





I

The House on Gloam Island



AT the bleakest edge of the world, crammed into a car that was much too small for five people, Gwen watched as Gloam Island loomed closer and closer. If she had been told a few months ago that this place would one day be her home, she would have laughed, then cried, then she probably would have punched a wall.

“I’m squashed,” said Hazel.

“I’m hungry,” said Hester.

Hazel and Hester Clayton-Fenn were twins, six years old and identical to the pore, dark-haired and freckled with matching button noses. They writhed against their seatbelts.

Gwen was sitting in the passenger seat with her suitcase in the footwell. She was both squashed *and* hungry, but she was thirteen, which meant she was old enough to keep her complaints to herself. She returned her attention to her notebook, where she was writing her latest story. This one was going to be a bestseller and she couldn't afford to get distracted.

"How much longer?" muttered Roger.

Roger was ten. His full name was Roger Clayton-Fenn Junior, after their grandfather, Roger Senior, although he had died soon after the twins were born, so there wasn't much need for the distinction now. With his elbows wedged between the twins' car seats, Roger Junior glowered through his curly fringe.

"Nearly there, kids," said Henry, who was driving. It was the fifth time he'd said it in the last hour. "Nearly there now."

The sea was beginning to tickle the edges of the causeway as Henry's absurd little car raced towards land. By night, the road would be underwater, erasing the only way on or off the island. Not that it mattered – Gloam didn't get much traffic. One visitor in late autumn was uncommon. A family was a phenomenon.

Hazel peered out of the window. "The sea's almost touching the road," she said.

“Don’t be silly,” said Henry, with a nervous glance at the lapping water. “We’ve got plenty of time.”

But he sped up, all the same. Henry became much cheerier when they left the causeway behind for the tiny village of Gloaming. Gwen was privately relieved that his poor time management hadn’t led to their drowning.

The children’s surname – Clayton-Fenn – was a combination of their father’s and their mother’s names. Henry Oakworth was neither a Clayton nor a Fenn. The children had met him over an awkward breakfast just two years ago. Gwen had thought he looked quite silly in his shabby houndstooth jumper and Oxford shoes, but she said her “hello”s and her “nice-to-meet-you”s, and wondered privately how quickly her mum would get tired of the boring old accountant from boring old Norfolk. The last thing Gwen expected her mum to do was marry him.

Henry turned at the sign marked “SMALLMARSH ROAD” onto a lane that took them far away from the village. There was no marsh to be seen, not even a small one. Instead, it was just grey, undulating fields as far as Gwen could see. The road ended on a hill surrounded by patches of purple heather. Henry’s car pulled into a driveway and the younger children’s whinging quieted with the engine.

The sight of The House was almost a surprise. It seemed strange to Gwen that The House could still exist without Grandma, yet here it remained, languishing on its hill like a forgotten toy. Windswept. Forlorn. Empty of life.

Henry was the first out of the car. "Here we are," he said. He clapped his hands together. It was a habit of his.

The children did not get out. They just stared up at The House.

"It looks different," Roger said.

The beds in the herb garden were strangled by weeds. The sundial had been toppled by the wind. The old millstone was half hidden in the overgrowth. It was as if the ground was trying to swallow the place up and hide it somewhere dark and deep below.

"C'mon, then!" Henry tapped the passenger window. "Out you get."

Gwen tucked her notebook into her pocket and slid out of the car. Following her lead, the others clambered out one by one. They glanced again at The House.

"I miss Grandma," muttered Hazel.

"I want to go home!" Hester shouted.

"This *is* home," Henry said. "At least, it is now. Your grandma left it to you. It must be nice to be back."

Hester kicked a rock.

The House was ringed by a narrow wall of stacked stone. When Gwen pushed open the iron gate, the hinges screamed. Her fingertips came away brown with rust.

The House had many names. To the people in the village, it was simply “the White House on the Hill”, and it sat lonely enough on its heather-furred slope that everyone knew just which house you were talking about.

In the olden times, The House had been a coaching inn called “The Golden Harp”. Gwen didn’t know exactly when “the olden times” were, but she knew it was a time when a “coach” was a carriage pulled by horses, not a single-deck bus, nor a sweaty middle-aged gymnastics teacher. Grandma Fenn had always boasted that the highwayman called Dick Turpin had stayed in The House, and that the rusted flintlock pistol on the living-room mantelpiece had been a gift to a beautiful barmaid working at the inn, as a token of his affection. Gwen had loved that story as a child, but now that she was older, Gwen doubted that Dick Turpin or any other traveller would have bothered visiting a miserable island in the North Sea.

It had been a whole year since Grandma died. Nobody called it the “The Golden Harp” anymore.

The House’s real name – the name scratched into the slate plaque over the front door – was Somnolent Hall,

but Gwen didn't know what "somnolent" meant, and she'd never tried to pronounce it, so she and her siblings just called the house "The House".

Now, The House was theirs. Gwen had hoped it would feel right, but it didn't. As she passed beneath them, The House's high windows looked down at her like a stranger's eyes: dark and inscrutable.

"You're quiet," Henry said when she joined him at the door. He still hadn't found the right key.

"I'm thinking," Gwen replied.

"Ah," he said. "I shan't disturb you, then."

And that was the end of that.