

The
HOUSE of
TIDES

a novel

HANNAH RICHELL

“If you love classic family sagas, in English settings, full of country-house atmosphere and complex relationships, you’ll love this story.”

—*Better Homes and Gardens*





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TIDES



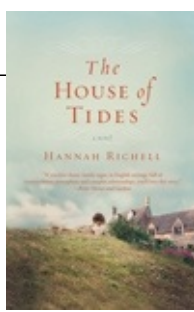
A Novel

HANNAH RICHELL



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[Begin Reading](#)
[Table of Contents](#)
[Newsletters](#)
[Copyright Page](#)

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For M, J & G

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Fever of the heart and brain,
Sorrow, pestilence, and pain,
Moans of anguish, maniac laughter,
All the evils that hereafter
Shall afflict and vex mankind,
All into the air have risen
From the chambers of their prison;
Only Hope remains behind.

—From “The Masque of Pandor”
Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

Prologue

A half-empty train rattles through fields and farmland toward the gray concrete sprawl of the city. There is a young woman huddled in the farthest corner of the last carriage. Her hair is like a veil, hiding her tears. In her pocket is an antique brooch. Her fingers brush its cold arc before flipping it over and over in time to the rhythmic clatter of wheels on track. When she can resist no longer, she releases the clasp and stabs the pin deep into the flesh of her palm.

It's agony, but she won't stop. She presses the needle deeper still, until warm blood streams down her wrist and splashes crimson onto the carriage floor.

Finally, the train jerks and slows. Brakes squeal.

As they reach their destination she pushes the bloodied brooch deep into her coat pocket, grabs her bag, and then drops down onto the platform.

People dart about her. Two women shriek and embrace. A tall man in a turban races for the ticket barriers. A spotty teenager hops from foot to foot, gazing up at the departures board as he shoves crisps into his mouth. Everything around her seems to buzz and hum while she just stands there on the platform, a single fixed point, breathing deeply.

Signs for the Underground point one way but she ignores them, hefting her bag onto her shoulder and making for the street exit. She strikes out across a busy pedestrian crossing and turns left for the bridge. Big Ben looms in the distance; it is three minutes to twelve.

She walks with purpose; she knows where she is going and what has to be done. But then she sees the river, and the sight of it, a shifting black mass carving its way through the city, makes her shudder. Whenever she's imagined this moment the water has been gray and flat, not dark and viscous like seeping oil. But it doesn't matter now. There is no going back.

She stops halfway across the bridge and leans her rucksack up against the wall. Then, with a quick glance about, she scoots up and over the barrier until she is clinging to the other side of the balustrade.

The toes of her shoes balance precariously on the concrete ledge. She grips the wall, wincing as her bleeding palms scrape the stone, and then twists so that she is facing the water below. The wind blows her hair, whipping it across her face and stinging her eyes until hot tears form. She blinks them back.

"Hey!" She hears a cry behind her. "Hey, what are you doing?"

She is out of time.

She locks her gaze on a sea of gray buildings on the far horizon and, with a final breath, lets go of the balustrade. Then she is falling, falling, falling.

Any breath left in her body is punched out by the ice-cold water. She fights the urge to kick and struggle, instead surrendering herself to the inky blackness, letting the weight of her clothes take her stone-like toward the bottom.

By the time Big Ben chimes midday she is gone, lost to the murky depths below.

Chapter 1

Dora

Present Day

IT IS LATE WHEN DORA ARRIVES HOME. She lets herself in through the heavy metal door of the old button factory and climbs the three flights of stairs to her flat. The stairwell is cold and gloomy, but as her key turns in the door she hears music playing and the welcoming sound of saucepans and cutlery clattering from deep within the kitchen.

“Babe, I’m back,” she calls out, slipping off her killer shoes and kicking them into an ever-growing pile of footwear by the front door. A wet nose and huge brown eyes appear from behind the shabby leather sofa, followed by a long wagging tail. “Hello, Gormley,” she says, giving the dog an affectionate pat on the rump. “Busy day?”

Dan’s chocolate-brown Labrador wags his tail again, yawns, and slinks back into the lounge.

“Don’t come into the kitchen,” she hears Dan yell. “I’m cooking...something experimental...vegan Blumenthal...you’re going to love it.”

Dora smiles; they both know Dan doesn’t cook. She rifles through the post on the table by the door, finding nothing but bills. “I didn’t think we had any food?” she asks suspiciously.

“Er...we didn’t. Oh shit!” There’s the sound of something smashing.

“You went shopping?”

“Sort of. Just don’t come in yet; it’s nearly ready.”

Dora walks into the living space, a large, white open-plan room flanked by floor-to-ceiling windows on opposite sides. As she moves through the room she startles at a movement out of the corner of her eye, but calms as she realizes it’s just her own pale reflection in the windows; she’s feeling jumped. Obediently she remains in the room, switching on a couple of lamps, returning a few of Dan’s splayed art books to the shelves next to the television. Gormley is already curled up on his bed next to the sofa, one eye lazily tracking her movements. Dora looks around at the room, wondering when it will ever really feel like *their* place. It’s been six months and they’ve barely scratched the surface of the enormous project they took on. The exposed brick walls have been painted white and the floorboards sanded and polished. It’s clean and spacious, but it feels a little like an exhibition space waiting to be filled. They just haven’t had the time to turn it into a home; it’s been one thing after another.

“Right, you can come in now,” she hears Dan shout.

Dora pushes the door to the kitchen; it sticks momentarily on the torn lino until she gives it a firm

shove with her shoulder and it flies open with a bang.

Dan is standing by the wonky trestle table currently masquerading as their kitchen table. He indicates with a flourish two steaming bowls of tomato soup and a plate of buttered white sliced bread. She can see the open soup tin on the counter behind him. She walks across and puts her arms around his neck, kissing his stubbly chin.

“That’s the nicest thing I’ve seen all day.”

“That bad, huh? How did the presentation go?”

Dora shrugs. “Hard to tell; the clients weren’t giving much away.”

“But your boss was pleased?”

“I think so. He’ll be more pleased if we sign them. It would be a real coup for the agency—good for me too,” she adds, “as I’d be on the account.”

Dan releases her from his big embrace and ushers her to the table. “Come on, let’s eat before it gets cold.”

