

A WEEK IN WINTER

A NOVEL

MARCIA WILLETT



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The lone walker on the hill shivered a little. The sun had set long since, sinking gently down, received by plump cushiony clouds above a fiery sea. The glow was all about him, transforming these bleak moorland heights with a golden, heavenly light. Far below, where lanes and tracks weaved and curled their secret ways, shouts and laughter drifted up into the clear air. He paused for a moment, dragging his gloves from his pocket, watching the small figures of men as they prepared to stop work for the day.

The old house was being renovated. Even from this distance he could see the evidence of it in the yard: piles of timber, a small bonfire still smoking, ladders and scaffolding. A schoolmaster, recently widowed, he'd walked these paths for years, during holidays and half terms, and could remember when the cream-washed walls had been bare granite and the yard full of cows. He'd heard the voices of children as they'd clambered on the swing beside the tall escallonia hedge and seen smoke rising from the chimney on cold autumn evenings.

Now, an agent's board bearing green and white lettering leaned at an angle against the low stone wall which bordered the narrow lane, and the workmen were ready to go home. A pick-up idled in the yard whilst someone opened the farm gate, shouting to his companion who came hurrying from the barn. The truck was driven slowly through the gateway, waiting whilst the gate was shut and the man safely aboard before disappearing behind the shoulder of the hill.

The walker drew his collar more closely about his throat and walked briskly onwards, his face to the west. The house, built at the moor gate, in the shadow of the hills, always reminded him of a poem he'd known from childhood. He murmured it aloud as he trudged onwards.

'From quiet homes and first beginning,
Out to the undiscovered ends ...'

A sudden gust of cold wind came snaking over the moors. He bent his head against it, still trying to remember the next lines. A handful of chill rain made him blink and he began to hurry, the verse forgotten, his mind now on supper: his landlady's warm kitchen, hot, strong tea and the comforting smell of cooking.

He did not see the muffled figure crossing the moor below the house, pausing within the shadow of the thorn hedge, climbing swiftly over the dry-stone wall.

The clouds gathered overhead and the rain began to fall steadily.

Part One

Maudie Todhunter poured herself some coffee, sliced the top neatly from her egg, and settled herself to look at her letters. A rather promising selection lay beside her plate this morning: a satisfyingly bulky package from the Scotch House, a blue square envelope bearing her step-granddaughter's spiky writing, and a more businesslike missive stamped with an estate agent's logo—which she placed at the bottom of the pile. She slit open Posy's card with the butter knife and propped it against the marmalade before plunging her spoon into the rich golden yolk of her boiled egg. Posy's writing required concentration, decorated as it was with tiny drawings and exclamations, and often heavily underscored.

'Don't forget,' Posy had written at the side, so that Maudie had to turn the card to read it. 'that you promised to think about Polonius. Mum's saying that he'll have to go to the Dacre Pleeze, Maudie!...'

Maudie shuddered. The idea of housing the boisterous Polonius, a large English mastiff rescued by Posy during the Easter holidays, filled her with horror.

'I am *not* a dog person,' she'd told Posy severely. 'You know that quite well after all these years.'

'Well, you should be,' Posy had retorted. 'Taking Polonius for walks would keep you off your weight down. You've just told me that you can't get into half your clothes. Anyway, it's only for term times. I've made Mum promise I can have him at home for the holidays if I can find a home for him during the term. Mind you, she'll be spitting nails if she knows you've agreed to have him ...'

Maudie chuckled appreciatively to herself as she spread marmalade on her toast. Selina had fought hard to prevent the alliance between her stepmother and Posy, but their mutual affection had been too strong for her. As soon as she was old enough to be independent Posy had spent as much time as she could with Maudie, ignoring her mother's sulks, fielding her accusations of disloyalty, bearing with her ability to make life extremely tiresome. Posy was quite bright enough to know that Maudie might well house Polonius simply in order to irritate Selina and she was ready to go to any lengths to keep him.

Resisting such a temptation, Maudie opened the next envelope. Soft squares of tartan tumbled on to the table. Distracted from her breakfast, her coffee cooling in the big blue and white cup, Maudie caressed the fine woollen samples. She examined them closely, reading the descriptions written on the white labels which were stuck to each square: Muted Blue, Douglas, Ancient Campbell, Hunting Fraser, Dress Mackenzie. They slid over her fingers and lay amongst the toast crumbs. Miss Grey at The Scotch House had done her proud as usual.

'Something different,' Maudie had pleaded. 'Not dull old Black Watch. Have you still got my measurements?'

Maudie had been a customer at the Scotch House for many years, and her measurements

were kept on file, but it was a while now since she'd ordered any new clothes. She'd been assured, however, that her file was at hand and that her order would be given immediate attention. Meanwhile, samples would be sent at once. Tall, with a generous, low-slung bosom and long legs, Maudie remembered with regret the good old days when clothes could be made to measure without costing the earth. She had a passion for the texture and colour of fabric: supple tweed in earthy shades, nubbly raw silk the colour of clotted cream, fine lawn shirts, crisp white cotton, soft, comforting cherry-red lambswool.

'You're so ... so *understated*,' Hector had said once, fumbling for the word. 'Not like Hilda ...'

No, not like Hilda who'd loved bright floral prints and fussy foulard frocks with pussycat bows; not like Hilda who held it an article of faith that a woman should make the best of herself at all times; who considered it an almost sacred duty to be good-tempered and forbearing at any cost. After a while, when Patricia and Selina made it painfully, cruelly clear that she would never replace their dead mother, Maudie had made it almost a point of honour to be as different from Hilda as it was possible to be.

'Be patient,' Hector had pleaded. 'They're so young. It's still raw for them and Hilda was such a wonderful mother.' Everyone had wanted her to know it, voices lowered respectfully, eyes alert, eager for her reaction: a wonderful mother, a wonderful cook, a wonderful wife, a wonderful friend. Even now Maudie still struggled against the resentment which had festered intermittently for thirty years, corroding and insistent, clouding happiness, destroying peace—and now Hector was dead too.

