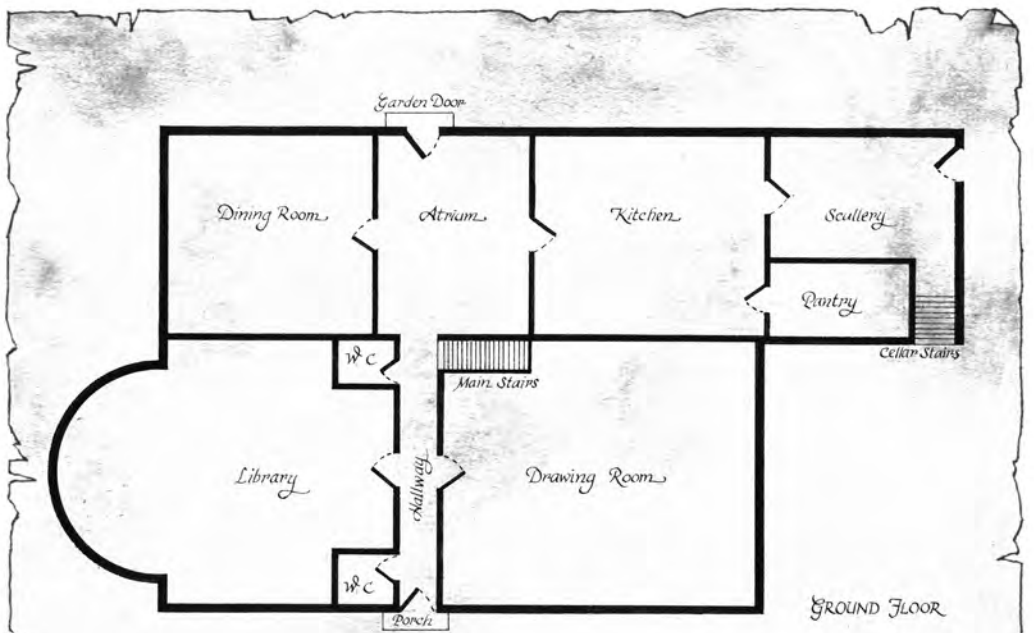


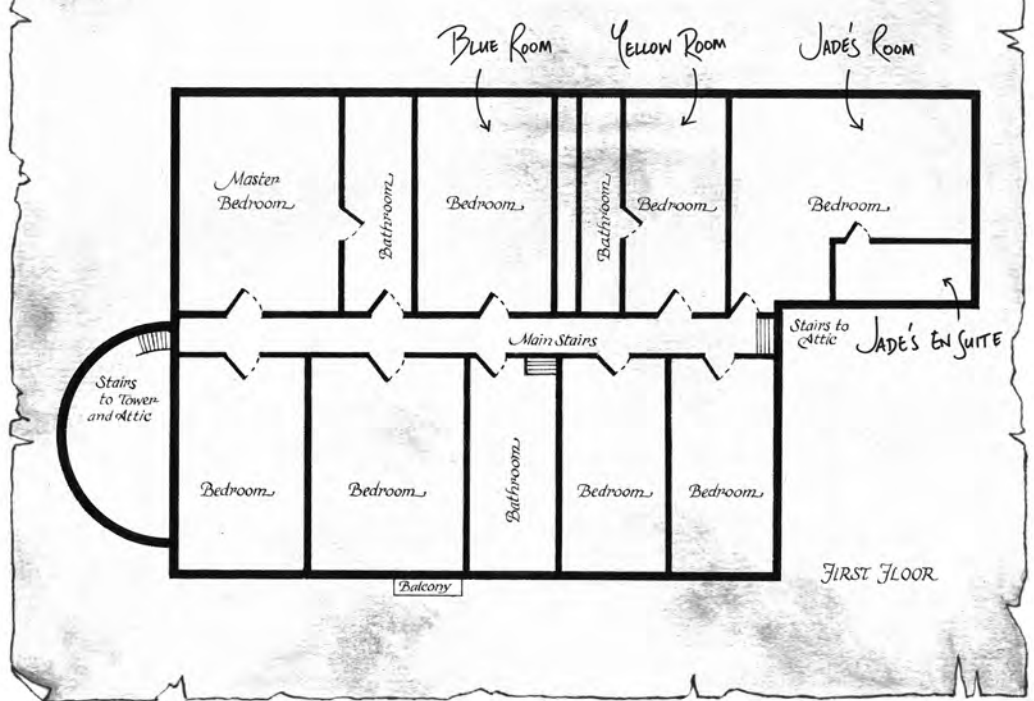
THE HOUSE ON COLD HILL

PETER JAMES

MACMILLAN



COLD HILL HOUSE



1

'Are we nearly there yet?'

