed the words that had been about to fly to her lips.

She looked down at the form again. The first words that met her eye were: *What is your age and sex?* And then: *Are you receiving any form of treatment or therapy?*

"Don't delay lunch for it, there's plenty of time." Edgar reached for the Double Gloucester. "But I shall want it back for Craig by five."

Ah. A breathing space. Juliet helped herself to one of Al's thick slices of bread. "You haven't told me about yourself yet, Edgar. What's your background?"

He cleared his throat. "I used to systematically study man's religious experience."

"*Used to?* Why the past tense?"

"The unit I headed up closed down through lack of funding." He cast a severe glance at her, as if she was personally responsible for it herself. Then he went on. "So I'm here instead. I devised this questionnaire for Craig. The idea is to get proper scientific evidence about human spirituality. I know others have gone before me. But I have a passion to pin down the evidence, starting with you lot."

He wore a self-satisfied expression as he busied himself with the salad bowl.

"Sounds ambitious," said Juliet. "I hope you do get your evidence. Must admit I don't feel I have any to give yet."

He gave a dismissive snort. "Everybody here is raw material as far as I'm concerned. You're no exception even if you have come here to interview us."

Juliet looked down at her knuckles and saw they were white. That was the effect of Edgar's last sentence. She consciously relaxed her hands.

Edgar, meanwhile, speared a cherry tomato with his fork and began munching.

"We've all filled in one of his forms." Laura leaned toward Juliet, an intimate smile upon her face.

"Maybe," Juliet said. "But I'm here for a different reason."

"Oh, don't try that with us, Juliet." Edgar lifted his hands, palms uppermost. "We're all where we're meant to be, and you're here for a special purpose. I can see you feel you're somehow set apart from the rest of us. But you'll soon get over that. And we each have to learn it's no good holding back from the group. We are, after all, part of the Wheel of Love."

She countered him swiftly. "But does love demand the completion of a form?"

He raised his eyebrows.

"We're not railroading you into this, Juliet," said Al. "You just relax, huh? Perhaps you're one of these guys who like to make a big show of chewing it over." He placed a large dish of some unidentifiable-looking substance on the table. It steamed gently. "And I'll wait for this to cool down."

"What is it?" she asked.

"Tomorrow morning's breakfast for the parrot. Groucho. You weren't here earlier to see it prepared, were you? We run a rota to cook it up for him. Rice, millet, couscous, lentils and split peas garnished with chopped herbs, mixed veg and..." he unscrewed the top off a jar, "a generous helping of his vitamin and mineral supplement." He scattered a white powder in, and stirred with a wooden spoon. "Delicious."

*Mystical Circles*

"Groucho certainly gets excellent treatment," laughed Juliet. "He must love it."

"Sure does." The American seated himself opposite her, his plate piled high with a well-oiled salad. "Go on, answer the man's questions." He reached for the butter. "I haven't yet figured out this English obsession with privacy. I'm curious about you. We all are. How did you wind up here? How did you swing it by Craig?"

"Yes, Juliet," said Laura, "Craig said you wanted to make a documentary."

Al turned to Juliet again. "I'd kinda like to know a bit more about that. What's the thrust of your piece?"

Ah, she was back on home ground. She could easily explain her journalistic approach, without causing offence. She opened her mouth to speak, but Edgar broke in. "Naughty, naughty, Al," he said. "Don't put Juliet on the spot too soon." His eyes gleamed. He wagged his finger in front of the American. "Not, that is, until she's shared her experiences with me."

"Which ones?" she asked.

"Ecstatic ones," he said.

Who did he think he was? Why should she bare her soul to him?

"Take your time. But not too long. Evidence, that's what I like." Edgar rubbed his hands together. "Evidence of any type. There's no evidence so thin I cannot massage it."

"Take it from him. The man means what he says," observed Al.

Probably best to concentrate on her lunch. But she couldn't resist pushing Edgar further on the subject. "I'm not a member of the group, and have no plans to join. I'm here as an impartial observer. And there are various guidelines that I have to observe..."

"The broadcast media has the highest code of conduct..." murmured Edgar. A titter passed between the other three at this.

"What you suggest is impossible. If you're to achieve anything here, you'll have to take part, and live as one of us," said Laura.

Juliet swallowed two or three times. Deep down she knew Laura was probably right. But could she pretend to go along with their beliefs without compromising herself? Weren't they all nuts, in one

way or another? And yet she knew she wasn't the only one here who felt like that. Surely Don did too.

