

# The Cornish House



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An Orion paperback

First published in Great Britain in 2012

by Orion

This paperback edition published in 2013

by Orion Books

an imprint of The Orion Publishing Group Ltd,

Orion House, 5 Upper Saint Martin's Lane

London WC2H 9EA

An Hachette UK company

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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A CIP catalogue record for this book  
is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-4091-3748-1

Typeset by Deltatype Ltd, Birkenhead, Merseyside

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd,  
Croydon, CRO 4YY

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## ✧ One ✧

It was nearly eleven and Maddie had been behind the wheel of the car for over eight hours. She yawned and forced her eyes open wider. Slowing, she approached yet another blind bend. Moonlight silhouetted the twisted trees against the sky. Their tortured shapes rose from the hedges, forming a tunnel. It seemed to be closing in around them. A shiver went down her spine. The engine stuttered.

‘Come on, old girl. It can’t be much further to Trevenen, and once there, both you and I can have a much deserved rest.’ Maddie stroked the dashboard. Smoke seeped from the edges of the bonnet.

She glanced at her stepdaughter asleep in the passenger seat. Hannah looked sweet with her blonde hair in spiky disarray. She changed position and a tattoo appeared on the teen’s arm. Maddie took a deep breath. Hannah had disobeyed her. She’d had to call on all her patience reserves when Hannah had displayed it last night. Maddie had just let it go. She too had been a teenager. However, she’d obeyed her parents.

Turning her attention back to the road, Maddie knew if the map was accurate that they must be near their new home, Trevenen. This, of course, assumed she’d followed it correctly and she’d no idea whether she had or not. The last thing she needed was to be stranded on a remote country lane.

When she’d visited the house back in April, the solicitor had driven her there. It hadn’t seemed confusing then, but maybe she hadn’t been paying attention as well as she should have. That was no surprise. She hadn’t done anything as well as she should have since her husband, John, had died.

In an effort to cool the engine, she turned the fan on full, but it did nothing. The car slowed despite Maddie pressing the accelerator to the floor. The engine coughed twice then died. She thumped the steering wheel. The trailer's momentum nudged them further along the lane until all movement stopped. The headlights went dim, then went out. 'Shit.'

Hannah woke. 'What?'

Maddie tried the ignition again but nothing happened.

'Are we at this godforsaken place?' Hannah stretched.

'Err, no. The car has broken down.'

'What?'

'The car ...' Maddie's fingers worried the key.

'I heard *that*, but where are we?' Hannah sat up.

'Don't know precisely.'

'Christ.'

'Mind your language.' Maddie shut her eyes. The day had begun at five in the morning when they'd carefully packed the last of their things, but they'd only left London at two after the removers had finished loading the van. Maddie wasn't sure what form of madness had made her agree to move house on the Friday of a bank holiday weekend.

'Hah, fine thing to say. I just heard you swearing.'

Maddie sighed.

'What's wrong with Christ, anyway? Besides, you haven't *done* God since Dad died.'

Silently Maddie counted to ten before she replied. 'We've been down this road before.'

Hannah crossed her arms against her chest. 'No we haven't. I've never been to Cornwall.'

'Don't be pedantic.' Maddie massaged the rigid tendons in her neck. 'Arguing isn't going to help.'

'So?'

Maddie yanked the bonnet release and stepped out of the car. Things could be worse she told herself. It could be raining. Instead it was a perfect late summer night. The fresh breeze scented with honeysuckle caught her hair as she stood in the darkness and struggled with the catch.

‘What are you doing?’ asked Hannah.

‘Looking at the engine.’

‘Since when do you know anything about cars?’

Maddie laughed. Hannah was right; she hadn’t a clue so she pulled the phone from her pocket to call roadside assistance. The screen lit up with a picture of John. She blinked. He’d been gone eight months.

‘Are you just going to stare at it?’ Hannah asked.

Maddie dialled the number. No signal. Brilliant.

Hannah leaned out of the window. ‘Well, what’s happening?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Nothing? Even better. So we’re in the middle of nowhere with no reception and a broken car.’