Dora seats herself at the table and reaches for a slice of bread. “Thanks for this.”

“It’s nothing, really.” He pushes a mug of tea toward her. “Are you okay? You look a little pale.”

“I’m fine; it’s just been a really long day. I’m tired.”

He gazes at her with concern. “You’re working too hard.”

“I’m fine,” she says again, with a shrug. “Anyway, how was *your* day?” she asks, steering the conversation away from her. “Did you get much done?”

It’s as if someone has switched a light on in Dan’s face. “It was terrific. I had a huge breakthrough. I know exactly what my next piece is going to be. And Kate Grimshaw rang me back to confirm her order for three of the sculptures from my showcase, so I’m certainly going to be busy over the next few months.”

“That’s great!” Dora raises her mug, and he clinks his against it. “Really, it’s wonderful news. They both know Dan has been waiting for inspiration to strike. His last set of bronze sculptures showed at a tiny London gallery and were picked up by a noted art collector, but ever since he’s been struggling with the pressures of following up with something better. Dora knows he’s been privately agonizing over the delay, so it’s a relief to hear he has, at last, found a project he’s excited about. “Do you want to tell me about the new piece?”

Dan shakes his head. “Sorry, not this one. It’s a surprise.”

“Intriguing. I take it the back room is out of bounds for now then?”

“Yes, and it’s a studio, remember, not a back room?”

She smiles down into her bowl and they fall into a comfortable silence, slurping at their soup until they are both staring down at empty dishes.

“I’ll wash up,” she offers.

“Just a minute. I got you these,” he says, holding out two brown capsules in the palm of his hand.

“What are they?” she asks, prodding them with suspicion. “They look like horse tranquilizers.”

“Vitamins. Mrs. Singh at the corner shop says you should start taking them.” He beams up at her and Dora takes them from his outstretched hand, placing them next to her empty bowl.

“Thanks,” she says, wondering how many people he has already blabbed the news to. They really do need to talk. Not now, though, not when he’s so happy about his work. It can wait.

She wakes later that night to the sound of rain drumming on the roof above their bed and Dan scuttling around the room in a panic.

“Do you need a hand?” she asks, propping herself up on one elbow in the darkness.

“No, stay there where it’s warm. I’m fine.” She hears him trip over a saucepan and the sound of water splashing across the floor. “Effing-useless roof.”

She smiles in the darkness and listens as he artfully rearranges the carefully cultivated collection of bowls and pans until the sound of water dripping on tin begins to mingle with the noise of the rain outside.

“It will be summer soon,” she tries cheerfully.

“Hmmm...” is all he says, which worries her. He is usually the optimistic one. The agent who had shown them around the crumbling old factory had proudly declared the space a “New York–style loft apartment,” but they had all known it was marketing flannel. Really they were standing in the dingy and dilapidated top floor of an old East End factory. It had potential, and could provide Dan with the work space he needed to create his massive bronze sculptures, but it was still a long way from the beautiful, contemporary home Dora had transformed it into in her mind’s eye when they had first looked around. The reality was harder to live with, and ever since they bought the old place it has been Dan who’s reassured her through her worries about rotten floorboards, leaky plumbing, and the hole in the roof.

“Come back to bed. We’ll deal with it in the morning,” she tries.

“We’ve been saying that for five months.”

“I know. But we will, okay?”

Dan gives up and dives under the covers, rubbing his cold feet against hers until she yelps. “Sorry you’re just so lovely and warm.”

She turns her back on him and nestles into the reassuring curve of his body. They are two proverbial spoons. His arms slide around her waist and his hands, rough and strong, come to rest on her stomach. She can feel his breath slow against her neck and realizes he is already drifting off. She envies him his ability to fall asleep so easily. She hasn’t been able to sleep like that for a very long time, and now that she is awake, her mind is suddenly buzzing.

First she is reliving the Sunrise Cereals pitch at work. She had thought it went well, but now lying there in the darkness, listening to the rain, she starts to wonder. She knows if she starts to mull over it she will be awake for hours, so instead she tries to concentrate on relaxing her toes, like those self-help books say to do when you can’t sleep. Start at your toes and work your way up your legs, relaxing each part of your body in turn. By the time you get to your nose you’re guaranteed to be asleep. She is sure she’s heard that somewhere.

But she has only reached her knees, which prove very difficult to focus on, let alone relax, when Dora feels a cold, creeping panic trickling up from her guts. It’s been the same thing the last few nights: a chilling grip on her insides and the sudden, overwhelming sensation of the breath being squeezed from her body, as if something heavy is lying on top of her, crushing her into the mattress. Dora’s heart begins to thud wildly in her rib cage.

“Dan?” she says into the darkness.

There is no answer but the drumming of the rain and the loud beating of her heart.

“Dan, are you awake?” She nudges him.

“Mmmmm...,” he groans. “No.”

“We need to talk.” She can’t bear to lie there alone a second longer.

Dan’s arms tighten around her waist. “Go to sleep. We’ll sort the roof in the morning.”

“It’s not the roof I want to talk about.” She swallows down the acid taste in her mouth. “It’s the baby.”

She can feel his arms stiffen slightly and his breath pause momentarily against her neck. “What about the baby?” he murmurs.

“I think we need to talk about it.”

“Right now?”

“Yes.”

Dan raises himself up on one elbow in the dark and looks at her. “What’s up?”

She takes a deep breath and tries to control her trembling limbs. “It’s like we’re just drifting along out of control, letting life wash over us. I think we should decide whether we actually want this or not. It’s such a huge responsibility, having a baby. What I mean is, how can we even think about raising a child when we don’t even have a dry place to live?” Dora can hear the hysterical edge in her voice.

Dan is quiet for a moment. “We’ll get the flat sorted. Don’t worry. These new commissions will help the cash flow. Now it’s spring we can get the roof fixed, and then we’ll tackle the kitchen and the bathroom. After that it’s just cosmetic stuff.” He stifles a yawn. “We always knew this place was going to be a long-term project. I thought you were up for it?”

“I was, I mean, I *am*,” she corrects. “This isn’t about the flat. Not really. I mean, it is, but it’s more than that.” She swallows. “Don’t you ever wonder if you’re ready to be a parent?”

Silence fills the room.

“I’m not sure,” she continues in a small voice, “if I want to be a mother. It’s such a responsibility. We wouldn’t be a couple anymore. We’d be...a family.”