Maudie gathered up the scraps of material and thrust them back into the envelope. Outside the window, on the veranda, sparrows pecked at the crumbs she'd thrown out earlier, while two collared doves balanced together on the bird table. She swallowed some lukewarm coffee, grimaced and refilled the cup with hot black liquid from the pot. The rain which had swept up from the west during last evening had passed away to the north and the sun was shining. From her table beside the French windows she could see cobwebs, glinting and sparkling, strung about the high hedges which protected the long narrow garden. A few leaves, golden and russet, were scattered on the lawn. The sun had not yet risen high enough to penetrate the dark corners beneath the trees, or pierce the shadowy waters of the pond, but the big square living room was bright and cheerful. Soon it would be cold enough to light the big wood-burning stove; soon but not yet.

Maudie took up Posy's card again. It was odd how the child's personality flowed out of the thin spiky letters which carried the usual messages of affection, cloaked beneath sharp observations and teasing remarks; odd and comforting. She refused to allow any concessions to Maudie's advancing years—'I'm seventy-two, child!' protestingly. 'So?' impatiently—and was now suggesting that Maudie should drive to Winchester to see her new quarters, meet her fellow students and share a pint or two at the local pub.

We're in this old Victorian house, *she wrote*. It's really fab. You'll like Jude. He's doing theatre studies with me and there's Jo, who's doing art and stuff. She's cool. I've got this really big room to myself on the top floor. It's great to be out of Hall and independent. You've got to come, Maudie...

She laid the card aside and looked almost indifferently at the last letter bearing the Truro postmark. Far too early, surely, for the agents to have a buyer. Moorgate still had the workmen in, although they were at the clearing-up stage as regards the house itself. Hector had always insisted that she should have Moorgate. The London house should be sold and the proceeds divided between Patricia and Selina; Maudie would have an annuity and Moorgate—and, of course, The Hermitage.

Here, in this colonial-style bungalow built at the end of the nineteenth century on the edge of woodland a few miles to the north-west of Bovey Tracey, she and Hector had spent the summers ever since he'd retired from the Diplomatic Corps. Maudie's father, widowed early and a rather solitary man, had bought it for his own retreats from his desk in Whitehall, and Maudie had always declared that she would live in it in her turn if anything happened to Hector. Her friends had not believed her. 'Extraordinary,' they said, now, to one another. 'Oh, haven't you heard? Maudie's gone native in a wooden bungalow down in the wilds of Devon ... I know. I couldn't believe it either. Mind you, she was always a bit odd, didn't you think? Super fun and all that, oh, absolutely, terrific fun, but underneath ... Not *quite* cut out for the motherly bit and I wonder if she didn't give darling Hector a bit of a hard time. Well, we all *adored* Hector, didn't we? Of course, you never really knew Hilda, did you? Oh, she was a *brick*, my dear. An absolute *brick*...'

Maudie knew what they were saying and revelled in it. Once married to Hector she acquired a reputation for tactlessness, for laughing at quite the wrong moment, for a worrying lack of respect for the hierarchy, whilst on the domestic front she was naïve. Dinner parties for twenty diplomats and their wives, organising bazaars, the children's Christmas party were out of her ken. The men liked her—though some feared her—despite these failings. Those years she'd spent at Bletchley Park during the war and her subsequent appointment as assistant to a well-known research physicist in America lent her an occasional glamour which some of the wives resented.

'And that's what attracted Hector,' murmured Maudie, picking up the long white envelope. 'After Hilda's perfection in the home he couldn't resist the opportunity for fun. And we do have fun when the girls weren't around to disapprove and make him feel guilty.'

There had been more disapproval—especially from Selina—when they learned that Moorgate was to be left to Maudie.

'My whole childhood is wrapped up in that place,' Selina had declared dramatically. 'We always spent the summer at Moorgate with Mummy.'

'But what would you do with it?' asked her husband, trying to suppress his embarrassment. 'It's been agreed that Maudie should sell the house in Arlington Road. What more do you want?'

Maudie had appreciated his partisanship but had no wish to be made out as a martyr.

'I wouldn't want to stay in London without Hector,' she'd said abruptly. 'But you and Patricia will get far more for that place than you will for an old farmhouse on the edge of Bodmin Moor.' She'd smiled grimly. 'Or do you feel that you should have *both* houses, Selina?'

'Of course she doesn't.' Patrick had been horrified. 'For heaven's sake! Hector is being

scrupulously fair ...'

'To me? Or to the girls?' Maudie had looked innocently enquiring.

'I meant, well, given the circumstances ...' Patrick had grappled with his confusion until Maudie released him from his misery.

'I shall have my father's house in Devon and an annuity. Moorgate is my insurance policy. Hector knows that neither Patricia nor Selina would ever use it or afford to keep it without a tenant in it. He believes that the money you'll get from the sale of the house in Arlington Road will be enough to give you plenty in reserve for almost any emergency. Well.' She shrugged, preparing to leave. 'Shall I tell your father that you're unhappy about his plans?' She'd warded off Patrick's protestations and beamed into Selina's sulky face. At the door she'd paused. 'Of course, there's always the possibility that you might die first and then all your worries will be over. So *taxing*, deciding what other people should do with the belongings, isn't it?'

Remembering the scene, Maudie chuckled again, briefly, then grew sober. What would Selina say when she discovered that Moorgate was about to be put on the market? The elderly tenants had died and Maudie had brooded long as to whether she should relet it or sell it. Expediency forced her hand. The bungalow needed a new roof and her car should have been replaced long since. She would sell Moorgate and give herself a buffer; it would be a comfort to have a cushion between herself and the sharp realities of life.