‘That sums it up quite well.’ Maddie turned to the heavens for strength, but all she found was the Milky Way. Although not what she needed, it was beautiful and she couldn’t remember the last time she’d seen a sky so devoid of light pollution. A shooting star sped across the black canopy and Maddie wondered if she dared to make a wish. At this moment, what would it be? Would it be the same one she’d always wished for, the whole white picket fence fantasy, or had her experience of life this past year destroyed her ability to believe in dreams, or anything for that matter?

Hannah waved her hand in the air. ‘*Hel-lo?*’

‘Yes.’

‘What are you going to do?’ Hannah fiddled with the zip on her jacket.

‘Walk down the road and find help.’ Maddie turned to the deserted lane then swallowed.

‘Good luck. No sign of life. You’ve driven us to the end of the earth.’

Refusing to rise to the bait, Maddie held out her hand. ‘The torch, please. It’s in the glove compartment.’

Hannah tossed it on the driver’s seat.

Maddie waited in silence but finally asked, ‘Are you coming?’

‘No.’ Hannah thrust the torch out of the window.

‘Fine.’ Taking it, Maddie strode from the car alone. She

couldn't force Hannah to come. John was dead and Maddie's relationship with his daughter deteriorated every day.

Slowing her pace, Maddie squinted, seeing only the road ahead fading into the darkness. She resumed her walk at speed and finally a light appeared. She ran until she could make out a cluster of buildings, but only one showed signs of life. Where was everyone?

Hannah's words, 'end of the earth', echoed in Maddie's mind while she pressed the doorbell. There was no response. Maddie jabbed the button again and listened, but all she heard was her own breathing. She rapped on the door.

'Who the hell—' a deep voice grumbled.

Maddie looked up into brown eyes.

'Sorry to disturb you but my car's broken down and I can't get a signal.' She checked her mobile once more. 'Is there any chance I can use your phone?' Silence filled the air and then Maddie heard a woman's throaty voice in the distance ask who was at the door. Her eyes opened wide. His hair was a mess, he wore no shirt and his trousers weren't on quite right. She looked at the ground.

'Of course.' The man stood back from the door.

Despite being the twenty-fifth of August, the rustle of leaves spoke to Maddie of the approaching autumn. This transitional time of year had always been her favourite, when the change in the angle of the sun's rays intensified the colours of the season. Not that she could see much of anything at the moment. Her torch's beam barely pierced the darkness.

A badger braved the dim light and dashed across the lane into a hedge in the distance. There was just enough room for Maddie and the man to walk abreast. He'd had to give the rescue service directions and, as a precaution, had offered to accompany her back to the car. They'd left the woman sipping a glass of wine. Maddie hoped that they could resume their evening, but she doubted it.

'Bloody hell, Maddie, you've taken your time.' Hannah stepped out of the shadows.

Maddie's heart stopped.

'Is this the rescue man?'

Maddie bristled. 'Has anyone come?'

'Are you joking? Someone come down this excuse for a road? Nothing but bats here.' Hannah waved her hand above her head.

'Excellent. They're protected. You're lucky to see them; numbers have been declining.' The man spoke quietly.

'Thanks for the endangered species update, but this place gives me the creeps. And who the hell are you by the way?' Hannah asked.

'Hannah ...' Maddie began but stopped.

He extended a hand to Hannah. 'I'm Mark Triggs.'

Hannah ignored him and turned back to Maddie. 'Have you done anything useful like found out where this Trevenen is?'

'Trevenen?' the man said. 'So you're related to Daphne Penventon.'

'Yes.' Maddie wrinkled her nose for, despite what the solicitor had said, she wasn't sure who or what Daphne Penventon was to her birth mother.

'Have you been to Trevenen before?' he asked.

'Once, a few months ago.' It was all so fuzzy now, just like everything lately. In the dim torchlight, she looked to see if he was horrified by this information, but she saw only the play of shadows across the planes of his face.

'You're planning to sleep there tonight?'

'God, this is worse than I ever nightmared. Trevenen will be a wreck with no roof and no hot or cold running anything,' Hannah muttered. 'I saw the papers that said it was a dwelling – *a dwelling* – and not a house.'

Mark laughed.

Something in Hannah's tone set Maddie on edge. Trevenen was habitable. Even though she'd been in a fog, she'd seen it with her own eyes. 'Dwelling is a legal term.'

Hannah shrugged. 'Hey, when's the car man coming?'

