

# PROLOGUE

2004

Four pink candles.

Burning for me.

The cake is blue with two cream-coloured ponies standing in a field of peppermint icing, fenced by strands of black liquorice. The flickering candles peg the corners of the field, and there is a golden fondant dog burying a white chocolate bone. That will be Oodie.

Melissa lit the candles as she's eleven and allowed to use matches. We sit about for a while, on the big settee, my feet swinging in mid-air, kicking up the blue-and-white lace on the skirt of my birthday dress. Melissa looks at the cake while I scan the pile of presents, all wrapped up in pretty paper. I can see a box, tied in a red bow. It might contain a new riding hat but I'm still hoping for a puppy, a wee playmate for Oodie.

We sit in silence.

Melissa gets bored and leaves the room without a word, I hear her footsteps running up the stairs.

Oodie sighs as I pat her on the head, watching the first candle fizzle out, sending fine wisps of black smoke to twirl and twist

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in the cool air of the drawing room. I'm not usually allowed in here on my own.

Half an hour ago Mum and Dad had been bringing in presents; Papa came in with a handful of cards, now fanned out neatly on the arm of the sofa. The plates, forks, rolled napkins, cups are all set for my birthday tea.

I'm waiting.

But Mum, Dad and Papa have gone somewhere else, they rushed out the door as if there could be something more important than my birthday.

I climb off the settee and look out the bay window to see Papa hurrying down the Long Drive, going somewhere exciting. Oodie jumps up, her front paws on the window ledge. She isn't allowed in the drawing room either.

I slide off the chair, ready to follow Papa, but Oodie pauses, reminding me to blow the rest of the candles out. Collies are very sensible.

Then we both scamper into the hall and erupt out the front door onto the gravel. Papa is almost out of sight, nearly at the bottom of the garden. Oodie and I try hard to keep up with him but he's walking quickly. I guess where he's going. Our favourite place, the Benbrae, the pond where the *Curlew* was moored. Papa is planning a wee surprise for my birthday.

But Papa doesn't turn off the drive, he walks towards the woods, not the sunny bit round the Benbrae but the dark bit where the faerie pools are. I'm not allowed in there either.

I can't see Papa at all now but Oodie's sniffing the air. It doesn't seem fair that I'm standing in my garden on the day of my fourth birthday with only my dog for company.

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I call out for Papa, as loud as I can. There's no reply except for my echo rolling back across the water. The ponds look warm and welcoming but I know they are full of deep, black, cold water. If I fell in, I would never get out.

With my hand on Oodie's hairy shoulder, I set off after Papa, down to the narrow dark path. We go slowly, so that Papa can't hear us and then I can jump out and shout '*boo*'.

It takes me a while to get to the faerie pool where I see Papa at the overhanging trees on the bank at the far side. He's putting a necklace on, then he takes a step out over the water.

He drops.

There is a thump. Papa dances on the end of the thrumming rope, arms and legs and head all going, then he winds down until it's just his feet twitching, like his batteries have run out.

I see a shadow in the trees. Somebody is giving Papa a little push, just to keep him dancing.

# ONE

## Monday 2019

**MEGAN**

I had learned early that it was better to drown in silence than to swim in a world of noise. Noise is nothing but a painful distraction from the truth.

Noise is abhorrent.

So I hated to walk out of my beautiful soundless world and into the hot city street and a riot of rabble. Retreating to the quiet was not an option, I was heading out on a journey that I didn't want to start.

The keys to the Merc were in my hand; they were a symbol of the advantages of being a Melvick; the money, the name, the house; here is a car to take you anywhere. And the disadvantage of being me; here is a car so you can always come home and do your duty.

There's no excuse, Megan.

Not now.

At the traffic lights, a couple of kids were screaming on the

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pavement, their red angry little mouths opening and closing, throats tightened. Mums were laughing, talking, scrolling on phones. Three teenagers were losing themselves in their headphones, bouncing on anxious heels as they wait to cross the road. As I joined them, I felt the constant boom of the bass beat, knowing that the delicate tympanic membranes in their youthful ears will thicken and scar, a revenge kept for later life when all their conversations will become half-heard and half-imagined.