Johnny, a smouldering cigar in his mouth, looked in the rear-view mirror. He loved his kids, but Felix, who had just turned eight, could be an irritating little sod sometimes. 'That's the third time you've asked in ten minutes,' he said, loudly, above the sound of the Kinks' 'Sunny Afternoon' blaring from the radio. Then he took the cigar out and sang along to the tune. '*The tax man's taken all my dough and left me in my stately home—*'

'I need to wee,' Daisy said.

'Are we? Are we nearly there?' Felix whined again.

Johnny shot a grin at Rowena, who was luxuriating on the huge front passenger seat of the red and white Cadillac Eldorado. She looked happy, ridiculously happy. Everything was ridiculous right now. This classic 1966 left-hand-drive monster was a ridiculous car for these narrow country lanes but he liked it because it was flash, and in his role as a rock promoter, he was flash all over. And their new home was ridiculous as well. Ridiculously – but very seriously – flash. Rowena loved it, too. She could see herself in a few years' time as the lady of the manor, and she could picture the grand parties they would hold! There was something very special about this place. But first it was badly in need of a makeover and a lot of TLC.

They'd bought the house despite the surveyor's report, which had been twenty-seven pages of doom and gloom. The window frames were badly rotted, the roof needed replacing, there were large patches of damp and the cellar and some of the roof timbers had dangerous infestations of dry rot. But nothing

PETER JAMES

that the shedloads of money he was making right now could not fix.

‘Dad, can we have the top down?’ Felix said. ‘Can we?’

‘It’s too windy, darling!’ Rowena said.

Although the late-October sun was shining brightly, straight in their faces, it was blowing a hooley, and darkening storm clouds were massing on the horizon.

‘We’ll be there in five minutes,’ Johnny announced. ‘This is the village now.’

They passed a sign saying COLD HILL – PLEASE DRIVE SLOWLY, with 30mph warning roundels on either side of the narrow road, then swooped over a humpback bridge, passing a cricket pitch to their left. To their right was a decrepit-looking Norman church. It was set well back and perched dominantly high above the road. The graveyard, bounded by a low flint wall, was pretty, with rows of weathered headstones, many of them tilting, and some partially concealed beneath the spreading branches of a massive yew tree.

‘Are there dead people in there, Mum?’ Daisy asked.

‘It’s a graveyard, darling, yes, there are.’ She glanced at the low flint wall.

Daisy pressed her face against the window. ‘Is that where we’ll go when we’re dead?’

Their daughter was obsessed with death. Last year they’d gone on a fishing holiday to Ireland, and the highlight of the trip for Daisy, who was six, had been visiting a graveyard where she discovered she could see into some of the tombs and look down at the bones below.

Rowena turned round. ‘Let’s talk about something more cheerful, shall we? Are you looking forward to our new home?’

Daisy cuddled her toy monkey to her chest. ‘Yes,’ she said, a tad reluctantly. ‘Maybe.’

‘Only *maybe*?’ Johnny asked.

They drove past a row of terraced Victorian artisan cottages,

THE HOUSE ON COLD HILL

a rather drab-looking pub called The Crown, a smithy, a cottage with a 'Bed & Breakfast' sign, and a village store. The road wound steeply uphill, past detached houses and bungalows of various sizes on either side. A white van came tearing down the hill towards them without slowing. Johnny, cursing, pulled the massive car as far over to the left as he could, scraping against bushes, and the van passed with inches to spare.

'I think we're going to need another car for our new country life,' Rowena said. 'Something more sensible.'

'I don't do *sensible*,' Johnny replied.

'Don't I know it! That's why I love you, my darling! But I'm not going to be able to walk the kids round the corner to school any more when the new term starts. And I can hardly do the school run in this.'

Johnny slowed the car and pulled down the right-turn indicator. 'Here we are! The O'Hare family has arrived!'