Dan sighs. “I’m sure every new parent feels this way, Dora. It’s perfectly natural. I know it wasn’t planned”—he gives another yawn—“but it’s exciting, don’t you think? A family.” He pauses for a moment. “That sounds good to me.”

Dora shifts slightly in his arms, turning to stare at the emptiness above their heads. Things are always more simple for Dan. He isn’t weighed down by baggage or tortured by his past. That’s what she loves about him. But her life isn’t as straightforward as his. It isn’t black and white. It’s shades of gray, like a storm-cloud oil painting hanging above a fireplace. How could a man like Dan, a man with lightness in his heart and a confidence in the future, understand what she feels?

“Dora, is this about your family?”

She nods in the darkness but cannot speak.

“I know it was terrible. I know, from the little you’ve talked about, that you still live with it. Believe me, Dora, I want to understand. I really do.”

She lies very still.

“But this is a chance for you to move on, don’t you see?” She can feel his grip tighten around her waist and his hands stroke her stomach with gentle, reassuring movements. “It’s a new life...a new start...us and our baby. We’ll be our very own family. Don’t you want that?”

Dora doesn’t know what to say. Of course she wants a life with Dan. She loves him and their life together in London. He is her rock. And yet, at the same time, she is utterly paralyzed. Years have passed and yet she still feels like the same girl she was all those years ago. Nothing has changed, not really. How can she even consider the enormous responsibility of motherhood when she has proved so catastrophically irresponsible in the past? And how can she contemplate starting a family of her own when the one she grew up in—the one she thought would be there for her forever—has been torn apart so completely? The truth is that she doesn’t know if she deserves a family of her own. She doesn’t deserve a fresh start with Dan. She doesn’t deserve happiness. But how can she tell him that?

“Go to sleep,” Dan murmurs into her neck. “Everything always seems worse at night. We’ll talk tomorrow.” His grip loosens on her slightly, and she can tell that she is losing him to sleep again.

“You’ll feel better in the morning,” he whispers.

“Night,” she says before turning in his arms to gaze into the blackness of the bedroom. Dan is wrong. She knows she won’t feel better in the morning. She has spent the last ten years willing each morning to be better...to feel better. And each morning she awakens to the sickening knowledge that she is to blame for the disintegration of her family. She feels, sometimes, as though they’ve abandoned her, as though she’s been cut loose and left to drift through life on her own. But then she remembers she is to blame for that. It is her fault they have been scattered like the floating debris from a shipwreck. She feels the guilt of it like a deep, throbbing pain.

As Dan begins to gently snore, Dora closes her eyes. She wants sleep to claim her too, but she knows it is a long way off. Instead, she lets her mind wander down the pathways of her past. Slowly, she drifts down a wide tree-lined drive. She can almost hear the wind rushing through the tall sycamore trees and smell the salt carried on the breeze. She rounds a corner in her mind and there it is, the rambling old farmhouse standing high upon the Dorset cliffs, its whitewashed walls gleaming like a beacon in the sunshine. As she draws closer she sees the tangle of ivy creeping up its exterior, curling around the eaves of the gray slate roof. She drifts closer still and sees the solid oak front door bleached with weather and age. She pushes on the door, the warm smooth wood familiar under her fingers, and enters a hallway, cool and dark and haunted with the footsteps of a generation of Tideys. She walks past an open door, ignoring the elegant dark-haired woman bent over a desk of books and papers. She turns away from the sound of giggles echoing down the creaking staircase and passes a handsome, fair-haired man seated in the drawing room peering at the newspaper spread across his lap. Instead she makes for the conservatory where the scent of roses and lilacs wafts enticingly through the open doors. Drifting through, she wanders down the sprawling lawn toward the siren’s song of the sea crashing far away onto the cliffs below.

As she reaches a twisted old cherry tree down in the orchard she turns and studies the house, gazing up at the wide sash windows. She stares at them, searching for answers deep within their shadows, but the glass is blackened by the glare of the sun.

Clifftops. The house she once called home.

Dan shifts and sighs in his sleep and as Dora moves her hands onto her still-flat belly and contemplates her future, she suddenly understands. She cannot hide any longer. She must return to Clifftops.

Chapter 2

Helen

Sixteen Years Earlier

HELEN STOOD IN THE HALLWAY and surveyed the ever-growing pile of suitcases, bags, shoes, and coats. It would be just fine by her if someone decided to cancel Easter. The packing was bad enough. There were the piles of washing to sort through, a fridge to clear, the airing cupboard to dig around in for long-lost beach towels, and then the challenge of squashing everything into the groaning trunk of the car. Add to that the fact that Richard was still sitting in the study on a last-minute work phone call and it was enough to make Helen want to scream long and loudly at someone.

She entered the kitchen to empty the trash and found Dora sitting at the kitchen table gazing dreamily into the garden over her bowl of cereal.

“You’re not *still* eating those cornflakes, are you?” she asked as she wrestled with the overflowing garbage bag.

“Uh-huh.”

“Well, hurry up,” she said, finally pulling the bag from its holder and tying it off. “I need to get the dishwasher on.”

Dora nodded and raised a token spoonful of cereal to her lips. Satisfied, Helen left the room and went to find Cassie. She’d assumed she was upstairs packing but when she finally came upon her, she found her elder daughter sprawled across her bed, half dressed and reading a paperback while she sucked lazily on the ends of her hair. It was the final straw.

“I thought I told you we had to be on the road by ten?” Helen yelled. “We’re going to get stuck in traffic.” She looked around at Cassie’s messy room in exasperation. “And didn’t I ask you to tidy the room up last night? You haven’t even *started* to pack!”

“Relax, Mum. It’ll take me five minutes. I really don’t know what the big deal is. It’s just a week for Nana and Granddad’s. You and Dad are acting like we’re going on some polar expedition!”

Sarcasm, that was new. Helen saw Cassie’s eyes flick back to the book in her hands and had to resist the urge to fly across the room and hurl it out of the bedroom window. Instead she took a deep breath and counted to three. At eleven, Cassie was a bright girl, and she already knew how to push her buttons.

“Well, I’m not going to ask you again,” Helen warned as she left the room. It was a weak parting shot, but she couldn’t think of anything better to threaten her with; as attractive as the thought was

they couldn't exactly leave her behind.