Maddie looked at her watch. 'Within the next two hours.'

'Rush job, huh? Two lone women stuck in a dark country

lane with a strange man and they're going to take their time about it. Good. I can see the headlines next week when the bodies are discovered by a passing farmer.'

'Enough, Hannah.'

'Enough what?' Hannah asked.

'Melodramatics.'

'Is that what that was? Good. Thanks for the vocabulary lesson.'

Maddie's hands balled into fists. 'Hannah.' She took a breath. Obviously Hannah had been scared waiting alone. Maybe the next time she wouldn't be so mulish and she would come along.

'Back off, Maddie.' Hannah paused and turned from them. 'You're nothing to me but Dad's widow. Nothing more.'

'I'm your legal guardian,' Maddie said but she shouldn't have responded. She accepted that Hannah would need more than being left alone on a country lane before a conversion could take place. It might just take a thunderbolt from above, but then miracles never happen.

'Bloody courts.' Hannah climbed into the car and slammed the door. The noise rang in Maddie's ears, almost drowning out the cry of an owl.

The dawn light revealed the outline of a bedraggled group of granite buildings. The house was big; far bigger than Maddie had remembered. The roof stretched, and more worryingly dipped, across a vast expanse. Had it been that way in the spring? She closed her eyes and searched her memory. Bluebells had huddled under trees and filled what had once been flower-beds. Blue, grey and green mixed with the scent of wild garlic. She could remember nothing of the state of the roof. With eyes open again Maddie searched the mass of shapes.

There were so many windows and she counted four chimneys, but she hadn't counted on ... an old manor house. How had she forgotten it was so big? When the letter had arrived and stated she'd inherited a house in Cornwall, she'd pictured something small, a cottage or bungalow, but Trevenen was not small. She swallowed. What had she taken on? No simple white



picket fence here, but mullioned windows and responsibility. She was insane to have done this but what options had she had? None, really. The house in London had been worth more than an old house in a remote part of Cornwall. So she sold up in London and paid the bills.

Suppressing a yawn, she climbed out of the car and took a deep breath. The scent of damp earth soothed her. Quietly she closed the car door. Hannah lay sleeping on the back seat where she'd retreated when it had become apparent that the car could be fixed, but that it would take a while. The mechanic had been a master of understatement.

Their new neighbour stepped out of his car. She couldn't believe how kind Mark had been, considering the circumstances. Rather than have them get lost again he'd led them the short distance through the confusing lanes to their new home.

'Morning,' he said.

Noting with envy that he showed no evidence of the night spent awake and outdoors, Maddie searched his face for tell-tale shadows, but found only high cheekbones and a full mouth. His features were not classical but the combination of the components, she imagined, could be quite devastating.

'It's been morning for a while,' she said.

'True, but the dawn chorus hadn't been singing then.'

She raised an eyebrow. 'That's how you define morning?'

'Yes, that and a good cup of coffee.'

'Don't mention something that's nigh on impossible right now.' Just the thought of a double espresso from her local café in Fulham was enough to make her weep, but her exhaustion was so deep that no dose of caffeine could reach it.

'You could come back to my place.'

Maddie looked at him and considered his offer genuine, but then she turned to the house. 'I'm eager to see Trevenen.'

'It awaits you.' He held out his hand towards the old building and grinned as he made a slight bow.

Her body ached but she focused on her new home. Carved stone surrounded some of the windows and others were simple wooden sashes painted white. They all reflected the early

morning but revealed nothing of the interior. Trevenen appeared sound, if cold and empty.

To her left, if her memory was correct, was the piggery, which was missing its roof, and behind her on the far side of the yard were the stables. The buildings formed three sides of a large rectangle with the house on the eastern side.

Fortified by a deep breath, she put one foot in front of the other up the overgrown path to the door. She pulled a large key from her pocket and tried it. With a bit of force the lock tumbled over and she turned the handle, but the door didn't budge. She tried again and pushed with her other hand on the flaking paint. Something gnawed at the pit of her stomach while she waited for it to give way. She had to be brave. This should be exciting: she was the owner of Trevenen.

A crack sounded and a blast of musty air greeted Maddie as she stumbled forward across the threshold. The disturbance caused dust to swirl and a sigh seemed to emerge from the walls. Shadows and dead flies covered the floor. Maddie wrapped her arms around herself.