As she slit open the envelope and drew out the sheet of paper, Maudie wondered again what had happened to those investments of which Hector had told her years ago. She hadn't taken much notice at the time but he had been scrupulous in showing her the extent of his portfolio. He wasn't wealthy, but she knew that even after the purchase of her annuity there should have been certain shares and investments which had not, after all, been mentioned in his will. Could he have changed his mind and given them to the girls much earlier? As usual she dismissed this recurring thought. Even had he bound them to secrecy, surely Selina could not have resisted displaying her triumph to her stepmother? Yet it seemed impossible to imagine Hector having financial problems which he had hidden from her. She pushed the nagging question aside and read the letter from the agents in Truro.

...the work inside the house is almost finished and we have already erected a board to tempt any passer-by. However, Moorgate being in such a remote location, we shall mainly be relying on advertising and sending out the particulars ... There is some problem about a key to the office, storeroom and cloakroom. This is the area which is approached both through the kitchen and from outside and, whilst it is not a particularly important selling feature, it will be necessary to allow clients to view it. Mr Abbot has been intending to contact you about it since he is unable to renovate this part of the house ... Perhaps you would be so kind as to contact me.

Maudie frowned. Surely she'd given Rob Abbot the full set of keys, having kept one spare front door key for herself and one for the agents? Rob wasn't the sort to mislay keys. Age about thirty-five, tall, tough, with a keen sense of humour, he'd appealed to her at once. He'd looked over Moorgate, making notes, cracking jokes, telling her that he'd given up h

engineering job in London after promotion had made him more of an administrator than an engineer.

‘Boardroom politics aren’t my scene,’ he’d said cheerfully. ‘I like getting my hands dirty. Since I’ve come West to make my fortune.’

‘Well, you won’t make it at my expense,’ she’d answered tartly. ‘I can’t afford to spend too much.’

‘You’ll be a fool if you don’t do it properly,’ he’d said seriously. ‘People throw money away. They refuse to spend a few pennies on a run-down cottage and they sell it to a builder who moves in and makes a killing. She’s worth doing up properly, this old place. You’ll get your money back twice over, believe me.’

She’d listened to him, making tea for them both with an old kettle in the huge, bare kitchen, and then they’d gone from room to room whilst he showed her what might be done. His ideas were simple but good and she decided, with one or two restrictions, that she would allow him to go ahead if his price were reasonable. He’d encouraged her to visit two other properties he’d renovated and she was privately impressed.

He’d grinned at her. ‘Wait and see. When I’ve finished you won’t want to sell her.’

‘Then you won’t get paid,’ she’d answered. ‘Send me an estimate and I’ll think about it.’

That had been at the beginning of the summer. Perhaps it was time to make a visit to Moorgate; to meet Rob again and to check out his work for herself. She’d made one visit and meant to go back but the right moment had never yet arisen.

Maudie decided that now it had. She would drive down to Cornwall, see Moorgate and Rob, sort out the problem of the key. She removed her spectacles, collected her post together and, rising from the breakfast table, went to make a telephone call.

Listening to the enthusiastic voice of the young agent in the office in Truro, Maudie was able to imagine him quite clearly—although she had never met him.

‘It’s an absolutely super property, Lady Todhunter, quite my favourite. I can’t wait to start marketing it properly. It’s just this thing about the keys to the office ...’ His voice, rather breathless, rattled on in her ear as she visualised the clean, floppy hair and scrubbed, fresh complexion; imagined the leather Filofax whose leaves she could hear rustling as he flicked through the pages; envisaged the head at an angle, shoulder hunched so as to grip the telephone receiver. In her mind’s eye she saw his tie; silk, of course, and decorated with some cartoon animal: Daffy Duck, perhaps? Of course, he would also own a mobile phone, laptop and a small hatchback: the necessary toys of his profession.

‘I quite understand, Mr ...?’ She peered at the name typed beneath the scrawled signature on the letter she held in her hand. ‘Mr Cruikshank, is it ...? Oh, very well, then, Ned,’—she hated the modern informality but could never resist the young—‘I understand that the keys have gone missing but I don’t have a spare set for the office and the side door. What does Mr Abbot say about it?’

‘Well, you see that’s the whole point.’ Ned’s voice was confiding, now, inviting her to share his bafflement. ‘He can’t remember ever having them.’

Maudie frowned, cudgelling recalcitrant memory. ‘I’m quite certain I gave him the whole set,’ she said firmly. ‘As I recall, there was only ever the one complete set of keys and I thought it sensible for Mr Abbot to have them until he’d finished. I kept one front door key for myself, in case of emergency, and gave you the other to be going on with. How very tiresome.’

‘I suppose,’ he suggested diffidently, ‘that there couldn’t be another set somewhere? You know? Just knocking about at the back of a drawer, or in the bottom of an old vase, or something?’

‘I suppose it’s possible. The tenants returned the set which I passed on to Mr Abbot. There might be a faint chance that my husband had another set somewhere.’

‘Perhaps you could ask him.’ Ned sounded hopeful.

‘Rather tricky, under the circumstances,’ said Maudie drily. ‘He’s dead and I have no inclination towards spiritualism ... No, no. Don’t apologise. How could you possibly know? She felt a stab of remorse for her abruptness which had caused his embarrassment and spluttered apologies. ‘My fault. You must forgive my bad taste. I’ll look about for the keys but I’m not at all sanguine. Everything was sorted out when I moved down from London, you see, but I’ll just make absolutely certain. No, not a nuisance ... Don’t give it a thought ... Yes, I’ll be in touch.’

She replaced the receiver and returned to the living room, picking up the big wooden tray

and piling up the breakfast things ready to be taken into the kitchen. Pausing to watch a nuthatch, upside down on the nut container which hung from a hook on the bird table, she was distracted for a moment from the problems at Moorgate. She loved these two big sunny rooms which opened on to the veranda and the garden. They were divided from the other rooms by a wide passage, with the front door at one end of it and a box room at the other. An adequate-sized kitchen, a surprisingly large bathroom, a tiny cloakroom and a spare bedroom made up the rest of the accommodation but it was quite big enough for Maudie. Each holiday Hector had chafed at its lack of space, at the impossibility of giving parties or inviting friends for the weekends.