My car was parked across the road, the door opened immediately as I pressed the fob, waiting for the traffic lights to change colour. Then the crowd and I moved, we didn't touch, didn't collide, we smiled and sidestepped in unison.

Glasgow was still that kind of city.

I felt the traffic vibrate the hot air as I jogged across the road, cutting the diagonal to get to my car. A delivery man, driving up the inside, didn't see me and his van juddered to a halt. I smelled his brakes and felt his fury as his passenger rolled down his window and his mouth moved, eyes angry and narrow. Did he realise how stupid he looked as I lip-read the words 'fucking, pavement, stupid, bitches'.

Glasgow is that kind of city as well.

We were warming up for another day in the low eighties, the air already stale and fetid, stinking of sweat and alcohol as if the city had not breathed since the weekend's drunken revelries.

Maybe going home is a good thing.

Home.

Strange word for the place, the sound of it was foreign on my tongue.

I got in the car and slung my handbag onto the passenger

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seat that had never seen a passenger, the laptop and my small travel bag on the floor.

The Merc was a birthday present. A gift the day I left the Benbrae Estate.

My dad thought the car was fitting only because he had already bought one for Melissa the day she left to go to university. It was the *right thing to do*.

The fact that I didn't want it, or need it, was neither here nor there.

My dad, Ivan Melvick, the Lord Lieutenant of the County, is like that.

**BY THE TIME THE** ferry docked at Hunter's Quay, I was already queasy. The crossing from McEnroe's Point is only twenty minutes. It's a journey I have endured many times but never without that creeping uneasiness as the ground moved under my feet.

Usually, I sat in the coffee bar, concentrating on the horizon, ignoring the holidaymakers in their bright summer clothes, wrestling with wheeled cases and overexcited children. I kept them on the periphery of my vision, mindful of any sudden change in their behaviour, paranoid of an emergency siren that I won't hear. I glanced at the emergency exit. Closed. No flashing lights. Nobody was hurrying.

When they do move, there is a synchronized choreography to it; phones swiped off, newspapers folded, computer games ceased, tablets folded away, everybody rises leaving paper cups and crumpled napkins littering the tables.

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Out on deck, the glare of the sun was matched by the ferocity of the chilling wind that raced in from the North Sea. From the top of the stairs, I could see the opening to the Holy Loch, the wide arm of water that ran northwards from the Clyde estuary to peter out onto an ever-changing beach near Kilmun and above that, the narrows that connected to the Benbrae and the faerie pools beyond; the boundary of the Benbrae Estate.

Home.

In the distance, I could see the light-green patchwork of the trees round the Benbrae, the darker fringe of the Tentor Wood beyond, the folly of the Water Tower on the hill. They had belonged to my family for five hundred years and some things never change.

Like I know the rooks, as always, are circling high in the sky, drifting and watching.

Waiting.

For me?

I can't see them but I know they are in there somewhere.

They are as unwelcome as my memories.

**IT TOOK TWENTY MINUTES** to drive from the ferry slipway to the intricate wrought-iron gate at the bottom of the Long Drive. My favourite part of the journey was always the sweep round the top of the Holy Loch and then over the narrow humpback bridge; here was the real sense of being home. Then a right turn skirting the waterside again before heading slightly inland. I'm sure the road, and the view, looks the same to me as it looked when horses carried my ancestors up to the grand gates.

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I always slow slightly at this stretch of road, it's common for cars to U-turn here, pulling out from the innocuous looking lay-by with its neat recycling bin and small friendly sign indicating the pathway to the osprey viewing site. I am cognizant of that, but much more of the fact that this was also where my mother decided to leave us, driving off into the sunset with some secret lover. My heart still misses a painful beat.

It's been three years. I left soon after her and haven't been home much since; it's too painful. Every time I pass this point I go back to the child I was, a wee girl, one hand on Oodie's collar, my other hand safe in my mother's grasp, waiting to cross the road.

Mum needs to come back now. I have no idea what I will say to her, never mind what words will pass between my parents.

As I passed the lay-by, I saw a red Ford Fiesta parked, a young man in his shirt sleeves, leaning on the roof, casually looking at a map, or maybe checking what the sightings of the golden eagles are today. His right arm was holding a mobile to his ear. His strawberry blond hair glinted in the sunshine. I slow down as I passed him, thinking that the phone signal must have been boosted since my last visit. He raised his left arm when he saw me and I felt that discomfort of stranger's eyes meeting mine, and holding for a moment too long, questioning.