She closed the door on Cassie and retreated down the corridor to her own bedroom. A battered suitcase lay open on the bed. She still needed to decide whether to pack a dress or another pair of trousers. Trousers would be more practical, but she knew her mother-in-law expected them all to make an effort on Easter Sunday. Helen eyed a green silk dress hanging in the closet, then a pair of black cords, before caving in and placing the dress on top of the growing pile of clothes. She could at least *attempt* to keep the peace with Daphne this year.

"That's nice; have I seen it before?" Richard asked, entering the room and glancing at the dress now lying on top of the open suitcase.

Helen rolled her eyes. "Only about a million times."

"Oh...well it's lovely. Are we nearly ready to go?"

Helen bristled. *She* wasn't the one who had been on the phone all morning. "The girls are still dawdling," she said, struggling with the zipper on the suitcase until Richard came across and leaned heavily on it for her, "but we should be on the road in half an hour or so." It was optimistic, but she realized there was a silver lining to their delay. She really wasn't in any great hurry to get down to Dorset and start the week of polite chitchat, country walks, and sedate cups of tea with Richard's parents. She knew it was a Tide family tradition, everyone together at the big house for Easter, and she knew how much Richard loved taking her and the girls to his childhood home, but just once, she longed to spend the holidays quietly at home, a bit of shopping, some reading, puttering around the kitchen, maybe even some gardening. Still, there was no point dreaming; it would never happen. When it came to family traditions, Daphne always got her way.

"Mum's very excited about our visit," said Richard, as if reading her mind. "Apparently she's been baking all week. And Dad's thinking about taking the girls sailing."

"Lovely," said Helen, forcing herself to return her husband's smile. She would go along with it, as she always did, for the rest of them. It was only a week at Clifftops, after all.

Forty-five minutes later, after a final sweep of the house, a reshuffling of the trunk, and a last-minute panic over Dora's missing bathing suit, the Tides locked up their North London home and clambered into the car. Miraculously, they made it all the way to Winchester before the first sounds of bickering broke out in the backseat.

"It's not fair," whined Dora. "I never get to choose the music." Helen could see her wielding a new boy band album in the rearview mirror.

"That's because you've got rubbish taste," said Cassie.

"I have not."

"Have too."

"Your turn to referee," Richard muttered under his breath as he indicated and overtook yet another trailer creeping its way west for Easter.

Helen twisted round in the passenger seat and regarded each of her daughters in turn. Cassie was hunched in the far corner of the backseat, her head turned toward the window, her face obscured by a curtain of blond hair. She was stubborn and Helen already knew she wouldn't look at her. She turned instead to regard Dora, her younger daughter, who stared up at her with imploring green eyes from beneath her wonky home-cut hairstyle. Helen sighed. "Will you two settle down? Your father's trying to concentrate on the road."

"But it's my turn to choose..." Dora's cheeks blushed red.

“If you girls don’t stop squabbling there’ll be no music at all.”

~~“B-b-but...” Dora fell silent under her mother’s glare, and Helen turned back to the front.~~

“You okay, love?” Richard lifted a hand from the steering wheel and placed it on her arm.

“Uh-huh.” She nodded, watching an endless ribbon of cats’ eyes speed toward them. She was getting one of her headaches and frankly, she’d have preferred a bit of peace and quiet to the relentless thud of pop music; still, it was definitely preferable to one of Cassie’s tantrums. She sighed quietly to herself; in twelve years the trip had never gotten any easier.

She could still remember the very first time she had traveled with Richard to Clifftops. It had been a bleak day in March, the sky so thick with clouds you wondered whether the sun would ever shine again. She’d sat in the car nervously braiding and rebraiding the leather fringe on her handbag. Richard drummed percussion on the steering wheel with his fingers and they sped ever closer to the house he had grown up in, to meet the parents she would soon, should everything go according to plan, be calling her in-laws.

“They’re going to love you,” he reassured her. “Almost as much as I do.”

“And the baby?” she asked, stroking her barely there bump protectively.

Richard’s glance followed her hands before returning to the road. “Let me handle that. It’ll be fine. Trust me.”

And she had, implicitly, which was strange because they’d only really known each other a matter of months. Helen had been in her final year of university, studying as a classics undergraduate. Richard—a little older—was finishing up five years of his architecture degree to start a placement at his father’s firm. They’d met, predictably, where most students did: in the pub. And they had hit it off right away.

Richard was tall and fair-haired with clear blue eyes, broad shoulders, and the sort of grown-up confidence that comes from being a beloved only child. Helen had noticed him watching her from across the bar. She’d gambled and smiled at him and he told her later that it was that first smile that had got him, hook, line, and sinker. Love at first sight, that’s what he called it. He’d made his way over to their table and introduced himself. She’d liked the way he did it, straightforward and honest—no corny pickup lines, no leering and winking at his friends. Right from the start, he had seemed good and honest and kind. And if what little experience she’d had with men up until then had taught her anything, it was that those qualities were very rare indeed.

They’d dated for a few weeks and it had been fun. He’d taken her to rugby matches and offered her his coat as she’d shivered in the stands. He booked tables at romantic candlelit restaurants and gave her a crash course in architecture by escorting her around the city pointing out the buildings and styles he particularly admired. They’d argued bitterly over politics and could never seem to find a film that both wanted to see, but all was forgotten when they drew together at the end of the night, their differences seeming to ignite a passion that was best served in bed. Dating Richard was a new experience for Helen; he seemed far more grown up than her previous boyfriends, more attentive and self-assured. Even when she had discovered, with stomach-clenching terror, that she was pregnant, he’d been a rock. She could tell from the pallor of his face and the slight tremble in his hands that it was a shock, yet he’d immediately said all the right things. It was her decision to make. He would support her no matter what. And once she’d decided to keep the baby, his proposal had followed just a week later, a beautiful antique diamond ring winking up at her from across the table of a local Italian restaurant.

“It’s the right thing to do, Helen. Let’s give this baby the best start we can. Let’s create a life together. You and I.”

Helen hadn’t been sure at first. It was scary enough deciding whether to keep the baby. Motherhood was one thing...did she really need to be a wife too? “Lots of people have children these days and don’t get married,” she’d said. “We can be one of those terribly modern couples who—”

“No, Helen,” he’d insisted, “I love you. If we’re going to have a child, let’s at least do it right.”