On their right, opposite a red postbox, were two stone pillars, topped with savage-looking ornamental wyverns, and with open, rusted, wrought-iron gates. Below the large Strutt and Parker 'Sold' board, fixed to the right-hand gatepost, was a smaller, barely legible sign announcing COLD HILL HOUSE.

As he turned in, Johnny stopped the car for a moment, watching in the rear-view mirror for the removals van; then he saw it as a tiny lumbering speck in the distance. He carried on up the steep, winding, potholed tarmac drive. It was bounded on each side by a railed metal fence, beyond which sheep grazed on the steeply sloping fields. All this land belonged to the house, but was leased to a local tenant farmer.

After a quarter of a mile, the drive curved sharply to the right and they crossed a cattle grid. As they reached a gravel-surfaced plateau at the top of the hill, the house came into view ahead.

'Is that it?' Felix said. 'Wow! Wowwwwww!'

'It's a palace!' Daisy squealed, excitedly. 'We're going to live in a palace!'

PETER JAMES

The central part of the house was fronted by a classically proportioned Georgian facade clad in weather-stained grey rendering, on three floors, or four if the cellar was included. There was a porch with a columned balcony above it – ‘Like a super-grand Juliet balcony!’ Rowena had said the first time she had seen it. On either side were tall sash windows and there were two dormer windows in the slate-tiled roof.

On the left side of the building was, incongruously, a crenellated tower with windows at the very top, and on the right was a two-storey extension which, the estate agent had told them, had been added a century after the main house had been built.

‘Who’s that?’ Rowena asked, pointing up at a window.

‘What?’ Johnny replied.

‘There’s a woman up in that window – up in that dormer in the attic – looking at us.’

‘Maybe it’s the cleaners still here.’ He peered up through the windscreen. ‘I can’t see anyone.’

The car rocked in a gust of wind, and an unseasonably cold draught blew through the interior. With a huge grin, Johnny pulled up right in front of the porch, jammed his cigar back in his mouth, took a puff, and through a cloud of smoke said, ‘Here we are, guys! Home sweet home!’

The sky darkened, suddenly. There was a rumble above them that sounded, to him, ominously like thunder.

‘Oh God,’ Rowena said, reaching for the door handle. ‘Let’s get inside quickly.’

As she spoke, a solitary slate broke free and began sliding down the roof, dislodging and collecting more slates in its path, creating a small avalanche. They smashed through the rusted guttering and fell, gathering speed, sharp as razors, slicing through the fabric roof of the Cadillac, one severing Rowena’s right arm, another splitting Johnny’s head in two, like a wood axe through a log.

THE HOUSE ON COLD HILL

As Rowena and the children screamed, chunks of masonry began raining down on them, ripping through the roof, smashing their skulls and bones. Then an entire slab of stonework fell from near the top of the facade, landing directly on the remains of the roof, flattening the car down on its suspension, buckling its wheels, and crushing its four occupants into a mangled pulp of flesh and bone and blood.

Minutes later, as the removals van crested the hill, all the driver and his crewmates could see was a small mountain of stonework, slates and timber. And above the sound of the howling wind, they could hear the monotone blare of a car horn.

2

Friday, 4 September

Ollie Harcourt was an eternal optimist. A glass half-full guy, who always believed things would work out for the best. Thirty-nine, with rugged good looks, an unruly mop of fair hair, and arty spectacles, he was dressed in a baggy cardigan, equally baggy jeans and Wolverine work boots, and sported an IWC wristwatch.

Caro was the polar opposite. Three years younger, with neat dark hair, wearing a brand-new blue Barbour jacket, tight-fitting trousers and black suede boots. Just as she always dressed appropriately for the office, so today, on this wet and windy September morning, she was dressed appropriately – if a little too perfectly – for the countryside. A born worrier, all the more so in the twelve years since their daughter, Jade, had come along, she fretted increasingly about everything. If Ollie's mantra was, *Hey, everything works out for the best*, hers was, *Shit happens, constantly*.

And she should know. She worked as a solicitor in a law firm in Brighton, doing conveyancing. Not many people went to lawyers because they were happy. She was burdened daily with non-stop meetings, calls and emails from clients fretting over their house purchases or sales, quite often as a result of bitter divorces, or equally bitter disputes with other relatives over inheritances. And because she cared so much, she carried most of their woes home in her heart, and in her briefcase, every weekday night, and often at weekends, too.