I return his wave. He knows me.

But then, everybody does.

**THE GATES HAD BEEN** opened, especially for me, like the maw of a snare trap, the key pad on its metal post stands idle, its sensor

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unblinking. The land is protected now, not because of us, but because of the eagles.

Many sensations floated through my body, through my mind, but being welcomed was not one of them. It's more like walking into jail to start a life sentence, although I'd never have to worry about a roof over my head or what I am going to cook for my tea. I might never have to think for myself ever again.

I drove the Merc in and then pulled over onto the lawn, rock hard after six weeks of constant sunshine. The car would now be visible to anybody watching from the house. To stay out of sight I needed to be in the Tentor Wood behind the ten-foot-high boundary wall, or down at the Benbrae, the beautiful pond created by a skilful gardener and the roll of the landscape. The dip and rise in the land had concealed many a mischief of the Melvick family over the years. I bet Dad was upstairs at the paladin window right now with his photographs and memories, pretending that he's not watching and waiting for me. That window was my favourite place in the house too, up on the first floor, the wide arc of glass that showcased the magnificent view. Many a picnic we had there as kids, Melissa and I, Mum and the dogs, sandwiches and lemonade on rainy summer days. Those reminiscences were now ruined, overwritten by the nightmare memory of Melissa and Jago speeding off in their Jag, the carousel at a standstill, the police cars strobing their lights over the water. I can still feel the throbbing of that helicopter landing close by.

Life spins like a carousel, moving on a spindle.

Like the rooks, still circling in the sky.

I got out the car to take a minute to myself, drinking in this view, this peaceful view. The still, deep water of the Benbrae

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pool, the weeping willows brushing their leaves on the surface, the small copse of trees that bordered the water on the far side before they merged into the darker, ancient trees of the Tentor Wood. The small path, Melissa's path, was overgrown and dry now. That seemed apposite.

A few steps up the rise of the lawn and the best view of the Italian House revealed itself to the eye. The building was stunningly beautiful, the weathered grey stone outlined against the backdrop of the brilliant azure sky. It was a work of incredible symmetry; the elegance of the first-floor balconies, the low wall around the ground floor, the two grass terraces below that and then the long stretch of verdant grass that ran towards me, and beyond to the banks of the Benbrae. Everything from this spot drew the eye upwards to the majesty of the house and that huge paladin window. It always took the breath away, designed to do exactly that by one of the lesser known Glasgow School architects. He had made an excellent job of it.

It's easy to forget the huge heating bills, the porous roof and the ever-present smell of damp.

One day, those bills and that roof, would be all mine.

Then I saw the boathouse, rebuilt and pristine, baskets of flowers swinging on the wall, the hooks neatly resting on their cradles. *Curlew 2* will be tied up at her pontoon, like her predecessor had been for a hundred years, like the ancestry of the cappuccino-coloured ponies pulling at the grass in the home field.

Deceitful memories of my youth came flooding back, portraying an idyllic childhood in this paradise; dragging the canvas trolley out the boathouse loaded with rugs, books, dogs

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and sandwiches. Heading off for a picnic, Oodie stealing the biscuits, swimming in the Benbrae, sunny, walking the ponies through the water, long, long balmy days when summers lasted forever.

I thought things would not change; kids don't. I expected permanence in my life; Dad, Mum, Melissa and Carla, but it looks like I was wrong on three counts, and hope for the fourth was fading. We still have the ponies, the dogs and the *Curlew*. They were here long before I was born and no doubt will be here long after I have died. The dogs are buried in the orchard in childish graves with painted stone cairns. Martha, Fern, and my own Oodie, the collie who ate my birthday cake the day Papa passed away. All my memories were trapped down here, like the leaves that tumble with the wind, trying to get free but inevitably getting caught, stuck at the bottom of the wall. They were as ensnared as my family were.

The *Curlew 2* sat low in the water, her varnished mahogany prow sticking beyond the end of the pontoon, her brass rowlocks glinting like she's winking at me. The water level has dropped since I was here last, no doubt an effect of the hot weather which has dried the earth and burned the grass.