“Where will we live? What will we do for money? I was going to travel...get a job...”

“I’ve got some savings. My family...well, we’re comfortable. We’ll manage. We’ll have this baby and then you can start your career when the baby’s a bit older. It’s not a life sentence, you know,” he’d tried to joke. “You don’t have to give everything up.” He had been so reassuring. He’d slipped the ring onto her finger with a broad grin and almost immediately begun to discuss the arrangements for a trip down to Dorset to meet his parents, leaving Helen with nothing to do but stare in disbelief at the large jewel sparkling extravagantly on her ring finger.

They’d driven straight to the beach, that very first time, so they could stretch their legs after the long journey. Richard had been hoping for a romantic walk along the shore, but the lead-colored sea lashed against the rocky beach and a bitter wind raged at them, tearing at their coats and clothes. They stumbled and shivered their way along the shoreline until they both admitted defeat and hurried back to the car, heads bowed.

“Well, that was a great success,” joked Richard, fiddling with the car heater. “Nowhere quite like England in the spring, is there?”

Helen laughed, despite her nerves, and put one hand on his warm knee.

He drove them back through the sleepy seaside hamlet of Summertown, past tiny candy-colored cottages and down treacherous, twisting lanes until at last they passed through a set of discreet wrought-iron gates and up a long and winding driveway. Their tires crunched loudly on gravel as they sped past the wind-whipped sycamores lining the route up to the house.

“There she is!” Richard exclaimed, pointing to a large stone building looming in the distance. “There’s Clifftops. We’re home.”

Helen could still remember how her breath had caught in her throat. She wasn’t exactly sure what she’d been expecting, but it certainly wasn’t the beautiful old house that had darted in and out of view between the branches of the windswept trees. It was a wonderful nineteenth-century farmhouse, perfectly proportioned and spread across the promontory in an attractive L-shape, as if the long stone building had tired of the sea’s buffeting embrace and turned one shoulder away from it. Much of the white stone exterior was adorned with trailing ivy, which wrapped its way across the front of the house and all around the wide sash windows. In the exact center stood a carved stone arch that framed an ancient oak front door, worn smooth over the years. The house glowed from within, a warm orange light radiating from every visible window, while at either end of the long slate roof a chimney sent promising plumes of dove-gray smoke curling up into the darkening sky. Down the hillside Helen could just make out a long, sprawling lawn leading off to a gated fruit orchard, beyond which lay the whitecapped wash of the sea. She knew, without even stepping one foot inside the house, that the views would be spectacular. The house alone was heart-stoppingly lovely, the kind Helen had only read about in children’s stories, but it was made all the more dramatic for its isolated position on the windswept bluff overlooking Lyme Bay. To Helen it screamed of romantic, windswept trysts and secret smugglers’ encounters.

“You could have told me you were lord of the bloody manor!” she cried, cringing inwardly at the thought of her parents’ cramped suburban home.

“It’s not *that* big.” Richard laughed. “This angle is deceptive.”

“Huh!” she snorted.

He reached across and gave her hand a reassuring squeeze but as they approached, the house seemed to sprawl farther and farther across the promontory, rising up proudly against the skyline.

“I can see how it got its name,” she managed finally in a small voice, suddenly terrified at the prospect of meeting his parents and of spending two days in such imposing surroundings.

Thankfully, the reception inside the house was warmer than the one down on the beach. Daphne and Alfred Tide were delighted to see their son, and Helen found Richard’s father charming. Alfred was an elder version of his son: tall, broad-shouldered, with silver hair, an easy smile, and the same kind blue eyes as Richard. He pumped Helen’s hand up and down enthusiastically as she walked through the oak front door and gave Richard a cheeky, approving wink when he thought she wasn’t looking. Helen then turned to Daphne, Richard’s mother, and knew with just one look that the attractive, gray-haired lady standing before her would prove more difficult to impress. She had a strong, serious face, cornflower blue eyes, and the sort of posture that suggested training at a Swiss finishing school. She wore a cheap blue wool dress with a string of pearls and Helen, standing next to her in the best dress she owned, felt cheap and shabby by comparison. Daphne’s welcome had been warm enough, but Helen could feel the woman’s cool, appraising gaze sweep over her as she turned to answer more of Alfred’s exuberant questions; it was the predatory gaze of a mother scrutinizing her son’s partner for signs of weakness or incompatibility.

They’d taken afternoon tea in the drawing room in front of a roaring log fire that crackled and spouted in the large stone hearth. “It’s a little indulgent perhaps,” Alfred had half apologized as they’d settle themselves on the faded chintz sofas, “but it’s such a chilly day out there I thought a nice fire would be just the ticket.”

Helen had smiled and held her hands out to the flames, grateful for the warmth emanating from the grate as the four adults settled into the required social niceties. They covered off Richard and Helen’s drive down to Dorset, Daphne’s new appliquéd cushion covers, and the wild weather outside before Richard cleared his throat and told them he had a little announcement. Helen tensed and tried to ignore the worried glance Daphne threw Alfred.

He’d started with the good news. “Helen and I have decided to get married.”

“Well,” exclaimed Daphne, “my goodness. What a surprise!” Then after a pause, “My goodness...” she repeated, fiddling with the strand of pearls around her neck. She seemed to run out of words and looked across at her husband for help. Alfred began to clear his throat, but Richard interjected before he could speak.

“Helen is expecting.”

Alfred seemed to check himself at the news of the baby. He looked back at his wife helplessly.

“We know it’s all happening rather fast,” admitted Richard, looking from his mother to his father and then back to his mother, “and it’s going to take a little time for you both to get used to the idea but all you really need to know is that we love each other, we want to have this baby, and we’ve decided to get married this summer.”

The silence stretched on and on until, at last, Daphne found her voice. “Well, my darling, you’re right; this is all happening *very* fast. Goodness. Perhaps we should all have a little drink. What do you say, Alfie dear?”

Grateful for something to do, Alfred leapt into action. “Yes, yes, of course, Daffy. Jolly good idea. Whiskey? Sherry? Or perhaps we should open a bottle of bubbly? I think we’ve got some in the cellar...”