THE HOUSE ON COLD HILL

Ollie joked that if worrying was an Olympic sport, Caro could represent Great Britain.

She didn't find that funny, particularly as right now, while Ollie worked hard on building his website design business, she was the principal breadwinner. And at this moment, heading towards their new home on the big day of the move, although she was excited, she was also saddled with worries. Had they taken on too much? As a born and bred townie, how would she cope with life in an isolated country house? How would Jade take to it? And she wished Ollie wasn't driving so fast. Especially in this pelting rain, which the wipers were struggling to clear.

'Thirty limit, darling!' she cautioned, as they approached a sign announcing COLD HILL. 'There might be a speed trap. It wouldn't be good to be seen being stopped on our first day here.'

'Tummy tickler!' Ollie said, blithely ignoring her, as the Range Rover became airborne for an instant over a humpback bridge.

'Fail, Dad!' shouted Jade, bouncing up on the rear seat and struggling to hold on to her iPhone and the carriers containing their two cats on the seat beside her.

They passed a cricket pitch to their left, then a Norman church to their right, its graveyard carpeted with fallen leaves. They carried on up a gradient, passing a row of cottages, one with a handwritten sign offering 'Free-range Eggs For Sale', a drab-looking pub, The Crown, a smithy, a 'Bed & Breakfast' sign and a village store. Finally, as they passed rows of detached houses and bungalows, then a small cottage to their left, Ollie braked hard.

'Dad!' Jade protested again. 'You're upsetting Bombay and Sapphire!' Then she focused back on the photographs of the journey to their new home she was sharing on Instagram.

It was Ollie who had jokingly suggested naming the cats after the gin brand, and both Jade and Caro had instantly liked the names, so they had stuck.

PETER JAMES

To their right, opposite a red postbox partially engulfed by an unruly hedge, were two stone pillars, topped with sinister-looking wyverns, and with open, rusted, wrought-iron gates. A large sign, in much better condition than the pillars and gates, proudly proclaimed: RICHWARDS ESTATE AGENCY – SOLD!

Ollie stopped, indicating right, as a tractor towing a trailer spewing strands of straw came down the hill towards them at an almost reckless speed, passing them with just inches to spare. Then he swung the car in through the entrance, and sped up the steep, winding, potholed drive, bounded by railed fences in a poor state of repair. On one side of them was a herd of gloomy-looking brown and white cattle; on the other was a field full of alpacas. As the car lurched and bounced, Jade shouted out, again, ‘Dad!’ Then she saw the animals.

‘Oh wow, what are those?’

‘Llamas,’ her mother said.

‘I think they’re alpacas!’ Ollie said. ‘Aren’t alpacas smaller?’

‘They’re so cute!’ Jade watched the animals for some moments, then returned her attention to her screen.

A quarter of a mile on they rattled over a cattle grid, and the house came into view. Ollie slowed down, scarcely able to believe this was now their home. It looked almost magical, but with a melancholic air. He felt as if he were a century or more back in time. He could see a horse-drawn carriage pulling up here. It looked like something out of a romantic novel or a movie, perhaps Rebecca’s ‘Mandalay’.

He pulled the car to a halt on the crunching mossy gravel, behind Caro’s Golf, which they had left here earlier in the day when they’d brought their first load of stuff over. The rain rattled down on the roof, as loud as hailstones, and the Range Rover rocked in the howling wind. ‘Home sweet home!’ he announced.

‘Why’s it called Cold Hill House?’ Jade asked, still focused on her iPhone and tapping away hard.

THE HOUSE ON COLD HILL

‘Because we’re in Cold Hill village, lovely,’ he said, unclipping his seat belt.

‘Why’s it called Cold Hill village?’

‘Probably because it’s north facing,’ Caro replied. ‘So it doesn’t get as much sun as some places – and it’s a bit of a wind trap.’ She looked up at the recently restored grey facade, the white-painted sash windows and the metal wall-ties high up – the few parts of the property that had been worked on – filled with worry about the work that would be needed.

She wished she had put her foot down when they had first seen this place. But it had been high summer then. The surrounding fields had been full of yellow wheat and rape. The paddock had been full of wild flowers, the five acres of sweeping lawns had been neatly mown, and the lake was flat as a millpond, filled with lilies, the willow tree on the tiny island shining golden in the brilliant sunlight. There had been dozens of ducks and ducklings and a pair of coots.