'Do you think there's electricity?' She turned and gave Mark a weary smile.

'Should be.'

The heavy curtains were pulled tight, trapping the smell of damp and adding to the feeling of neglect. Flicking the light switch on, she stood tall. It would be all right – eventually. She and Hannah had a roof over their heads and they could rebuild their lives. Now she needed to look forward and leave the painful memories behind.

Mark moved to her side and she felt his breath caress her cheek. Maddie stepped away. She could not have drawn a man more different in appearance to her husband. When well, John had been lanky and fair. Closing her eyes she could see him bent over his computer madly typing to finish some article before its deadline, with his boyish locks fallen across his brow. By the end, all his silky hair had gone. She twisted a loose curl that lay on her neck.

'Shall I go and have a quick check through the house for you?'

'Thanks.' Maddie paused and scanned the hall again noting the dust and cobwebs. She suppressed a shiver. The house was almost icy cold. 'There aren't any ghosts, are there?'

'Trevenen isn't haunted,' he said.

She took a breath and peered at the closed doors covered in white gloss paint that had become buttermilk with age. Maddie knew the colour couldn't be achieved by just mixing it. That shade only arrived after years of exposure.

'No ghosts, promise. There are several other houses nearby with them, but not Trevenen.'

'You sound like an expert.'

'Absolutely not.' He grinned and disappeared up the large staircase. The wood on the banister wasn't painted but the grain was barely visible. Maddie moved closer to it. The sweat and oil from many hands had stained the oak dark and worn it smooth. The colour of the balusters was three shades lighter. The tread of each stair dipped in the middle. Maddie glanced up again when something caught her eye but there was nothing there. She rubbed her arms.

Leaning against the wall, she willed the tightness around her heart to retreat. The single bulb suspended from the ceiling cast a dull glow on the floral wallpaper. The array of blooms almost obscured the pictures that hung on the walls, but a faded photograph of three women stood out from the rest. Who were they, she wondered, and was Daphne Penventon one of them?

Her hand trailed along the walls of the hall, rising and falling over the undulating surface as she wandered, lost in thought. Thanks to Daphne Penventon, she and Hannah had a new start. Maddie now had Trevenen, although it didn't yet seem real.

Having some security should provide her with the space to find inspiration again. While John was ill she had longed to paint – to paint her pain, her hope and her love, but time didn't permit and now that she had time she was empty. She didn't know what she was going to do. She needed a plan but didn't know where to begin. How could life once have been so clear and now be so opaque?

As she entered the kitchen, her glance fell on the massive

window that dominated one end. Each of its hand-blown panes framed an alternative vision of the scenery beyond. She shook her head and turned away. Great black beams crossed the ceiling and faded gloss paint was in abundance, but the uneven yellowing of the walls put the woodwork to shame. Maddie tried to guess when the room had last been decorated. Judging by the fittings, it might have been the fifties or even earlier. Set in the fireplace was a range that had seen much use and hadn't been cleaned in a long while. Nothing had. It wasn't just the dust that covered every surface, but the smell of decay that hung in the air.

Maddie leaned over the large white sink and fiddled with the latch to open the window and let in the morning air. Piles of dead insects filled the corners of the ledge and a spider's web clung to the frame. There was no sign of the spider. It was as if all residents of Trevenen had departed in a rush, leaving everything behind. There was even a teapot with the mouldy remains of what must have been Daphne's last brew. Had Maddie noticed this when she'd viewed the property?

Mark's footsteps heralded his arrival in the kitchen. Fighting the overwhelming urge to cry, she turned to him. 'You've been incredibly kind. You didn't have to stay.'

He rolled his eyes and smiled. 'Leave two damsels in distress? My reputation would be destroyed for ever.'

Maddie laughed. With his good looks and smile she didn't doubt he had a reputation but it was of no concern to her.

Mark had departed and Maddie checked on Hannah in the car. She was still asleep. It was good that one of them would be rested. The sun beat down on Maddie as she gazed around. The lawn looked like a meadow and there were more weeds than flowers in the garden, but the house appeared cheerful in its surroundings.

Making a mental list of things to do, she began to walk around the house. A climbing rose sprawled over the arch that led to the front. Wild tendrils crawled from the arch to the neighbouring little building. The plant had grown through a

broken window pane. So much to do. Adding broken window to the list, she moved on.

