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Written by S. K. Tremayne

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THE PERFECT HUSBAND. THE PERFECT STEPSON.

THE PERFECT LIE?

THE FIRE CHILD



S. K. TREMAYNE

THE NO.1 BESTSELLER

THE FIRE CHILD

S. K. TREMAYNE



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178 Days Before Christmas

Morning

The tunnels go under the sea. It's a thought I can't easily dismiss. The tunnels go under the sea. For a mile, or more.

I'm standing in the Old Dining Room, where the windows of my enormous new home face north: towards the Atlantic, and the cliffs of Penwith, and a silhouetted blackness. This dark twinned shape is Morvellan Mine: the Shaft House, and the Engine House.

Even on a cloudless June day, like today, the ruins of Morvellan look obscurely sad, or oddly reproachful. It's like they are trying to tell me something, yet they cannot and will not. They are eloquently muted. The rough-house Atlantic makes all the noise, the booming waves riding the tides above the tunnels.

'Rachel?'

I turn. My new husband stands in the doorway. His shirt is blinding white, his suit is immaculate, nearly as dark as his hair, and the weekend's stubble has gone.

'Been looking for you everywhere, darling.'

'Sorry. I've been wandering. Exploring. Your amazing house!'

'Our house, darling. Ours.'

He smiles, comes close, and we kiss. It's a morning kiss, a going-to-work-kiss, not meant to lead anywhere – but it still thrills me, still gives me that that scary and delicious feeling: that someone can have such power over me, a power I am somehow keen to accept.

David takes my hand, 'So. Your first weekend in Carnhallow . . . '

'Mmm.'

'So *tell* me – I want to know you're all right! I know it must be challenging – the remoteness, all the work that needs doing. I'll understand if you have misgivings.'

I lift his hand, and kiss it. 'Misgivings? Don't be daft. I love it. I love you and I love the house. I love it all, love the challenge, love Jamie, love the way we're hidden away, love it love it love it.' I look into his green-grey eyes, and I do not blink. 'David, I've never been happier. Never in all my life. I feel like I have found the place I was meant to be, and the man I was meant to be with.'

I sound totally gushing. What happened to the feisty feminist Rachel Daly I used to be? Where has she gone? My friends would probably tut at me. Six months ago *I* would have tutted at me: at the girl who gave up her freedom and her job and her supposedly exciting London life to be the bride of an older, richer, taller widower. One of my best friends, Jessica, laughed with sly delight when I told her my sudden plans. *My God, darling, you're marrying a cliché!*

That hurt for a second. But I soon realized it didn't matter what my friends think, because they are still there, back in London, sardined into Tube trains, filing into dreary offices, barely making the mortgage every

month. Clinging on to London life like mountaineers halfway up a rockface.

And I am not holding on for dear life any more. I'm far away, with my new husband and his son and his mother, down here at the very end of England, in far West Cornwall, a place where England, as I am discovering, becomes something stranger and stonier, a land of dreaming hard granite that glistens after rain, a land where rivers run through woods like deep secrets, where terrible cliffs conceal shyly exquisite coves, a land where moorland valleys cradle wonderful houses. Like Carnhallow.

I even love the name of this house. Carnhallow.

My daydreaming head rests on David's shoulder. Like we are halfway to dancing.

But his mobile rings, breaking the spell. Lifting it from his pocket he checks the screen, then kisses me again – his two fingers up-tilting my chin – and he walks away to take the call.

I might once, I guess, have found this gesture patronizing. Now it makes me want sex. But I always want sex with David. I wanted sex the moment my friend Oliver said, *Come and meet someone, I think you'll get on,* at that art gallery, and I turned around and there he was, ten years older than me, ten inches taller than me.

I wanted David on our first date, three days later, I wanted him when he bought me the very first drink, I wanted him when he then told a perfectly judged, obviously flirtatious joke, I wanted him when we talked about the rainy March weather and he sipped his champagne and said, 'Ah but where Sergeant March is skirmishing, Captain April will headquarter, and General June will follow with his mistresses,' and I wanted something more than sex when he told me about his

house and its history and he showed me the photo of his beautiful boy.

That was one of the moments I *fell:* when I realized how different David was to any man I had met before, and how different he is to me. Just a girl from the council flats of south-east London. A girl who escaped reality by reading. A girl who dislikes chiller cabinets in supermarkets because they remind her of the times when Mum couldn't afford to pay for heating.