“I’d like a sherry,” Daphne replied quickly, clearly not quite ready to celebrate. “And I should think a little sherry would do Helen the world of good too,” she added, with a meaningful nod. “You look a little peaked, my dear.”

It seemed rude to say she didn’t drink sherry, so Helen consented with a small nod.

Alfred left the room at a near-sprint, and then seemed to take an age bringing the decanter and glasses through from the dining room. As Daphne sat smoothing the pleats on her skirt, Helen glanced about, drinking in the casual elegance of the drawing room. The furnishings were pretty and worn, faded floral fabrics and threadbare Persian rugs lending the room a cozy, lived-in feel. Next to an ornate carriage clock stood a vase of early-spring flowers trailing petals across the mantelpiece. A patterned cashmere shawl lay strewn across an ornate ottoman. Here and there were oddities and antiques: an old barometer hung upon one wall; tarnished silver picture frames scattered across a table; eclectic lamps and paintings drawing the eye, while nearest the door stood a sunken leather Chesterfield chair with a hint of stuffing bursting forth from one tatty arm. It was all very chic—perhaps a little busy for Helen’s personal taste, a little overdone, yet there was no denying that the overall effect was one of timeless good taste and style.

“Do sit down, dear,” Daphne urged Richard, who was pacing nervously by the French doors. Helen obeyed, sitting next to Helen and taking her hand in his. She could feel a slick of sweat on his palm, and they both startled as a log fell in the grate, sending sparks spiraling up the chimney.

Eventually Alfred returned, to everyone’s palpable relief. He passed around the glasses before offering up a halfhearted toast.

“To the happy couple.”

They drank in silence.

“So,” Daphne tried brightly. “Tell us a bit about yourself, Helen.”

The afternoon had limped slowly toward evening and the four adults had shared an uncomfortable meal in the rather grand wood-paneled dining room, seated at a large mahogany dining table set with white linen, silverware, and two enormous candlesticks, which cast an intimate, flickering golden glow around them. As Daphne served the meat and passed vegetables around the table and Richard began to talk through their plans, Helen watched a stream of molten wax trickle down one of the candlesticks and form a gluey pool on the starched white tablecloth.

“It makes sense for us to move to London as soon as possible. We’ll look for a flat before I start to work at the firm.” He reached across and gave Helen’s hand an affectionate squeeze. “It’s all very exciting.”

“Yes, and of course Helen can settle you in to your new home. It will be good for her to have a little project while she waits for the baby to arrive,” agreed Daphne.

Helen raised one sardonic eyebrow at Richard, but he missed the gesture, turning instead to reach for the wine.

“Of course you must talk to Edmund,” suggested Daphne. “He has places dotted all over London. I’m sure he would love to help you out. Why don’t you give him a ring, Richard?” Seeing Helen’s curious glance, she turned to her and explained, “Edmund’s my brother...Richard’s uncle. He’s a lovely man, very kind, and he dotes on Richard.”

Helen nodded politely as she chewed carefully on a green bean; privately she wondered what sort of family just happened to have *places dotted all over London*. Sitting here in his family home next to his parents, Richard suddenly seemed even more self-assured and grown up. She couldn’t help but

compare to the way he acted with Alfred and Daphne to how she felt when she returned to visit her own parents; no matter how hard she tried, she always felt more like a petulant teenager than a grown woman.

As the conversation moved along without her, Helen stole covert glances around the grand dining room. Along one wall hung an array of paintings, still lifes, and landscapes shimmering seductively in the candlelight. There was a mahogany sideboard, its surface cluttered with an array of items including an elegant silver champagne bucket that looked like it could use a good polish, a dusty old crystal decanter, a hand-carved wooden bowl overflowing with lemons, and a rather beautiful porcelain vase depicting two young women standing beneath the swaying fronds of a weeping willow. The artful chaos of the room contrasted wildly with her parents' own sterile dining room, with its hostess trolley and electric plate warmer and their best sherry glasses polished and permanently on display. She knew she was a world away from her own mother's careful domesticity.

The meal progressed slowly, but Helen forced herself to swallow everything Daphne put on her plate, even though her stomach churned with nausea, until, unable to take any more, she had excused herself, saying she was tired from the drive.

"Of course," agreed Daphne. "You must be exhausted. I've made up the blue room for you, my dear. I hope you'll be comfortable." Richard had already told her they'd be in separate rooms.

"I'm sure I will," she said. "Thank you, Mrs. Tide."

"Oh, please, call me Daphne. We're going to be family, after all." The false note of cheer fell flat in the room.

"Yes, thank you, Daphne... Well, good night, everyone."

"Good night," they cried valiantly at her retreating back.

Helen felt immense relief as she carried herself up the creaking stairs to the guest bedroom. She lay down fully dressed on the generous brass bed and breathed deeply. Upstairs, the faded grandeur continued. The bedroom was beautiful, its walls lined with flocked wallpaper in the softest duck-egg blue; a pretty dressing table stood in one corner, a velvet-covered stool pulled up in front of its speckled mirror. Dusty, leather-bound books lined a solid mahogany bookcase; a smattering of white lace cushions lay strewn across the window seat, perfectly positioned to look out across the garden below. A tiny jug of snowdrops had been placed on the bedside table, and at the foot of the bed lay a cozy hand-embroidered quilt, its colors bleached with age and sunshine. Away from the candlelight and conversation downstairs, Helen suddenly felt the night chill close in around her. She shivered and pulled the quilt up over her legs, drinking in the heady smells of fresh laundry, beeswax, and money.

It occurred to her then that entering Clifftops was like entering a whole new world, a world whose ground Helen wasn't quite sure of; it certainly felt as though it were shifting beneath her, as though she could trip or stumble at any given moment. She rested her hands on her belly, wondering for the millionth time if she'd made a mistake deciding to keep the baby, if she was truly ready to give up her dreams and ambitions for the tiny curled being nestled inside of her, if she was crazy to tie her life to a man she sometimes felt as though she barely knew, and to a family whose assured sense of place in the world appeared to be so far removed from her own cautious upbringing. And all the while she tried, in vain, to ignore the sounds of angry raised voices drifting up the staircase.

Things had seemed better in the morning. Everyone was more relaxed after a night's sleep and there was no further mention of weddings or babies as they took breakfast in the conservatory, but Helen was still grateful when Richard suggested the two of them take a walk.