They allowed her to spend the next five minutes eating, before Edgar took up the topic again. "Therapy or treatment? What about those, Juliet? Have you ever had any?"

"No. There's nothing wrong with me."

"There doesn't have to be anything *wrong* with you, dear." Laura turned an earnest face to her. "But you'll have needs. We all have those. And they are what have brought us here."

Juliet considered. Since her relationship with her last boyfriend had broken up, just two months before, she'd set her sights more firmly than ever upon her career, and upon trying to help Zoe. She needed recognition, acknowledgement, acceptance... and some truth from Craig about his plans for her sister, for a start.

"Well," she said, "I expect I do have a need to find some answers." She gave a half-smile.

Edgar quickly took his opportunity to get back to the all-important questionnaire. "So," he said. "You can't at this moment remember an ecstatic experience to share with me. Let's move on to another question instead. How have you been feeling in the past week?"

No, she wasn't going to be drawn. "As from Wednesday – which was when I received Zoe's email – I've been looking forward to the challenge of meeting you and your fellow group members." As Juliet levelled her eye upon Edgar, there came several loud knocks on the kitchen door. They all looked up, startled.

"Come in," called Edgar. The door banged back, and a dishevelled figure lurched through the doorway, dumping a well-stuffed plastic carrier bag down onto the quarry tiles.

"James!" cried Laura. "Why must you do this at meal-times? Every time you do, I swear you get filthier and filthier. It's a good thing Craig never saw you in this state up in Edinburgh. Otherwise, I'm sure none of us would be here now."

*Being Drawn In*

James wore a filthy, tattered gabardine coat, and his hair hung in oily dreadlocks. He seemed to have smeared his face with greasepaint. His teeth were a sickening mixture of black and yellow. The eyes he turned upon Juliet were filled with undisguised curiosity.

It was those eyes which gave him away. Despite being bloodshot, they fizzed at her, keen and intelligent – totally out of keeping with the rest of his image.

“So you’re Juliet Blake, our radio interviewer?”

“Yes,” she said, astonished.

“James Willoughby. We’re all on first-name terms here, so call me James. I used to teach Craig at Edinburgh.”

“How do you do, James?”

“Excellently, thank you.”

She tried not to flinch as they shook hands – especially as his needed washing. “Would you mind telling me why you’re dressed like that?”

“Ah,” he said. “You haven’t had the chance to meet me in my socially acceptable persona yet have you?”

She shook her head.

“Well, let me tell you,” James said, “I dress very smartly when I’m in that guise.” He slouched into the seat next to her.

“I first started dressing up like this,” he continued, “shortly after I was appointed to my position at Edinburgh.”

“Why?”

“I saw that everyone around me hunted honour and prestige. So it seemed a good idea to try shame and squalor instead. My plan was to do it every few days.” He paused. “And then, I got hooked.”

"That sounds fascinating, James, but I still don't see how..."

"*The Shadow*," interrupted Edgar. "That's what you call it, don't you, James?"

"Exactly." James seized upon the prompt Edgar offered. "*The Shadow* is Jung's term for the dark side of ourselves. And in my case, it's had one or two extra advantages. I've picked up a few cameo roles from film production companies – and not least when the BBC's been filming up my way."

"Isn't that cheating?" Juliet asked. "Earning money from it?"

"Not if you've got an Equity card it isn't." He leered at Juliet, displaying his ghastly dentures once more. She could only speculate that he must have a very well-stocked stage make-up kit.

He grabbed the cheeseboard, smearing it with grimy marks.

"No, James," cried Laura. "Wash your hands first."

"If you say so, lady." He scraped his chair back, lurched to his feet, and sloped across to the sink, where he began to run the hot water.

"So," Juliet said, when he returned with cleaner hands. "You were Craig's mentor, were you?" She struggled to suppress the laughter bubbling up in her.

"Oh yes," said James. "I met a need in him, one of the many unmet by his father, I might add."

Silence fell. She looked at Edgar, then at Laura and Al, thinking they might deny this picture of their leader as emotionally insecure. But they said nothing. She fought a brief temptation to spring to Don's defence.

"French dressing for your salad, honey?" said Al. "Help yourself."

"Thanks, I will." As she reached for the bottle, though, she kept half an eye on James. He was now plastering butter on his bread.