Now the fields were a barren wilderness of mud and stubble. The front lawn was overgrown, and the windows of the house, which had seemed then to be filled with light, were now dark and gloomy, like the sunken eyes of a fish that was past its prime.

The porch also looked as if it had aged two decades since they had last been here. The paintwork, which had been new and fresh back then, was already flaking. The brass lion’s-head knocker, which she had been certain was shiny and gleaming last time they saw it, was a dull green-hued colour. And the circular driveway was more weed than gravel.

The house had been empty for over thirty years, after part of it had collapsed, the irrepressibly jolly estate agent, Paul Jordan, had told them. A property development company had bought it, intending to restore it and turn it into an old people’s home, but they had gone bankrupt in the last property crash after only completing a small part of the renovation work. It had so much scope, Jordan had enthused. It needed an owner with vision.

PETER JAMES

And Ollie, who had great taste – and vision – had convinced her. They'd already moved house three times in the fifteen years since they were married, buying wrecks, doing them up and moving on with a good profit. It was that, and the lump sum Ollie had received from selling his property-search website, which had enabled them to afford this grand old wreck of a place. And, Ollie had persuaded her, they could double their money in five years' time – if they wanted to move again.

'God, I can't believe it's finally ours!' Ollie leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. 'Can you, darling?'

'No,' she said, apprehensively. 'No. It is beautiful. But—'

Close up, and real now, she could see the cracks in the front masonry, the patches of damp on the library wall, the peeling paint on the window frames. The sheer scale of the task ahead of them.

'How'm I going to get to see my friends in Brighton?' Jade interrupted. 'How'm I going to see Phoebe, Olivia, Lara – and Ruari?' Ruari was her boyfriend. She'd told her parents that they'd shared a last, tearful raspberry and mango milkshake yesterday afternoon in Drury's cafe in Richardson Road, round the corner from their old home.

'There's a regular bus service!' Ollie said.

'Yeah, right. Twice a day from the village, which is, like, a mile walk.'

'Your mum and I can drive you in when you want to go.'

'How about now?'

In his rear-view mirror, Ollie saw the small Volvo of his in-laws and, behind them, the removals truck lumbering up the drive. 'I think we ought to get moved into our new home first, darling, don't you think?'

'I want to go home!'

'You are home.'

'This place looks like it's about to fall down.'

Ollie grinned and looked at his wife. 'It's stunning. We are

THE HOUSE ON COLD HILL

going to be very happy here. It'll just take a bit of getting used to our new lifestyle.'

'I liked our old lifestyle,' Jade retorted. 'I liked Carlisle Road.'

Ollie squeezed Caro's hand. She squeezed back. Then she turned to their daughter. 'We'll make sure you see your friends whenever you want to. And you'll make new friends out here.'

'Yeah? What? Cows? Llamas? Alpacas?'

Caro laughed and tousled Jade's hair. Her daughter pulled her head back, irritated; she never liked her hair being touched. Caro wanted so badly to feel good about being here, to share in Ollie's enthusiasm. She was determined to make an effort. As a city girl, she'd always dreamed of living in the countryside, too. But on this rainy September day, heading towards winter, all the work they had to do on the house seemed daunting. And she'd never in her life lived without neighbours. Noise. Human life. 'You love animals, Jade, darling,' she said. 'You wanted a dog – we could get one.'

'A dog?' Jade said, her face suddenly animated. 'We can really have a dog? A puppy?'

'Yes!' Caro replied.

'When?'

'Well, we could perhaps start looking around the rescue homes as soon as we're straight here.'

Jade brightened considerably. 'What kind of dog?'

'Let's see what's around!' Ollie replied. 'I think a rescue dog would be nice, don't you, lovely?'

'Something fluffy?' Jade asked. 'Big and fluffy?'

'Sure,' he said. 'Big and fluffy.'

'How about a labradoodle?'

'Well, let's see, darling!' Caro laughed. Ollie smiled. Everything was going to be fine. Their dream life in their dream new home. Well, project of a home, anyway.

Caro opened the car door and the howling gale blew it back

PETER JAMES

on its hinges, bending them, the door mirror hitting the front wing of the car so hard the glass shattered.

‘That’s seven years’ bad luck!’ Jade said.

‘Lucky I’m not superstitious,’ Ollie replied.

‘Mum is,’ Jade said, breezily. ‘We’re doomed!’