‘For heaven’s sake,’ she’d cry impatiently, ‘we’re only here for a few weeks. Surely you can survive without them? Isn’t it nice to be on our own for a while?’

He’d smile repentantly. ‘Withdrawal symptoms,’ he’d say. ‘Give me a day or two ...’ But he’d never been able to hide his pleasure and anticipation as the day for their return to London drew near.

Maudie took the tray into the kitchen and unloaded the contents on to the draining board. Hector had always been at his best surrounded by people—selected people, if possible, but almost any people were preferable to his own company. Maudie was happier in a more intimate setting, one friend at a time so that she could concentrate upon them, rather than the bustle and noise of large parties. Nevertheless, they’d managed pretty well, given that Maudie had never entertained more than six people at a time before she’d met Hector. Naturally, Hilda had been the perfect hostess...

The sudden jet of hot water, splashing against the back of a spoon, sprayed Maudie’s jersey and she cursed sharply, turning off the tap. How foolish, how utterly *pointless* it was, to feel such antagonism against a woman who had been dead for more than thirty years. The irritating thing about dying young—well, forty-four was fairly young—was that it immediately hallowed the dead with a kind of immunity. They were always ahead of the game, one point up, they didn’t play fair. Maudie bashed the dishes about in the hot soap water with a splendid disregard for their welfare. Even now, with Hilda and Hector both dead, she still felt the frustration of what she called ‘second-wife syndrome’. Perhaps it would have been easier to deal with if Patricia and Selina had been prepared to meet her halfway. To be fair—did she want to be fair?—Patricia had been tolerant enough. She simply wasn’t interested in her new stepmother, too immersed, at sixteen, in her own growing-up to make any efforts to make Maudie feel part of the family. Selina had demanded her sister’s partisanship in her battle, however, and Patricia, through loyalty or indifference, had added her weight to Selina’s resistance.

Drying the dishes, putting away the marmalade and butter, Maudie struggled for rationality. It had been difficult for Hector to remain unmoved by his daughters’ hostility. Patricia’s attacks had been spasmodic, distracted as she was by boyfriends and parties, but Selina had waged a determined, unflinching war. At twelve she’d missed her mother terribly and had no intention of sharing her father with this stranger. It was perhaps unfortunate that she’d started at boarding school in the autumn following the wedding so that, although it had been arranged for years, she could always blame Maudie for packing her off to school in that wicked stepmother style.

‘Absolute rubbish!’ Hector had shouted irritably, driven to distraction by Selina’s tears and recriminations. ‘You knew quite well that you’d be going away to school next term. Patricia went at thirteen and you were perfectly happy about it until ... until now. You know that I’ve been posted to Geneva and that Mummy would have wanted you to be settled with Patricia at school by the time I leave. It has absolutely *nothing* to do with Maudie.’

He’d slammed himself into his study leaving Selina, tear-stained and furious, outside the door.

‘Look,’ Maudie had said awkwardly, ‘I know it’s hard to understand but he feels it too, you know.’

Selina’s face was as stony and unyielding as granite. ‘I hate you,’ she’d said—but quietly, lest Hector should hear and come storming out—‘and I wish it was you who was dead.’

‘I expect you do,’ Maudie had answered cheerfully. ‘But while we’re waiting for that happy event can’t we try to be friends?’

Selina had not bothered to reply but had gone away to her room, locking herself in, refusing to come down to lunch, and the house had been wrapped in an atmosphere of gloom and ill-feeling until the term started. Oh, the joy of being alone with Hector, ghosts and guilt banished—only temporarily, however. Both would be resurrected with monotonous regularity at half terms and each holiday.

‘We must be patient,’ Hector had insisted—also with monotonous regularity. ‘After all, at least we get the term times to ourselves.’

Hanging up the dishcloth Maudie smiled secretly to herself. What fun they’d had; careless, selfish, glorious fun.

‘I must say,’ he’d admitted, just once or twice, after afternoons of love, or an extra brandy after a particularly good dinner party, ‘I have to admit that it’s rather nice not to be worrying about the girls all the time. If Hilda had a fault it was that she used to fuss about them. Know what I mean? I felt that I was a father and provider first and husband and lover second.’

She’d learned that it didn’t do to make a little joke about such criticism. ‘What’s the heresy?’ she’d asked once, laughingly. ‘Come now! Can it be true? Hilda wasn’t perfect, after all?’ It had been mild enough but he’d descended at once into self-criticism and remorse, rehearsing a catalogue of Hilda’s attributes, singing her praises, mourning her passing. No, she didn’t do at all to hint, even light-heartedly, that she felt the least bit inadequate in the face of such perfection. Instead she’d done what she was good at; she’d made him laugh, made him feel young, sexy, strong. Responsibility, grief, anxiety would slide away from him and he’d respond in such a way that her own esteem would soar again and she’d feel needed, desired, witty, vital. It hadn’t been easy, after all, to give up her own career, to become a diplomat’s wife and stepmother to his ungrateful, tiresome daughters.

Although, at the start, she had to admit that it had been only *too* easy. She’d been on her way home to England for leave following the retirement of the physicist for whom she had worked for more than fifteen years. Part of her life was at an end. It was Christmas and the airport was closed by snow. Disgruntled passengers huddled together, complaining, while Hector ... ‘hector’d’, as Maudie had said to him afterwards. ‘You hector’d the staff and bullied them into finding us accommodation.’

‘Perfectly reasonable,’ he’d said. ‘You didn’t refuse a nice warm bed, if I remember rightly

It was odd—odd and altogether delightful—how she and Hector had so quickly drawn together. Laughing, sharing his hip flask, making light of the difficulties—the brief episode had been romantic, unreal, fantastic, yet afterwards they’d refused to be separated. Maudie had given up her career and Hector had risked the surprise and disapproval of friends and family so that he and Maudie could be married twelve months after the death of his wife.