I filled my lungs with the silence, taking time to settle myself, standing at the side of the water, watching the gurgle and slap of tiny waves against the bank. Timeless, comforting sights.

Running my eye along the north bank, I couldn't quite see the brightly coloured tiles of the sunflower mosaic, a memorial to friendship that lasted a lifetime; a short life, though. I can close my eyes and see Carla's elfin face, laughing, mischievous. She was always up to something.

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This was a house of many beautiful views. Weird that none of them are happy.

**DESPITE THE HEAT,** I felt the breath of a chill on my neck. The beauty of the Benbrae pond was always darkened by the danger of the faerie pools beyond. Were they called that when I was young? I don't think so. They were forbidden territory for Melissa and me after I nearly drowned in one when I was wee, but I can't recall it. The thick trees there were borne from Tolkien fantasy, as dark and dense as Mirkwood, isolated from the house and the road. It's very grown over now but I knew the faerie pools were still there. There used to be three of them, who knows how many there might be now. They appeared overnight as if by magic, hence the name but like much that was magical, the reality was mundane. They were merely the signs of tidal water eroding the subterranean soil. I preferred the faeries explanation, dark faeries who lurked in the flowers and the deep dank grass where no sunshine penetrated to warm their cold hearts, they waited there to drag children and adulterous wives into the murky depths. The police searched the pools after my mother disappeared, in case she had come to harm. Maybe while looking for a runaway dog, she had come across a pool sooner than she thought and tumbled in. They are impossible to climb out of, the banks roll in over the water, underwater branches and roots of surrounding trees catch on struggling feet, or strike the skull on the way down.

It wasn't true. Everybody knew that my mum, Beth, had left us for a man.

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Just like that.

This place hasn't changed, not really. The grass was a little longer, the trees were bigger, the wood denser, allowed to grow as it wanted after Tom McEwan went to jail. How long would that be now? Four years? His actual incarceration would be short; I have no doubt that he would be a model prisoner. The prison garden would have impeccable lawns and well-trimmed trees.

My memory caught and stopped.

It's remarkable how easily the eye picks up the familiar figure of a loved one. I could see Dad leaning against the bonnet of his Land Rover, his hand raised, cupping his eyes from the glare of the sun. He was looking for me, scanning the land at the bottom of the drive. Then he waved, and jogged towards me, maybe not something a man of his age should do. It's a long way. And then the dogs were running down the drive to greet me. Molly, the retriever, was a golden, galloping streak. Mo and Midge, the two Russells yapping and tumbling behind her, stopping every few yards to take a snap at each other.

I waved back at him, slipping my hearing aids in before dropping to my knees to hug the dogs, readying myself to go through the routine of being the perfect daughter. Then Dad's arms were outstretched, lifting me and swinging me round, the dogs jumping and barking. I laughed and warned Dad to watch his back. He held my face in his hands and kissed me on the forehead in a rare show of emotion.

'Megan, it's so good to see you.'

I smiled at him. Every time I come home he's older, slightly leaner, his once sable hair is greyer and longer but his eyes were still the blue of the Caspian Sea and his smile as wide as the

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moon. He's a very handsome man. Melissa inherited her looks from him and is, was, a very beautiful woman. I took after my mother, kind-faced and pretty, so I have been told, but never beautiful, not in the heart-stopping way Melissa was.

The way Melissa used to be.

'Have you heard from Mum?'

I truly expected him to say yes but he shook his head. 'Not a word, Megan. Not a single word.'

Trying not to meet his eyes my line of vision drifted past my father, up to the house, to the far window upstairs on the left, where the curtains were closed. My sister was in there, dying.

Then I saw the other woman striding purposefully down the Long Drive.

Well, well, well.

So it wasn't only the rooks that were circling.