Here, at the front, Trevenen seemed to have had a facelift. It was trying to be formal, almost Georgian, unlike the rear which reflected the medieval beginnings of the building and a bit of a few other centuries thrown in. Maddie stepped away from it and studied the shape of her house. She had to say it again: *her house*. This ancient building was hers and its wonky façade made her smile, but it must have annoyed whoever had tried to impose rigid balance on it. It didn't work but the result was delightful with tall Georgian windows capturing the morning light.

The same light picked out the seam in the building where it had been added to. The stones changed in size and were more regular in the newer half. She walked towards the join and ran her hand along it. Her fingers stilled and goose pimples travelled up her arm. A faint crying sound whispered around her. She turned her head looking for the source, but all she saw was the overgrown garden basking in the late August sun. A sleepy wasp hovered around her knees.

She blinked and broke contact with the house. The sound stopped. She shrugged and strolled through the garden towards the large Monterey Pine tree that towered over the far side. Its boughs reached out to the sky in asymmetrical disorder. Chunks of blue were visible between branches, triggering that creative pull. She pushed it aside. Today was not a day for painting. She had a house to discover and clean before their worldly goods arrived next week.

She wandered further through a gap in the hedge to what must have been the kitchen garden. Stakes stood bare and grass ran riot. She bent over one bed and found some spinach that must have self-seeded. It wouldn't take too much effort to make this garden operational again. Maybe she could persuade Hannah to take an interest in this. Cleaning it up would be hard work, but the results would be worth it.

Standing again, Maddie scanned the horizon. The trees that sheltered the buildings thinned and the vista opened up as she

came to the far side of the garden. She surveyed the fields that dropped down into a deep crease where the tree cover was dense. Maddie suspected there might be a stream at the bottom, but couldn't see. Fields rose up the other side. With eyes half closed against the sun, the irregular shapes outlined by hedges formed a haphazard pattern of furrowed, planted and pasture.

She turned and walked through the orchard back to the house. All the trees were heavy with fruit. She gave an apple a twist but it resisted. It would be another month she guessed before they would be ripe. What surprised her was the variety of apples and pears she saw. Greens, reds, ochres, yellows made her fingers itch. Soon she would paint.

Moving back to the house, she began to acquaint herself with it. The solicitor had provided her with a brief history. Trevenen had begun as two rooms up and one room down then had grown to a manor house, albeit a small one. The house was built roughly in the shape of an L, with the large kitchen being the bottom of the L and projecting into the yard at the back. The rest of the house followed in a long line. All the reception rooms on the ground floor ran off the main corridor with a hall dividing the old from the new.

Maddie opened every door and flung windows wide open along the way. Each room was unique and clearly had served a purpose in the past, but in most cases that had been long since lost. From all of Daphne's belongings that remained as she'd left them, Maddie could begin to ascertain how her benefactor had used the spaces. It was a big house for an old woman to have maintained alone.

Beside the door to the yard hung an old waxed jacket on a peg. Below it stood a pair of very tired boots. Gloves caked in mud sat on the windowsill with a pair of secateurs beside them. How had Daphne died? Had she been out working in the garden and come in for a cup of tea and keeled over? It all had that feel about it. Maddie touched the gloves, wondering about the woman who had worn them.

Leaving the back entrance, Maddie went to the dining room with its beautiful long table and mismatched chairs. She

counted three of a Chippendale style; the others were probably Victorian. Opening a cupboard on the side of the fireplace, a wisp of air spun the dead moths sitting on the china. Maddie sneezed and waved her hand to clear the dust but it had no effect.

She walked out of the dining room and stood in the main hall. Sunlight fell through the tall window on the landing, picking out the large slate slabs on the floor. Most were rectangles of varying sizes. Their veins and scars were visible on the dull surface. Maddie gave into the urge to play hopscotch and jumped on one foot until she was at the base of the stairs. Laughter bubbled up and she felt a lightness that she hadn't felt in years. She took the stairs two at a time.

Something was digging into Hannah's back and she kicked out. Light blasted through her eyelids while the smell of cows assaulted her nostrils. She'd died and was waking up in hell. No, she was in the back seat of the car. Why? Oh yes, Maddie's grand plan to live in a hut in Cornwall. That's why.