‘It might be tricky,’ he’d admitted anxiously as they’d driven to meet Hilda’s mother and the girls. ‘It’ll come as a bit of a shock. Everyone adored Hilda ...’

It was only then that she’d realised that their life together was to be a delicate balance, a seesaw of emotions. There was the Hector that she knew, lover and companion, and the Hector who was the responsible elder son, the adored father, the admired friend, the respected colleague.

‘I feel that nobody really looks upon me as Hector’s wife,’ Maudie had once said to Daphne. ‘It’s the oddest sensation, as if there’s something illicit about the whole thing; that Hilda was his official, legal wife and I’m regarded as his mistress.’

‘Sounds good to me,’ Daphne had replied. ‘Much more fun.’

Daphne had been the one who had welcomed her, done her best to make her feel at home and eased her path: Daphne, who was Hilda’s oldest friend and Patricia’s godmother.

‘You might have a problem with Daphne,’ Hector had warned as they’d waited for the guests at the official cocktail party in Geneva. ‘She and Hilda were at school together. They were like sisters.’

He’d been clearly uneasy at that first meeting, awkward during introductions, quiet without his usual urbane ease, but Daphne had taken Maudie’s hands readily, smiling, although her gaze had been very direct, searching.

‘How clever of you, Hector,’ she’d murmured. ‘How very clever.’ And she’d leaned forward to kiss Maudie’s cheek.

Even now, more than thirty years later, Maudie could remember the warmth she’d felt in Daphne’s brief embrace. There had been a genuine liking, discernible even in such an artificial setting; a warmth that had thawed Maudie’s wariness.

‘I like Daphne,’ she’d said later, over their nightcap, and Hector had taken a deep breath, stretching as he stood before the fire, clearly relieved.

‘It all went off very well,’ he’d admitted. ‘Very well indeed.’

Daphne had become her closest friend, her ally in the ongoing battle with Selina, her defender against the whispers of Hilda’s supporters.

‘After all,’ Maudie had said, enraged by a snub, ‘it’s not as if Hector divorced the blasted woman, abandoned her for me. He was a widower, for God’s sake!’

‘Oh, my dear.’ Daphne had looked rueful. ‘Can’t you see the threat you are to us old wifies? Hector’s flouted the unwritten rules which govern our small bit of society. He has found himself a younger, attractive woman who can’t cook, doesn’t want children, can’t tell the difference between His Excellency and the gardener and *he doesn’t give a damn*. He’s clearly enjoying himself enormously. He looks ten years younger and he’s making us question

all our entrenched beliefs.'

'But why?' Maudie had asked. 'Why can't people just leave us alone?'

'Research laboratories must be very unusual places.' Daphne had shaken her head. 'Are you only just learning that if someone steps aside from the herd he is likely to be torn to pieces? We're all so insecure, you see. If you behave differently from me, I either have to question my own beliefs and habits or prove that you are wrong. Misguided, stupid, ill-bred, it doesn't really matter how I label you so long as I can continue to feel complacent and safe. You have to come amongst us and upset the apple cart. But you must be patient with us, Maudie. Middle-aged wives are very vulnerable people, you know. And middle-aged men are very susceptible.'

'I don't want to be a threat to anyone,' Maudie had cried. 'I just want to be left alone. I don't criticise any of *you*. I don't care what you do or how you do it.'

'That's the problem,' Daphne had sighed. 'You're so confident, so sure, so indifferent. You will find that some people will simply not be able to cope with it.'

'You make it sound as if my life is one big laugh,' Maudie had said crossly. 'I promise you it isn't. Being a second wife and a stepmother can be hell. I'm not nearly as confident as you imagine.'

'Ah, but you're not admitting it. You're not confiding in all those wives who would love to advise ...'

'And gloat, privately together, afterwards.'

'Well, there you have it. So why do you admit it to me?'

'Because you're different,' Maudie had said, after a moment or two. 'I trust you.' And Daphne had laughed then, laughed until Maudie had felt almost uneasy.

'I know it's odd that I should trust you,' she'd said almost defensively, 'you being Hilda's closest friend and all that. But I do. So now *you* can go and gloat privately.'

'No, I shan't do that. But I agree that it's odd. I loved Hilda, I really did. We started boarding school together, you know, and I spent a great many holidays with her family while mine were abroad, and we had a lot of fun. But she was always a serious girl, rather prim and proper, and as she grew older this developed into a kind of complacency which, if I'm honest, could be very irritating. There, how's that for disloyalty?'

'Not a bad effort for a beginner,' Maudie had answered, grinning, 'but I'm sure you could do better if you were to try harder.'

Daphne had hesitated—and then laughed. 'You are a wicked girl,' she said. 'Hector's a lucky man. He's clearly a very happy one.'

Had he been happy? Maudie took her jacket from the peg inside the door and rummaged in her bag for the car keys. What about those endless rows over Selina? Those accusations he had hurled at her: that she was unsympathetic, cold, selfish? What about those times that he had gone alone to see his daughter and her children because Selina complained that Maudie was so critical, so unaffectionate that the boys were frightened of her? What about the pain when she realised that Hector was beginning to take Selina's word against her own?

'Over,' Maudie said loudly, as she stepped outside and slammed the door. 'Over, over'

over!'

So why, asked the insistent small voice inside her head, *why* are you still so angry?

'Shut up,' said Maudie. 'I will not do this. I am going to enjoy myself Go away and leave me alone.'

She opened the door of the large shed which housed the car, drove slowly down the long moss-covered drive and headed westwards, towards Bodmin Moor.