And then, David.

We were in a Soho bar. We were drunk. Nearly kissing. He showed me the photo of that enchanting boy again. I don't know why, but I knew, immediately. I wanted a child like that. Those singular blue eyes, the dark hair from his handsome dad.

I asked David to tell me more: more about his house, about little Jamie, the family history.

He smiled.

'There's a wood surrounding Carnhallow House, it's called Ladies Wood. It runs right up Carnhallow Valley, to the moors.'

'OK. A wood. I love woods.'

'The trees in Ladies Wood are predominantly rowans, with some ash, hazel and oak. We know that these same rowan woods date back at least to the Norman Conquest, because they are marked on Anglo Saxon charters, and continuously therefrom. That means the rowan trees have been here for a thousand years. In Carnhallow Valley.'

'I still don't get it.'

'Do you know what my surname means? What "Kerthen" means, in Cornish?'

I shook my head, trying not to be distracted by his smile, the champagne, the photos of the boy, the house, the idea of it all.

‘This might amaze you, David, but I didn’t do Cornish at school.’

He chuckled. ‘Kerthen means rowan tree. Which means the Kerthens have lived in Carnhallow for a thousand years, amongst the rowans from which we took our name. Shall we have some more champagne?’

He leaned close to pour; and as he did, he kissed me full on the lips for the first time. We got in a taxi ten minutes later. That’s all it took. Just that.

The memories fall away: I am back in the present, as David finishes his call, and frowns.

‘OK, sorry, but I really do have to go. Can’t miss the one o’clock flight – they’re panicking.’

‘Nice to be indispensable.’

‘I don’t think you could ever call corporate lawyers indispensable. Viola players are more important.’ He smiles. ‘But corporate law is ludicrously overpaid. So what are you going to do today?’

‘Carry on exploring, I guess. Before I touch anything, I need to know the basics. I mean, I don’t even know how many bedrooms there are.’

‘Eighteen,’ he says. Then adds with a frown: ‘I think.’

‘David! Listen to you. Eeek. How can you not know how many bedrooms you have?’

‘We’ll try them all in time. I promise.’ Shirt cuff pulled, he checks his silver watch. ‘If you want to do some real research, Nina’s books are in the Yellow Drawing Room. The ones she was using, for her restorations.’

The name stings a little, though I hide it.

Nina Kerthen, née Valéry. David’s first wife. I don’t know much about her: I’ve seen a couple of photos, I know she was beautiful, Parisienne, young, posh, blonde. I know that she died in an accident at Morvellan Mine, eighteen months ago. I know that her husband

and in particular her son – my brand-new, eight-year-old stepson Jamie – must still be grieving, even if they try not to show it.

And I know, very very clearly, that one of my jobs here in Carnhallow is to rescue things: to be the best stepmother in the world to this sad and lovely little boy.

'I'll have a look,' I say brightly. 'At the books. Maybe get some ideas. Go and catch your plane.'

He turns for a final kiss, I step back.

'No – go! Kiss me again we'll end up in the fourteenth bedroom, and then it will be six o'clock.'

I'm not lying. David's laugh is dark and sexy.

'I'll Skype you tonight, and see you Friday.'

With that, he departs. I hear doors slam down long hallways, then the growl of his Mercedes. Then comes the silence: the special summery silence of Carnhallow, soundtracked by the whisper of the distant sea.

Picking up my phone, I open my notebook app.

Continuing Nina's restoration of this huge house is not going to be easy. I do have some artistic talent to help: I have a degree in photography from Goldsmiths College. A degree which turned out to be utterly pointless, as I basically graduated the same afternoon that photography collapsed as a paying career, and so I ended up *teaching* photography to kids who would never themselves become photographers.

This was, I suppose, another reason I was happy to give up London life: the meaninglessness was getting to me. I wasn't even taking photos any more. Just taking buses through the rain to my cramped and shared Shoreditch flat. Which I couldn't actually afford.

But now that I have no real job, I can, ironically, apply these artistic gifts. Such as they are.

Armed with my phone I begin my explorations: trying

to get a proper mental map of Carnhallow. I've been here one week, but we've spent most of that week in the bedroom, the kitchen, or on the beaches, enjoying the blissful summer weather. Much of my stuff from London is still in boxes. There's even a suitcase left to unpack from our honeymoon: our gloriously hedonistic, sensuously expensive trip to Venice, where David bought me his favourite martini, in Harry's Bar, by St Mark's Square: the gin in a shot glass, chilled nearly to ice 'and faintly poisoned with vermouth', as David put it. I love the way David puts things.