“Why is it called Golden Cap?” she’d asked as they strolled up the coastal path running beside the house, clumsy in boots and billowing raincoats borrowed from Alfred and Daphne.

“Well, that cliff you can see ahead of us is the highest point on the south coast of England. It gets its name from the exposed yellow sandstone you can see at the summit. I’ve always thought of it like its golden crown.”

Helen gazed at the bald patch crowning the top of the cliff. In the gloom of the overcast skies it didn’t look golden, more of a dirty mustard color.

Richard read her mind. “It’s probably more impressive on a sunny day, but the views are great. It will be worth it, I promise.”

“So how long has your family lived at Clifftops?”

“Oh, quite awhile now,” Richard mused, reaching for her hand and tucking it into his. “It’s rather romantic, actually. Mum and Dad stumbled upon the house on their honeymoon. It was incredibly run down back then. The farmer who owned the estate had lost rather a lot of money and then been taken ill so it was little more than a ruin when my parents came upon it. Dad convinced the old chap to sell and then presented it to Mum as a wedding present. It’s been a labor of love for them both ever since. It’s a complete money pit of course, but they adore it. I think it was seeing their passion for Clifftops that first got me interested in architecture and restoration.”

Helen nodded. “It’s certainly an unusual old place.”

“Isn’t it? You do like it, don’t you?”

Helen sensed her answer was important to him. “It’s like nowhere else I’ve been before,” she replied, and she wasn’t lying. Wandering around the house felt like being on a film set; it was like a box of delights to roam and explore on a rainy afternoon. But an afternoon—a weekend even—she knew would be enough for her. Secretly she couldn’t help thinking she’d go mad rattling around such an isolated and drafty old house, with nothing but the tiny hamlet of Summertown within walking distance. Thank goodness their future was in London.

“Come on,” urged Richard suddenly, “I’ll race you to the top!”

“Wait!” protested Helen. “That’s not fair. I’m carrying two of us here...”

But Richard was already flying up the hillside, the wind inflating his Barbour coat and blowing his thick fair hair in such a comical fashion that Helen couldn’t help but laugh at his retreating figure.

It was as she had packed her bag later that afternoon that she’d heard voices from the garden below. She’d peeked out of the open window and seen Daphne and Alfred, side by side in the flower bed, running along the back of the house. They were clearing winter mulch from the plants.

“She seems so...quiet...aloof, perhaps. Do you think she really does love him?”

Alfred had muttered something she couldn’t hear.

“She’s lovely looking, beautiful I suppose,” Daphne had continued, “but I just can’t understand how he could have been so stupid. By all means, he’s a red-blooded young man; of course he’ll want to score his wild oats. I just thought we’d taught him better than that.”

“What’s clear to me is that we’ve taught him a sense of responsibility. I’m proud of the way he’s handling it,” Alfred countered.

Daphne lowered her voice, but Helen could still make out the words that followed. “He’s a good catch. Do you think she did this intentionally to trap him into marriage? And how does he know the baby is even his?”

Helen flushed an angry red but she couldn’t pull herself away.

“He’s no fool, love. And he says he loves her.”

“~~But Richard as much as admitted last night that they’ve only known each other for a matter of weeks. It’s sheer madness.~~”

“You’re forgetting though, buttercup, that I knew with you from day one,” Alfred replied, holding Daphne’s gaze.

“You old softie, come here.” As Alfred leaned in to the tender embrace of his wife, Helen withdrew from the window, an ugly churning feeling settling in the pit of her stomach.

How dare they presume she was nothing more than a grubby gold digger? How dare they think she had deliberately trapped their son? There she was, trying to do the right thing by the baby—by *the* grandchild—and they stood there accusing her of *that*? She was enraged. After all, things for Richard would carry on as planned. He would finish his architecture degree. He’d still be able to work at the family firm and carve out his illustrious career. No, it seemed obvious to Helen who was really trapped. It was *she* who would be giving up her dreams of travel and teaching, she who would be swapping smoky Parisian cafés and sultry Spanish sunshine for dirty diapers and sleepless nights. How dare they think her so pathetic and impoverished, so devious that she would stoop so low? Helen flung the rest of her belongings into her overnight bag. She couldn’t wait to get away from Clifftop and bloody Daphne Tide.

Things had moved quickly after that; Helen had graduated in the summer and she and Richard were married soon after in a quiet registry office ceremony in London. Cassie was born just a few months later—a tiny bundle of wrinkled pink skin, blue eyes, and fuzzy golden hair. As soon as she clapped her eyes on her daughter, Helen knew she’d done the right thing. There would be plenty of time for her career later. Then, it was simply enough to just hold her baby close and breathe in the warm, sweet scent of her. Motherhood brought with it an intense love like no other, organic and pure, and Helen felt transformed by it.

Their daughter had an equally softening effect on Daphne. To Helen’s surprise, she appeared at Helen’s bedside in London the day after the birth, carrying with her a small arrangement of late summer flowers.

“From the garden at Clifftops,” she’d explained to Helen as she handed them to a harried-looking nurse. “Put these in some water, would you?” She turned back to Helen. “May I?” she asked, holding out her arms for the baby, and Helen, swallowing back the urge to clasp her daughter even closer to her breast, handed her over.

“She’s beautiful,” Daphne cooed, offering the baby her little finger. “She looks just like her father.”

Helen allowed herself a thin smile of triumph and watched as Daphne pulled an extraordinary range of clownish faces at the baby.

“Tell me, why did you choose the name Cassandra?”

Helen shrugged. “I’ve always loved it. We’ll call her Cassie.”

Daphne gave a sniff. “I don’t know my classics as well as you, of course, but wasn’t Cassandra rather a tragic figure?”

“Yes, in the end. But she was a princess, one of King Priam’s daughters...and a prophet. Besides,” added Helen, seeing Daphne’s skepticism, “it’s only a name, after all.”

The two women fell into silence, both gazing admiringly at the snuffling bundle in Daphne’s arms.

“I’ve something else,” Daphne said suddenly. “Something you should keep for Cassandra until she’s a little older. It’s in my handbag, there.” Daphne indicated that Helen should open the bag, and

Helen reached across and pulled out a tiny leather jewelry box. She carefully undid the clasp. The inside, nestled on black velvet, was an exquisite antique brooch in the shape of a butterfly. The body of the insect was made from the finest gold filigree and encrusted with tiny diamonds, while the wings were formed from delicate sheets of shimmering mother-of-pearl. Helen held it up, twisting and turning it so that the diamonds dazzled under the harsh hospital lights.