The farmhouse stood in a small hollow beside the narrow lane. At the end of the garden, behind the dry-stone wall, two granite pillars—the moor gate—leaned either side of the cattle grid, beyond which the lane climbed steeply to the open moor. Maudie parked the car by the gate to the yard and climbed out. A pick-up stood in the shelter of the open-fronted barn and a bonfire smoked sulkily. It was a soft grey day, the distant farmland veiled in mist, and a brooding quiet lay over the countryside. The place looked deserted, the house closed up and empty. In the stand of trees to the west, across the lane, a party of rooks rose suddenly and noisily, into the damp air, and the faint clopping of hoofs penetrated the silence.

Maudie looked with approval at the sturdy cob which now appeared round the bend in the lane. Its rider raised his crop to his hat and jogged onwards, bending to unfasten the small gate beside the cattle grid. They passed through, the cob waiting quietly whilst the gate was shut, and began to climb the moorland road. Presently they were out of sight and Maudie turned her attention once more to the house. In this land of granite and slate the cream-washed walls struck a warm note. The roof was Delabole slate, the front door solid oak, and the old farmhouse had an air of permanency and safety; a place of refuge in an inhospitable environment.

On a hot summer's day, with the tall escallonia hedge in full flower and the larks tossing high above, it was an idyllic place to be but in winter, with the storms lashing the upland and the wind screaming from the west, it was harsh and bleak. Left empty, the farmhouse would become damp, icy-cold and uninhabitable. It needed to be lived in, kept dry and warm, used as a home, not bought for a holiday retreat.

'Mummy adored Moorgate,' Selina had been fond of repeating. 'Her family owned it when she was a little girl and she used to stay with the farmer and his wife. Then, when they retired, we kept it as a holiday home for years. We went there every summer, Mummy, me and Patricia. Daddy joined us when he could. We must never get rid of Moorgate, there are so many memories.'

Even after the sale of the London house Selina kept a watching brief from a distance.

'Pure dog-in-the-manger,' Maudie had observed crossly to Daphne, after one of their sessions down memory lane with her stepdaughter. 'She hasn't been there for years. Sentimental hogwash. I notice there was no problem when it came to selling the house at Arlington Road. Yet she spent much more time there with Hilda than down at Moorgate.'

'I suppose that childhood summers are always invested with a kind of glamour,' Daphne had answered thoughtfully. 'You know the kind of thing I mean? The sun was always shining, wasn't it? The sea was warm and adventure was always round the corner.'

'Thank you, Enid Blyton,' Maudie had said acidly. 'Shall we have a chorus of "Jesus want me for a sunbeam" before you go?'

Nevertheless, Maudie had not yet told Selina that Moorgate was about to be put up for sale. Now, as she wandered into the yard and stood looking about her, she felt rather sad that the old farmhouse should pass out of the family. Posy loved it too, and for Posy's sake she wished she could keep it. Yet, even for Posy, it would be crazy to hold on to a property which none of them could enjoy. If she kept Moorgate it must be let—so what was the point? Better to sell and be able to help Posy financially later on.

Rob Abbot came striding round the corner of the house and she gave a gasp of surprise. She could see that she'd startled him too. He frowned a little—and then came on towards her, eyebrows raised, a faint smile hovering on his lips.

'Come to check up on me?' he asked lightly.

Maudie grinned at him. 'Thought I'd catch you slacking,' she said. 'Mr Cruikshank's been in touch, wittering on about keys. I couldn't get you on your mobile so I thought I'd drive down and see if we could sort this out.'

'He's been here,' said Rob grimly. 'Poking around, rattling door handles, peering through windows. I told him that I can't break down doors without your permission. You know, I'm sure I've never had those keys.'

'It's a mystery.' Maudie shrugged. 'I honestly can't remember now what I did with them. If they weren't on the big ring I gave you then I simply haven't a clue. We'll have to force the locks. As I remember, there's a door from the kitchen which leads into a passage to the office. There was a small cloakroom, I think, and a kind of storeroom which had an outside door.'

'Both doors are firmly locked,' said Rob. 'And the window has a blind or a curtain pulled across it. You can't see in.'

'How silly of us!' exclaimed Maudie. 'Perhaps we can just break the window and get in that way. Why didn't we think of it before?'

Rob looked doubtful. 'It's not that sort of window. I had thought of it, actually, but it's too small to climb through. Anyway, we'll have a look at it now you're here.' He hesitated. 'I shouldn't leave the car in the lane. It's very narrow there and a tractor will probably be along in a minute. Pull her into the yard.'

He opened the gate for her and went away to put the kettle on for some tea. Maudie backed carefully through the gateway and parked beside the pick-up, and by the time she arrived in the kitchen the kettle was boiling and Rob was putting tea bags into mugs. She paused inside the door, looking around. The kitchen faced northwest, stretching almost the whole width of the house, and looked out across the moor, beyond distant farmland to the sea. Empty, except for some built-in cupboards, the sink unit and the Esse range, it looked enormous, cavernous.

'It needs really big, old-fashioned farm furniture,' Maudie said, accepting her mug. 'Huge dressers and a big refectory table. The odd thing is that it doesn't feel as cold as I'd expected. There's a warm atmosphere,' she sniffed at the air, 'and what's that smell ... Bacon?' She shook her head. 'I'm imagining things.'

Rob was looking at her oddly. 'It's funny you should say that. I've had the same impression once or twice. I'm on my own here now, tidying up, and the lads have moved on to the new job, but I sometimes get the feeling that I'm not alone.' He chuckled, almost embarrassed. 'No ...'

stories of ghosts or hauntings, are there?’

She stared at him, watching him as he turned away, sipping his tea, staring out across the moor, and felt a twinge of uneasiness. Rob Abbot was the last person in the world to let his imagination run away with him but he seemed rather distant today, unresponsive, not at all his usual joking self.

‘Of course not,’ she said briskly. ‘What nonsense. Anyway, ghosts don’t cook bacon. Are you absolutely certain that none of your men could have taken the keys, Rob? I have the feeling that there were several keys on a smaller ring, attached to the big one. Could you have taken them off and put them down somewhere?’