But that is already the past, and this is my future. Carnhallow.

Striking south like an Antarctic explorer, I head down the New Hall, examining furniture and décor, taking notes as I go. The walls here are linenfold panelling, I think, decorated with engravings of the many Cornish tin and copper mines once owned by the Kerthens: the adits and tunnels of Botallack, and Morvellan, the shafts and streamworks of Wheal Chance and Wheal Rose. Elsewhere there are ancient photos of the mines in their heyday: wistful pictures of frozen labour, forgotten industry, men in waistcoats pushing wheelbarrows, chimneys smoking by the sea.

The New Hall ends at a grand double door. I know what lies beyond: the Yellow Drawing Room. Pushing the door and stepping through, I gaze around with a kind of helpless longing.

Because this room, already restored, with its leaded windows overlooking the dreaming flowery green of the south lawns, is probably the most beautiful room of all, and therefore one of the most daunting.

I need to make the rest of Carnhallow as impressive as this. It won't be easy; Nina had excellent taste. Yet

the beauty of the Yellow Drawing Room shows the potential of Carnhallow. If I can match what Nina did here, Carnhallow will be startlingly lovely. And mine.

The idea is so dazzling it makes me giddy. And happy.

I have some notes in my phone about the Yellow Drawing Room. They don't do much, however, but show my ignorance. I've noted a 'blue pig on the table', '18th-century funerary urns?' and 'Mameluke knives'. Also 'David's father's pack of cards', 'they played chouette', and 'tortoiseshell inlay in brass'.

What do I do with all this? How do I even begin? I've already had a quick skim through Nina's books: books full of wise but puzzling advice on Georgian furniture and Victorian silver, books full of words that enchant, and confuse – hamstone quoining, aurora wallpaper, antique epergnes.

Everything sounds so exotic and obscure, and impossibly luxe. I grew up in a crowded little council flat. The most expensive thing we owned was an oversized TV, probably stolen. Now I am about to spend thousands on 'Stuart silver fingerbowls', and 'fill them with rosewater'. Apparently.

My daydreaming – half anxious, half rapturous – leads me to the corner of the Drawing Room, and a small, polished wooden sidetable. Cassie the Thai housekeeper has set a silver vase here, replete with lilies and roses. Yet the vase doesn't look right. So maybe I can begin here. With this. Just this. One step, then another.

Putting my phone down, I adjust the vase – centring the vessel carefully on the sidetable. Yet it's still not correct. Perhaps it should be on the left, off centre? A good photographer never puts her subject smack-bang in the middle.

For ten minutes I try to find the best position for this

vase. I imagine Nina Kerthen, behind me, shaking her head in polite dismay. And now the self-doubt returns. I am sure that Nina Kerthen would have got this right. She would have done it impeccably. With her blonde hair harping across her slanted, clever blue eyes, as she squinted, and concentrated.

Abandoning my job, I gaze down, sighing. The varnished yew wood of the table reflects my face in its darkness. A crack runs the length of the table, breaking the image in two. Which is appropriate.

People tell me I am attractive, and yet I never truly *feel* beautiful: not with my red hair and my peppering of freckles, and that white Celtic skin that never takes a tan. Instead I feel flawed, or broken. Cracked. And when I look very hard at myself I can't see any beauty at all: only the deepening lines by my eyes, far too many for my age – only thirty.

A delicious breeze stirs me. It comes from the open window, carrying the scents of Carnhallow's flower gardens, and it dispels my silliness, and reminds me of my prize. *No*. I am not broken, and this is enough self-doubt. I am Rachel Daly, and I have overcome greater challenges than sourcing the correct wallpaper, or working out what a tazza is.

The seventy-eight bedrooms can wait, likewise the West Wing. I need some fresh air. Pocketing my phone, I go to the East Door, push it open to the serenity of the sun, so gorgeous on my upturned face. And then the south lawns. The wondrous gardens.

The gardens at Carnhallow were the one thing, I am told, that David's father Richard Kerthen kept going, even as he gambled away the last of the Kerthen fortune, en route to a heart attack. And Nina apparently never did much with the gardens. Therefore, out here, I can

enjoy a purer possession: I can wholeheartedly admire the freshly cut green grass shaded by Cornish elms, the flowerbeds crowded with summer colours. And I can straightaway love, as my own, the deep and beautiful woods: guarding and encircling Carnhallow as if the house is a jewel-box hidden in a coil of thorns.