Sitting up, she looked around. To the left there was a thing that resembled a stable and directly in front was a wreck with two walls, no roof and certainly no hot and cold running anything. Brill. The wicked stepmum rode again, tearing her from London to this hell-hole. Was that the house? If so, it was a nightmare, complete with bats filling the night air and that drooling eco geek, Mark, who hadn't left them, or more correctly Maddie, alone last night.

How long had Hannah slept? She rubbed her eyes. The sun was high in the sky. Where was Maddie? Hannah turned to the right and saw a huge building with a roof. It was massive and it was ancient, really ancient. She'd always loved old buildings; it was a passion she and Dad had shared. They'd always done the National Trust thing. Now she'd be living in one and she wasn't so sure it would be as cool as she'd thought back then. She could thank Maddie for fulfilling one of her fantasies, but then again maybe not. Reality sucked.

Abandoning the car, she lost herself in granite, windows and

slates. The stones making up the walls seemed to have order in some places. Big ones on the bottom slowly getting smaller until the top but that wasn't always the case. Hannah stepped back and wondered if the house had been added to. A seam-like line moved down one part of the house. It wasn't straight. It was like the mason had been pissed when he was building it or maybe the house had shifted over time.

The windows on one side were all shapes and sizes, including a bay over the back door that made her think of a woman sitting there and spinning. Weird time-warp feeling. She set off around the outside of the building until she reached the front of the house where a majestic tree ruled. It made the house look small in a way.

A breeze scented with pine wrapped itself around her and she turned back to the tree. It had been a while since she'd climbed one, but she reckoned she was up to the task. Swinging from the bottom branch, she remembered climbing her first in Windsor Great Park. Dad had taught her how to study the tree before beginning. He'd love this one. It was made for climbing, but of course he'd never see it because he'd died, bloody leaving her alone.

Her phone pinged. A message from her best friend, Abi, appeared.

How bad is it? Hows the witch? x

Hannah paused and looked at the stones that made up the building. It wasn't bad at all.

Cool house. Witch as usual. x

Hannah jumped to the ground and thought maybe she'd been a bit tough on Maddie about this move, but then she heard Maddie's voice and thought again. Who was she talking to? Was that guy still here? Why did men find Maddie so attractive? Hannah had never understood why her father had fallen for her. It must have been the sex. Why else would he



marry a tall, gangly woman with wild, curly brown hair and a posh accent? No other possible reason.

Her stomach growled. Food. She continued her journey around the building hoping she'd come back to where she started and find something to eat, maybe in the car. Walking slowly, she arrived in the yard in front of the stables. She'd come full circle. No sign of the witch. Hannah pulled her bag out of the car and rummaged for a chocolate bar while she went into the house.

Dark walls covered in flowered wallpaper. Welcome to the forties. Maybe if Hannah tried to think of this as one of those television experiments that lasted for just a few weeks, she'd survive and then magically life would return to normal. Or as normal as it could be without Dad.

Maddie opened the first door at the top of the stairs and entered a sparsely furnished room. A crocheted bedspread covered the double bed. Small roses adorned the wallpaper and the curtains. She walked to the window and looked down to the courtyard and to the fields beyond. They were filled with cows. The solicitor had said Daphne had farmed up until she was eighty, but now the fields were let to another farmer. This provided a small income and every bit helped. She frowned. She didn't want to think about all of that right now.

The floorboards creaked as she made her way to the next room. Here was the one with the bay window which stood above the rear entrance. It must have been used as a library. Shelves lined two walls and a large desk sat in the bay alcove. A small sofa was pushed up against the bare wall. Needlework cushions covered its surface and a very fine watercolour of a beach hung above it. Tempted though she was, Maddie resisted the urge to pull a book off the shelves; she had more to explore.

Back in the hallway, Maddie counted the doorways and realised that the room she remembered from her visit must be in the 'new' part of the house. It was much larger and airier than any of these, although the one above the kitchen was a big

room if a bit narrow. She opened a few windows and then went downstairs to the sitting room.