"What perfect manners," mused Laura. She turned back to Juliet. "Listen, my dear, you've yet to experience Dynamic Meditation. When you do, Craig will change you just as he's changed all of us."

"Not too much I hope, while I'm here," said Juliet, "for I'm really quite happy the way I am right now."

Edgar gave a bark of amusement. "Your goals will change if you become one of us."

"I think that's unlikely," said Juliet.



*Mystical Circles*

“When we give ourselves to him he changes our lives,” Laura told her.

“And what does that mean?”

“Simply that we throw off our self-limiting beliefs,” said Laura. “We wipe out negative messages from the past. And never speak of them again.”

“In fact we forget them,” said Edgar. “That’s why my initial interview is so important. I can’t possibly let people give themselves to Craig without offloading their past onto me first.”

“That’s an extraordinary statement,” said Juliet. “So each person tells you their story and then forgets it?”

“Yes.”

“But how can anyone forget their past? James clearly doesn’t.”

James chortled. “I’m the exception that proves the rule,” he said.

Juliet wasn’t quite clear how.

“For the rest of us,” said Laura, “this process of forgetting starts when Craig begins his work on us. He’s pulled me apart and reshaped me.”

Juliet glanced at the faces of the others but they remained impassive. How could she take this seriously?

“You make Craig sound very physical,” she said.

“I wish.” Laura giggled for some while.

Suddenly Juliet’s attention was drawn to Sam. His face had reddened. What was that about?

“Well, all right, not with me anyway,” Laura admitted, “yet.”

Nor Sam either, if his face was anything to go by. Juliet stored her observations away, together with the questions they raised. Plenty here for her to investigate later.

“Here you are, have some Branston pickle.” Al cut into the conversation in a very deliberate way. A large jar with a fork in it landed in front of Juliet.

“Thank you, Al. So, Laura, what exactly is your relationship with Craig?”

Silence fell heavily. Laura stared at her. So did the others. Then Laura said, “Here in this group we all share love equally, and nobody is to have an exclusive relationship with anyone else.”

*S.C. Skillman*

“But *all men are equal and some are more equal than others*,” Al added enigmatically.

At this, Sam’s face burned even more.

Al’s rather artificial laughter hung in the air until Laura caught it and slapped it down. She shot him a warning look.

He quickly said, “You’ve changed in every way possible, Laura, since I first met you. You’re a different woman.”

“Am I really?”

“Sure.”

*What must she have been like before?*

Al and Laura held eye contact for several moments.

Juliet gazed at them. Clearly, passion was simmering not too far beneath the surface. If Craig wasn’t available, then perhaps Al would supply the deficiency. On first acquaintance with Laura, she hadn’t guessed she might be a candidate for such a relationship.

“I understand this is a wheel of love.”

“Oh yes.” Laura’s voice was low.

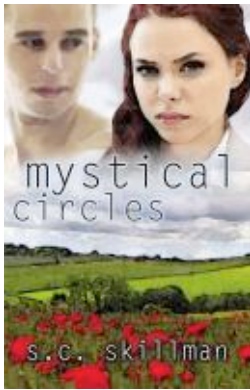
“And what does that actually mean to you?” asked Juliet. “In a practical sense?”

“It m-m-means everything to m-m-me.” Sam had spoken for the first time since James had entered the room. “All I care about is that Craig’s in t-t-touch with the t-t-truth, and he’s m-m-my m-m-master.”

“In what way?” asked Juliet. Silence followed. Then Sam began to bristle, like a highly-strung poodle who’d misinterpreted a cautious pat. She waited. Did Sam bite?

At that moment, the door opened. Craig stood there. She rose and faced him. Her heart pounded.

“Don’t ask too many questions too soon, Juliet,” he smiled. “Have patience. It’ll be worth it.”



*Juliet, concerned that her younger sister has fallen for the charismatic Craig, leader of the Wheel of Love, sets off for the Cotswolds to investigate. She arrives in Craig's community hoping to rescue Zoe. But intrigues, liaisons and relationships flare and flourish or fizzle out quickly within this close circle and, despite her reservations, Juliet is drawn into the Wheel of Love - with completely unforeseen consequences.*

# Mystical Circles

**Order the complete book from**

**[Booklocker.com](http://www.booklocker.com)**

**<http://www.booklocker.com/p/books/6329.html?s=pdf>**

**or from your favorite neighborhood  
or online bookstore.**