

## THE HIDDEN GIRL

Hannah sniffed. The air was so fresh.

She took a deep breath, not quite believing they were finally here.

Phase one completed. Phase two to begin tomorrow.

Tall weeds dipped and danced in the breeze along the edge of the front lawn before disappearing into the black night. How on earth would they cut these back in time for Barbara's visit?

Hannah inhaled again, smelling rotting leaves and damp earth nurturing the first blossoms of spring. She stretched her arms up, to ease off the ache from moving boxes.

The temperature was dropping again, but the breeze was pleasant. She felt it reviving her after their long day. Hannah looked around. The depth of the darkness was astounding. It was that thick, berry blackness that you didn't see in the city. Through the bare trees that bordered the far end of the garden she saw the distant glow of half a dozen houses and farms in Tornley. To her left she made out the slope-roofed garage that would become Will's studio one day.

His mood had been difficult today. She reminded herself that he had worked all week and was exhausted. He was probably dreading the commute back to London on Monday, too. At least one of them didn't have to worry about work anymore. She could manage the decoration of Tornley Hall and just give him jobs to do in the evenings. That should take some pressure off.

Hannah decided to take Will over to the garage after dinner. It might encourage him to look beyond the cracks—to the future, and what this house would bring to their lives.

She let her head fall back and shut her eyes. This was idyllic. No sirens or buses; no voices from the fried-chicken shop on the corner; no drum and bass from passing cars, or taxi engines running outside the pub.

She swayed a little, and picked out the distant bray of an animal and a soft hiss, and wondered fancifully if it might come from the sea, across the marshes.

To her left, there was a rustle in the bushes.

Hannah opened her eyes.

There was a second rustle, this time farther away.

“Hello?” she said, feeling silly. The nearest property must be fifty yards behind the high wall at the rear of the kitchen.

Hannah scanned the darkness. The rustling stopped. A rabbit, or a fox, probably. That would be part of the joy of this place. Nature right on their doorstep.

A stronger, colder wind buffeted the tall weeds. She picked one and ran its spiky stem through her finger. Their schedule for Barbara coming was already tight. Only thirteen days from tomorrow to finish the whole house. Tidying the garden would steal at least one of those days, now.

Hannah imagined seeing this scruffy lawn through Barbara’s eyes.

*You’ve taken on an awful lot here, Hannah. Maybe we should wait another few months?*

She felt a flutter of panic and shook her head.

No. Not a single month more. She couldn’t bear it.

Hannah stamped her feet to shake off the day’s fatigue. Thinking about it, Day 14 wasn’t actually over yet.

She returned inside, picked up her marker, thought for a moment, then rewrote the first entry. Day 14: Saturday, ~~MOVING DAY~~/START KITCHEN.

Reid, Megan 21/5/14 10:19

Comment [1]: Per EB

She found a box in the hall, and went to rip it open.

Just before she did so, however, she rattled the sitting-room door handle again, in case it was just stiff. Nothing happened.

This was so annoying. She put her nose to the keyhole and sniffed.

That was weird. She could swear she smelled petrol.