

Fran Cooper

The Two Houses


HODDER &
STOUGHTON

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For my parents, who taught me to love wild places.

Crack

I

The Two Houses sit grey and brooding beneath a pale sky. They cling to the hillside, cowering from the wind, because always, before everything up here, there is the wind. In the not-quite-light of a November afternoon, this whole strange world is beaten by it; the spindly trees, the long sedge grasses, even the houses themselves seem to bend under its assault.

The Two Houses were not always two. But if it is human to build – even up here, in this blasted northern hinterland – it is human to break, too.

And he could not have known – the man whose hand carved 1712 in deep, angular strokes above the doorway – that his work would both last and not last. For it is more than three hundred years that this wind and these stones have been battering each other, more than three hundred journeys around the sun, and still his stones stand. But the middle of his great house is missing. Its central rooms have been cut out, removed, sliced clean away as if a stinking wound or canker. His one great house rent and rendered into two.

Jay walks out into the space between, into the gap between the two houses that, in 1712, were built as one. A house so haunted, the locals say, that its last owner simply took out the middle. Took out the rooms where objects hurled themselves across the carpet and dogs whimpered and even in the heat of summer – what summer there is, up on these hills – the air could on a sudden turn to clouded ice in front of you. One house made two; void and vacuum in between. Bad things happened here, they murmur; this is bad land.

Jay walks out into the space between, because it is in this

space that the builders have been digging. Because wouldn't it be perfect, they said, to have her studio here; to connect the two houses, to bring them together again? And Simon, with his architect's brain, with his love of stone and glass and building, had eagerly put pen to paper.

Up here, high above the world, the rain is as relentless as the wind. In the silence of the fading year, Jay has been making a taxonomy of it. Thin rain, fat rain, rain that doesn't fall but hangs around you like a shroud; rain that drives itself horizontal, pricking dull needles into the skin. Today it drips, ticklingly slow, down the back of her neck, catches dew-like in her hair and eyelashes.

You see everything and nothing from Two Houses. Everything, because they sit above the valley's road, looking out over the sweep of empty hillside, the curved fells with their wind-whipped green and ochre grasses. Nothing, because the village is further up the dale, hidden from view, and it's ten miles down to town the other way. They are the only souls for miles, Jay and Simon, the builder and his lad.

There are spades lying on the earth between the houses. A digger, abandoned, its claw limp against the ground. Beyond the damp, Jay can smell the wetness of newly churned soil, its rich secrets meeting air for the first time. Her knees crack as she bends down to the place on which all eyes are fixed.

'Jay—'

It is Simon, hovering behind her somewhere. He is always so sensible, her Simon.

'—maybe you shouldn't . . .'

But it is too late. Her fingers have touched it, this strange, unearthly protrusion from the land at which they are all looking. And as they do, everything swims into crystalline focus. Every sharp intake of breath when the Two Houses are mentioned; each darkly guarded reference to the things that happened here. Suddenly, she understands.

Behind her, the builder's lad retches. The smell of his soured

breakfast carries on the bitter air, and a new silence descends as they wait, held in uneasy tableau around the unburied earth. For there is no doubting it now: this thing beneath her fingers has the irrefutable hardness of bone.