He turned back to her, frowning. ‘Don’t think I haven’t thought it over. It’s possible, of course. A lot of keys pass through my hands, and I’m usually very careful, but I suppose it is possible that I may have taken them off and left them lying about. But why should anyone take them? I’ve asked the boys, of course, and they’re all as puzzled as I am. I certainly can’t imagine any of them having any use for them. The house is empty, nothing to take, and it’s clear that nobody’s squatting in it. At the same time ...’

‘It’s odd, isn’t it?’ She grimaced. ‘Rather creepy. Come and show me the sitting room—we haven’t seen it since it was finished—and then we’ll decide what’s to be done about the office. How annoying it is. Not that it will take long to get it decorated. I hope you won’t abandon me before it’s done.’

‘No, I shan’t do that.’ He put his mug down on the draining board. ‘It’s always good to have some indoor work as the winter comes on and I wouldn’t want to leave a job unfinished.’

‘It’s taken rather longer than you thought, hasn’t it?’ Maudie asked as they passed into the hall and she paused to look appreciatively at the oak staircase, restored now to its simple natural state. ‘You’ve done well, Rob. It looks right. Not like some tacky conversion. It has retained its dignity.’

He looked about him. ‘She’s like an elderly countrywoman,’ he said affectionately. ‘Strong and kindly, sheltering. She’s not some passing fad for a pseudo townie who wants to pretend he’s living the good life.’

Maudie glanced at him, touched by his warmth. ‘The trouble is, now that the farmland has been sold off, Moorgate isn’t really a farmhouse any more. And she’s right off the beaten track. I’m not certain exactly who would buy it.’

‘No offers yet, then?’ He led the way into the sitting room. ‘Mr Cruikshank seems very keen.’

She laughed. ‘He’s young,’ she said tolerandy. ‘He’ll get a lot of interest from the type of people you’ve just described but it’s too big a house for a second home and it’s a long way from London. Lots of people work from home these days so maybe it’ll attract a young family who can afford to ferry their children about and pay the heating bills. This warm wet climate can do such harm.’ She paused. ‘Have you been lighting fires in here, Rob?’

The square sitting room faced southeast and the natural stone walls had been washed with cream paint. Built into the alcove to the right of the inglenook fireplace was a glass-fronted cupboard, the oak floorboards had been stripped and polished, and the original wooden shutters were folded back on each side of the sash windows. In the fireplace, on the bi-

central slate, was the remains of charred twigs and a few half-burned logs in a pile of so grey ash.

He glanced at it indifferently. 'I had a trial run after the chimney sweep had been in. I did the same in the other room just to make sure the fires were drawing properly. There's a pile of logs out in the barn so it seemed a good idea. Apart from anything else it doesn't do any harm to give the place a warm through. Actually, I was going to suggest that we might light the Esse and have some background heat if she hasn't sold in a month or two. I can pop over and keep an eye on her until you get a buyer.' He hesitated, shrugged. 'If you want me to ...'

'That would be very kind of you,' Maudie answered. 'If it isn't a trouble. It's not a bad idea to light the Esse. Better to pay for a bit of oil than have damp coming in. Should we have pipes in proper central heating, I wonder?'

'Too late now,' Rob said firmly. 'And it would have been very expensive to lift these slate floors. Natural fires are best in these downstairs rooms and the Esse runs two radiators upstairs and heats the kitchen. It's more than adequate with the night storage radiators in the other bedrooms. Don't fuss.'

She grinned at him. 'Are you married?'

'No,' he answered shortly. 'What's that got to do with central heating?'

'Nothing,' she answered, feeling another twinge of uneasiness. It was unlike Rob to be so—she tried to define his mood—so *preoccupied*; as if half of him were off somewhere else. Perhaps he had woman trouble and her question had touched a nerve. Certainly he was not on his usual cheerful form. 'Nothing at all. I'd better look at these firmly locked doors, suppose. Are you OK, Rob? Plenty of work coming in?'

'Too much, if anything.' He led the way back to the kitchen. 'I've fallen a bit behind schedule here, I'm afraid. The truth is, it's been an unusually dry summer and I've been giving the lads outside work on another site while I carried on inside here.'

'That's not a problem,' she said quickly, anxious lest he should think that she was criticising him. 'People can come and view, after all. You've done splendidly.' She watched as he indicated the door to the office, turned the knob, put his weight against it and pushed. 'Yes, well, that's not going anywhere, is it?'

'It's a lovely old oak door and I don't want it broken,' he said. 'Come outside and see the other door. It's sturdy but not particularly worth saving. That's the one I'd go for, I think. No point in smashing windows.'

Outside, on the path which ran along the side of the house, Maudie tried the unyielding door and attempted to peer through the grubby window. A fold of cloth obscured her view and she shook her head as she stepped back, dusting her hands.

'I take your point. What shall we do?'

'Better leave it to me,' he said. 'I'll get it opened, now I have your permission. We'll do a little damage as possible but I'll need some time to get it sorted inside.'

'That's fine,' she said. 'I'll tell Mr Cruikshank. There's one thing, though. If it's been locked up since the tenants left there might be things which need sorting out. I suppose you could try to break it down whilst I'm here. If we're going to have a new door it wouldn't make much

difference, would it?’

He frowned thoughtfully. ‘I’d rather not leave the house with a broken door,’ he said. ‘Anyone would be able to get in, wouldn’t they? I wouldn’t want to arrive tomorrow morning and find the house full of New Age travellers. There’s a party of them up on Davidstow, I’ve heard. Give me a chance to think about this. I want to be able to leave the place secure whatever I do.’

‘Sounds reasonable. Telephone me when you’ve done it and if you need me I’ll come down.’

‘I’ll do that.’ He looked at her, smiling a little. ‘I promise not to sneak off with any treasures I find.’