“It’s beautiful.”

“Isn’t it. It’s the first piece of jewelry Alfred ever gave me. It belonged to his grandmother. Now I’d like Cassandra to have it—my firstborn grandchild. Will you keep it for her?”

“Of course.” Helen looked up at Daphne and smiled. “Thank you, it’s very kind.”

“Yes, well...” Daphne looked around, suddenly embarrassed. “Where on earth can those chaps have gotten to? It can’t take that long to find a coffee machine in this place, can it?”

Helen had carefully secreted the tiny jewelry box into her own bag before reaching out to reclaim her baby.

Eighteen months later, Dora had been born, and with the second arrival of the new generation of Tides came a deeper confirmation of Helen’s place within the family. Daphne and Alfred doted on the granddaughters; Helen only had to look at their faces to know she was, in part, forgiven for the “entrapment” of their son. Yet even twelve years on, Helen still never felt completely comfortable visiting the elegant old house. She still wandered through the rooms and hallways, unsure of her place within its walls and, if she were being really honest with herself, never really feeling quite good enough for Daphne’s perfect, blue-eyed boy.

“There it is!” exclaimed Richard, breaking through her memories. He pointed to a sparkling wash of ocean in the distance. “There’s the sea, girls, and look, the sun’s coming out.”

Dora leaned forward, pushing against the back of Helen’s seat. “I see it!”

Helen saw it too, and even though she wasn’t particularly looking forward to the holiday, she couldn’t fail to feel her spirits lift at the sight of the spectacular emerald-green valley of fields and forest sprawling down the hillside to meet the sea. She rolled down her window and let the fresh spring air wash over her. London suddenly seemed a long, long way away.

“Nearly there,” said Richard, navigating the car through twisting lanes lined with hedgerows bursting with primroses and wild daffodils, his foot heavy on the accelerator. Just a few hundred yards later they were crunching their way up the long driveway toward Clifftops.

It stood there, as it had for well over a hundred years, gleaming white against the pale blue sky and wholly unchanged since Helen’s first visit. As they approached, Helen could see the arched front door had been thrown open, and in its shadow stood Daphne and Alfred, side by side, waiting patiently to greet their guests. Helen wondered how they knew; did they stand there for hours, waiting for them to appear at the end of the driveway? The thought made her smile.

Richard saw the curve of her lips and patted her hand encouragingly. “Your palace awaits,” he said, addressing Cassie and Dora over his shoulder.

As soon as they pulled up beside the front steps Dora leapt out of the car and raced toward her grandparents. “Nana! Granddad! We’re here!” She hurled herself into Alfred’s waiting arms and shrieked with delight as he swung her up into the air.

“Your father’s going to put his back out one of these days,” muttered Helen to Richard as she

watched Alfred spin Dora about his waist. "She's getting too big for that."

"Oh, let him have his fun," said Richard gently.

It seemed Cassie wasn't going to wait around either. She grabbed her bag and stomped across the gravel to greet her grandparents while Helen and Richard still struggled with seat belts and an assortment of maps and sweets wrappers.

"Cassandra!" exclaimed Daphne, reaching out for her eldest granddaughter and pulling her into her embrace. "Look at you, so tall...and all that lovely long blond hair, so pretty. Isn't she pretty, Alfred?" Daphne took a step back and peered at Cassie until she shifted and lowered her eyes, uncomfortably under such close scrutiny.

"She certainly is," agreed Alfred, "just like Rapunzel. Hello, Cassie my girl. How are you?" He squeezed her tight while Dora bounced up and down beside him, giddy with excitement.

"Daphne, Alfred," said Helen, greeting them each at the door, "it's lovely to see you both. Happy Easter."

"And to you, my dear. How was the journey? Not too much traffic on the roads, I hope?"

"Oh not too bad. We're here now." Helen smiled politely.

"Well we're pleased to have you all, aren't we, Alfred?" Daphne pulled her cardigan a little closer around her shoulders and turned to look for her son. He was staggering toward them, laden under a collection of bags and buckets and spades. "Goodness, Richard dear," exclaimed Daphne, "leave all that. There's plenty of time to unpack. Come in, come in, I've made hot cross buns. You must all be gasping for a nice cup of tea."

"We are," agreed Dora. "We're all *gasping*. Mum and Dad had a huge row about whether to stop. Mum wanted to pull over but Dad said we should just push on!"

Helen felt her cheeks flush red.

Richard gave a little cough. "It wasn't a big row, Dora, just a little...*discussion*."

It was Daphne's turn to smile politely. "Well, never mind all that; let's get you inside, shall we? Cassandra, Pandora, follow me."

They trooped into the house, Helen hanging back to help Richard with the bags. "Why does she insist on calling them that? She knows the girls hate it," hissed Helen under her breath.

Richard shrugged. "It's what we called them, isn't it?"

Helen shrugged. She couldn't argue with that.

Helen didn't need to look around as she walked through the entrance hall toward the drawing room to know that everything would stand exactly as it had on her last visit, and the visit before that. There was the same smell of flowers and polish wafting on the air, the same worn Persian rugs spread across the flagstone floors. In the drawing room, amid the golden dust particles shimmering in the sunshine, she spied the ancient carriage clock ticking noisily away on the mantelpiece, the familiar faded wallpaper, and the usual creaking wooden furniture. Clifftops was like that. Nothing ever changed.

"Sit down!" said Daphne, hurriedly. "You must be exhausted. Make yourselves comfortable while I sort the tea. I'll just be a minute."

Helen sat herself on one of the chintz sofas, sinking into an eclectic mix of scatter cushions, most of which Helen knew Daphne had made herself. Across the room Cassie slumped into the sunken leather chair, the one nearest the door. Richard ruffled her hair affectionately as he passed by, before seating himself on the sofa opposite Helen. Then Dora launched herself at Richard, who laughed and pulled her onto his lap. With that one simple action Helen instantly saw the growing gulf between her two daughters. Dora, at nine, was still so naive and child-like, while Cassie seemed to be growing sharper, more independent and self-aware by the day.

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