'Hello.'

A little startled, I turn. It's Juliet Kerthen: David's mother. She lives, alone and defiant, in her own self-contained apartment converted from a corner of the otherwise crumbling and unrestored West Wing. Juliet has the first signs of Alzheimer's, but is, as David phrases it, 'in a state of noble denial'.

'Lovely day,' she says.

'Gorgeous, isn't it? Yes.'

I've met Juliet a couple of times. I like her a lot: she has a vivid spirit. I do not know if she likes me. I have been too timid to go further, to really make friends, to knock on her front door with blackberry-and-apple pie. Because Juliet Kerthen may be old and fragile, but she is also daunting. The suitably blue-eyed, properly cheek-boned daughter of Lord Carlyon. Another ancient Cornish family. She makes me feel every inch the working-class girl from Plumstead. She'd probably find my pie a bit vulgar.

Yet she is perfectly friendly. The fault is mine.

Juliet shields her eyes from the glare of the sun with a visoring hand. 'David always says that life is a perfect English summer day. Beautiful, precisely because it is so rare and transient.'

'Yes, that sounds like David.'

'So how are you settling yourself in, dear?'

'Fine. Really, really well!'

'Yes?' Her narrowed eyes examine me, but in a

companionable way. I assess her in return. She is dressed like an elderly person, yet very neatly. A frock that must be thirty years old, a maroon and cashmere cardigan, then sensible, expensive shoes, probably hand-made for her in Truro forty years ago, and now, I guess, polished by Cassie, who looks in every day to make sure the old lady is alive.

'You don't find it too imposing?'

'God no, well, yes, a bit but . . . '

Juliet indulges me with a kind smile. 'Don't let it get to you. I remember when Richard first brought me home to Carnhallow. It was quite the ordeal. That last bit of the drive. Those ghastly little moorland roads from St Ives. I think Richard was rather proud of the remoteness. Added to the mythic quality. Would you like a cup of tea? I have excellent pu'er-cha. I get bored with drinking it alone. Or there is gin. I am in two minds.'

'Yes. Tea would be brilliant. Thanks.'

I follow her around the West Wing, heading for the north side of the house. The sun is restless and silvery on the distant sea. The clifftop mines are coming into view. I am chattering away about the house, trying to reassure Juliet, and maybe myself, that I am entirely optimistic.

'What amazes me is how hidden it is. Carnhallow, I mean. Tucked away in this sweet little valley, a total suntrap. But you're only a couple of miles from the moors, from all that *bleakness*.'

She turns, and nods. 'Indeed. Although the other side of the house is so completely different. It's actually rather clever. Richard always said it proved that the legend was true.'

I frown. 'Sorry?'

'Because the other side of Carnhallow looks north, to the mines, on the cliffs.'

I shake my head, puzzled.

She asks, 'David hasn't told you the legend?'

'No. I don't think so. I mean, uhm, he told me lots of stories. The rowans. The evil Jago Kerthen . . .' I don't want to say: *Maybe we got so drunk on champagne on the first date and then we had such dizzying sex, I forgot half of what he told me* – which is totally possible.

Juliet turns towards the darkened shapes of the mines. 'Well, this is the legend. The Kerthens, it is said, must have possessed a wicked gift, a sixth sense, or some kind of clairvoyance: because they kept hitting lodes of tin and copper, when other speculators went bust. There is a Cornish name for those with the gift: *tus-tanyow*. It means the people of fire, people with the light.' She smiles, blithely. 'You'll hear locals telling the story in the Tinners – that's a lovely pub, in Zennor. You must try it, but avoid the starry gazy pie. Anyway, Richard used to rather drone on about it, about the legend. Because the Kerthens built their house right here, on the bones of the old monastery, facing Morvellan, yet that was centuries before they discovered the *tin* at Morvellan. So if you are suggestible it rather implies that the legend is true. As if the Kerthens *knew* they were going to find tin. I know, let's go and have some pu'er-cha *and* gin, perhaps they go together.'

She walks briskly around the north-west corner of Carnhallow. I follow, eager for the friendship, and the distraction. Because her story disquiets me in a way I can't exactly explain.

It is, after all, just a silly little story about the historic family that made so much money, by sending those boys down those ancient mines. Where the tunnels run deep under the sea.