She was pleased to see him relaxed again, less touchy. ‘In that case,’ she said, ‘why don’t we go down to the pub and have a pint and a sandwich before I go home?’

He laughed. ‘Now there’s an offer I can’t refuse. I’ll lock up and be right with you.’

Driving back towards Launceston Maudie found herself rehearsing different ways of telling Selina that Moorgate was to be sold. Her fear was that, in a fit of misguided nostalgia, Selina might insist that she and Patrick should buy it. Despite the injection of cash from the sale of the London house, Maudie knew that her stepdaughter was not in a position to attempt such a quixotic act; not unless they intended to sell up and move to Cornwall. The idea of Selina living on the edge of Bodmin Moor made Maudie snort with laughter; childhood holidays were one thing, real life another. Selina's smartly shod feet required a pavement; her love of entertaining and being entertained demanded delicatessens, theatres, restaurants. No, it was unlikely that she and Patrick would make any such sacrifice. The real problem was that Selina might insist that Moorgate should be kept as a place for holidays; that she might try to persuade Patrick that it was their duty to save it.

Looking out at the bleak moorland landscape, the black, twisted thorn, the dying, rusted bracken, Maudie suddenly felt all the melancholy of the season. She knew that she was, once again, to be cast in the role of wicked stepmother. Patricia and Simon, happily settled in Australia, would receive letters and telephone calls reporting this latest calumny, and Selina's boys—Chris and Paul—would be prevailed upon to add their weight of disapproval. As she slowed to allow a sheep to meander across the road, Maudie shrugged. Patricia was too far away to lend more than a token support; as for the boys, they didn't give a damn about Moorgate and were too busy with their own lives to take action. For once, however, Posy might be on her mother's side.

Rain misted the windscreen, drifting across from the sea in thick vaporous clouds smothering the granite outcrops in its clammy embrace, obliterating the road ahead.

'Damn,' muttered Maudie, switching on the car's sidelights and turning the windscreen wiper to intermittent. 'Damn and blast.'

Driving carefully she cast her mind back to brighter, sunnier days; a glorious summer twenty years before, when she and Daphne had spent the holidays at Moorgate. Daphne's daughter, Emily, had been unwell and Selina, committed to assisting with the boys' school trip to Venice, had been let down by the au pair who was supposed to be looking after Posy. It was Hector who had suggested that they should all go to Moorgate: Maudie and Posy, Daphne and Emily. The sea air and walks on the moor would be good for them, he'd said and somehow, it had all been arranged—although Selina was clearly unhappy at the plan. Hector and Philip, Daphne's husband, appeared at intervals—punctuation points in the long, slow hot days which slid seamlessly past. By day the house had been filled with sunshine; the flagged floors shockingly cold to hot, bare feet; by night the bedrooms were washed by moorland air and moonlight.

Slowing the car a little, peering into the mist ahead, Maudie remembered the old wooden swing in the shade of the escallonia hedge where Emily would sit, idly pushing herself

dreaming about her forthcoming wedding, whilst Posy splashed about in the paddling pool squealing with delight. Daphne would lie, recumbent on the old plaid rug, her book open across her chest, her eyes closed, as Maudie poured iced lemonade from a tall, frosted jug, the sunshine burning her bare arms. Later they would have an early supper in the huge, cosy kitchen; swimsuits drying on the rack above the old solid-fuel Aga; Posy, newly scrubbed, drowsing in her high chair; Emily, bright-faced, chin in hands, describing her wedding-gown; Daphne moving quietly between table and range, cutting new brown bread, placing a bowl of sweet, wine-red raspberries beside a bowl of thick, crusted, yellow clotted cream.

Darling Emily: what an enchanting bride she'd been at the end of that magical summer drifting up the aisle in cloudy white, with small Posy staggering behind, the train clutched in hot, determined fists, the wreath of flowers askew over her eyes. Darling Emily, slender and fragile beside Tim's tall, broad-shouldered figure. The next summer they'd returned to Moorgate. Emily was pregnant and Tim had agreed that the country air would do her good. This time, however, Selina and the boys had been members of the party and Maudie and Daphne feared ructions. By sheer good fortune, some of Selina's friends had taken a cottage at Rock and the boys had been loud in their insistence that it was more fun to be on the golden sands with their chums than to be impeded by two old women, one young pregnant one and their small, tiresome sister. Reluctantly Selina had given way before the demands of her sons and her friends so that, once again, the four were left much to their own delightful devices. For a few years the pattern had continued, until Hector had decided that Moorgate should be let on a long lease.

Young though she'd been, Posy insisted that she could remember those summers, had even once, whilst staying with friends, insisted on being driven over to see Moorgate. The long-suffering tenants had given them tea and let Posy show her friends over the house. Her love for Moorgate was more genuine than Selina's, and Maudie dreaded breaking the news to her. She hoped that Posy was too involved with her friends and her studies to be truly miserable, but it would not be a pleasant task. Posy was her darling; the baby who had broken down her defences, shattered her pride and made her vulnerable.

'We all have our favourites,' Daphne had said once, her eyes on Emily's sleeping, peaceful face. 'It's only natural, I suppose. The thing is not to let it show to the others.'

Emily had been everyone's favourite, arriving long after Daphne and Philip had given up hope of having children. She had Daphne's short nose and small square chin, her cornflower blue eyes and blonde hair. Even if she hadn't been such a miracle child she would still have been special. She was beloved of old and young alike; sweet-tempered, merry-hearted, generous, fun.

'She's such a darling,' people exclaimed—and so she was. Daphne brooded over her with an odd mixture of delight, relief and gratitude that touched Maudie's heart.

'You are besotted with that child,' she'd said—and Daphne had looked almost guilty, defensive.

'She might so easily have been a boy,' she'd answered.

'You'd have loved him just the same,' Maudie had suggested, surprised.

'Yes,' she'd replied quickly. 'Yes, of course. Only I'd always so longed for a little girl, you

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