### CARLA

*I can hardly wait for Megan to come back. After a year of speculation, there are rumours that it might be this week. That it might even be today.*

*It has been three years since Beth walked out, and then Megan, for her seventeenth, got her Mercedes. She doesn't think she's coming back for me, she thinks it's for Melissa.*

*All this homecoming is for Melissa.*

*That's what they think.*

*I think – I know – different.*

*I knew it when I saw the rooks swooping high above the Tentor Wood, squawking and cawing. They have been flying around the bay*

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*for the past few weeks, then the Benbrae, in the last few days and this morning they are right up at the house, black-winged demons. Soon they will be flying into the house, smashing their brains, smearing leaded glass with blood. I wonder if they know, if they can sense death and are preparing for what may come their way. There's talk Ivan will be out with the shotgun before the end of the week.*

*Their presence reminds me of Melissa's wedding day. The sun was very bright that morning too. Ivan Melvick said the rooks flew into the windows at this time of year, when the sun's rays hit the old window panes at a certain angle, and the rooks, stupid buggers, were attracted by the glint and the flare. On the morning of the wedding they battered into the paladin window, covering it with bloodied smears and black feathers. We'd be plunged into darkness for an instant with a sickening dull thud, and Megan thought they had died, bursting their brains, but rooks, like the upper classes, have very hard skulls. They bounced off, leaving us looking at a raspberry ripple sky.*

*That day my dad was in the middle of the Long Drive with a clipboard, overseeing the parking of two transporters, directing catering vans and the odd guest that was parking up at the house. He was an important man on the day Melissa, or Fucking Frosty Face, got married.*

*Today it's Megan's dad who has top billing. He has been pacing about downstairs, scared to go out and welcome his daughter back to the family home. When Megan sees Heather I think she'll realise how often Ivan has been mentioning her mum's best friend on the phone. Heather Kincaid is a bloodsucking, gold-digging little tick. With Beth gone, Ivan is now up for grabs and the bold Heather is right in there. I almost feel sorry for him.*

*Megan will pick up on that, she's sharp where her beloved daddy*

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is concerned. My mum is keeping out the way, knowing her place as the hired help and all that. She'll be in the kitchen making tea and providing sandwiches, preparing to pick up the pieces once the prodigal one has passed away.

*I've never liked Melissa.*

*And she's always hated me.*

*Strange how things pan out. I am scared that they will pull Megan apart now she's back, just as they destroyed Melissa, just as they drove Beth away.*

*Megan is delicate and she'll not come to harm, not while I am here.  
Over my dead body.*

*I have the same memories of the wedding day as Megan.*

*I remember the carousel starting up, slowly at first, with Jago and Melissa, the newlyweds, both on the same horse. The barrel organ music rolled out down the Long Drive, discordant in the night sky. It rolled over the water as the spinning rhythm wound up and the starey-eyed horses flashed past, their coloured lights dappling and dancing on the Benbrae. Then the carousel slowed, becoming more definite in form, horses and the bride and groom, those sweeping, magical lights changed to single bulbs covered in cheap plastic.*

*We all climbed on for the photographs, a battery of mobile phones. Melissa and Jago stayed on board, Beth and Ivan, Beth holding the reins properly. Megan and I hitched up our skirts and we posed on top of our mounted steeds, their painted bright eyes wide and red mouths open like they were out their faces on cocaine. Round and round we went, holding onto the poles with one hand and letting the wind whip through our hair; the flowers went flying through the air, the music ground on and on. The lights sprinkled over the land, brightly coloured, reds and blues and green, all flashing through the darkening air. Once*

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*it slowed, the guests lined up, ready for their turn. I had necked a few vodkas by then and I fell off, I lay on the ground and waited for my guts to stop churning and my head to stop hurting. I don't think anybody noticed.*

*Then I should have gone off looking for Megan as she hates fireworks but I didn't find her. She'd come to the Curlew as soon as she had escaped from whichever boring relative had pinholed her. I had been stockpiling a few bottles for our own private party later. The Italian House would probably be open all night so nobody would care if Megan was there or not.*

*I had planned a beautiful end to a beautiful day, out on the Curlew. She was at the bank, bobbing, there was nobody else on the water, everybody was drinking around the carousel, waiting for their ride. The oldies were climbing aboard, getting legs up onto the horses, some of them sitting side saddle. Those old posh biddies were probably on a horse before they could walk. But the carousel was a social leveller, the duchess and barmaid, side by side, laughing. Minutes passed, the music went on and on, I was out on the Curlew, close to the bank, drinking my vodka, waiting. I remember feeling warm and cosy when the first firework rocketed into the sky, bursting again and again, flowering sparks of colour all over the heavens.*

*Then the explosion happened.*