She didn't linger but wondered if the original floor was still under the horrible wall-to-wall carpet. The seventies had a lot to answer for in terms of decoration and shag pile carpeting was one of the biggest, only surpassed by avocado green bathroom suites. The furniture was lovely and she could visualise the few pieces of her parents' furniture that she hadn't sold fitting in well with what was already there. She closed her eyes. She musn't dwell on what she'd given up; that wouldn't achieve anything. Turning from the room she went into the smaller one beyond and found what must have been Daphne's office. It too had a lovely big window but the furniture was sparse, nothing more than a few filing cabinets, a table and a chair. Maddie glanced at the documents that lay on the desk, but it was just old bills and she didn't need to see those. New ones would arrive soon enough.

Maddie peered into the small loo tucked under the stairs then she made her way up, pausing to look out of a circular window. Once in the room she saw how it echoed the sitting room below, but felt cosier because of the lower ceiling height. Light flooded in. Maddie walked the length of it and explored the sizeable bathroom that sat above the office. There was no evidence that this room had been used by Daphne, or anyone for that matter. The wardrobe was empty and there were no towels or toiletries to be seen. Maybe this side of the house was too much for the old woman to look after. However, it was perfect for Maddie with both the morning and the evening light.

A large four-poster bed dominated the room. It seemed to call to Maddie and she was too tired to resist. Dust rose from the old eiderdown covering it, as the mattress sank with her weight. The light caught the dust motes in their flight and Maddie fought the urge to close her eyes. She knew even as tired as she was that the nightmares would arrive as soon as sleep did. She forced herself into a sitting position then out of bed.

‘Hannah?’ The precise tones invaded her head. Maddie was looking for her.

‘Hannah?’

Did Hannah hear a touch of panic? She smiled. Finally the calm was disturbed. Usually Maddie was oblivious to everything, lost in her world of colours and shapes. Hell, she hadn’t even shouted about the tattoo. She’d just closed her mouth and then commented on the lovely use of blue. She wasn’t even clued up enough to know it was a fake; so much for getting under her skin. Maddie didn’t shout. She didn’t rage. She kept on packing for this wretched move to Cornwall and whimpering on about what a godsend it was she’d inherited this house.

Hannah strolled up to her stepmother standing in the hall.

‘There you are.’ Maddie smiled. ‘Having a look around? What do you think?’

Hannah shrugged.

‘I’ve chosen the bedroom over the sitting room. You can have any other room you want. There are certainly enough to choose from.’ Maddie paused. ‘You may need to take furniture from other rooms too. I’m sure you’ll find what you need.’

Hannah rolled her eyes and climbed the stairs. Maddie always had to try and put a positive spin on everything. When was the woman going to realise that life sucked?

Walking back and forth between rooms, Hannah couldn’t decide, but she wanted to be as far away from Maddie as she could. The room Hannah stood in now spanned the full width of the building. It sat directly above the kitchen and had a sweet fireplace. Not a big open job like the one downstairs, but a dainty ladylike one with a white wooden mantel around a small black grate.

Most rooms had bits of odd furniture. Maddie had said she could take what she wanted so that didn’t need to come into her decision. Maybe she should just opt for the place furthest from Maddie’s and be done with it.

Leaning on the mantel, she wondered if the fireplace worked. It might need to because Maddie didn’t know if the central

heating did. The woman was going to test it later. Any normal person would've had someone check the place out before they came to live in it, but no, Maddie had just rushed ahead and sold the house in London. She claimed she had to, to pay Dad's bills but that was crap. She could've sold this place. It must be worth something to someone.

A bird perched on the windowsill.

'Good morning, Mr Magpie.' Hannah bit her lip. Hadn't she grown out of stupid childish superstitions yet? No, not when they were one of the things her father had taught her long ago before her stepmother had come into the picture. Hannah walked to the window to look more closely at the brilliant black feathers. The bird cocked its head at her before it flew away.

A neat vanity table stood in front of the window. It was dusty as hell, but the wood under it looked nice. Hannah sat down at it. From here she had a wonderful view of the huge tree on the lawn through the open window. Through its branches she could see into the field across the lane where cows munched peacefully in the sun. A waft of cow shit came through the window. Something had to spoil everything.

She turned away from the view. This room was going to be hers. All she needed was the big wardrobe from the other room and it'd be perfect. Not that she was excited about it, but it just wasn't as bad as she'd thought.