

# PROLOGUE

He was on top of the world. He ran and ran, blood pumping with sheer exhilaration, on through the woods, over the top of the hill, then up the stairs, two at a time.

Flying.

At the bottom of the monument, amongst the old beer cans and the discarded syringes, he started to scramble up. His trainers slipping on the smooth marble, his toes catching in the angles of the statue, his bloodied hand grasping, leaving red feathered traces on the stone, scarlet teardrops on the steps below. At the top, face to face with the soldier, he hugged his unyielding friend, telling him that he loved him before swinging out on an outstretched arm, looking across the night cityscape. He was beguiled by the twinkling lights, the deep dark scar of the Clyde and the unhurried fireflies of red and amber on the motorway. He breathed in deep, taking in the sight of all that was below him, knowing that he was a hawk, and that all this was his.

He could dive if he wanted.

He could fly if he wanted.

He regarded the little people, the rooftops and the dear green city.

He closed his eyes, feeling the energy in the air, let go and launched himself into space. For an eternity, all he could see were the trees swirling below him, the clouds dancing above him, and the grass, the green sweet grass that welcomed him so warmly.

He wasn't sure when he hit the ground. He was just there. No longer flying. Now embraced by Mother Earth, a small stone cutting

into the skin of his cheek. One leg was twisted to the side. His shoulder wasn't where it should be.

A comforting hand was on his arm, giving him a reassuring pat, then fingers slipping his iPhone from his pocket and a voice asking him for his PIN number, telling him that help was on the way.

# ONE

Tuesday, 5 July, nine days before

The day was dying. Long shadows followed the two lads creeping round the outer walls of Otterburn House, their silhouettes echoing furtive movement before being absorbed by the ivy on the bricks of the old mansion. Once through the arch at the walled garden, they dropped their hoods and started to swagger.

They moved in silence though they knew no one was home to overhear. Their only companions were their shadows, and they weren't much for talking.

Scotto gave the cars the once-over: the Lexus, the Jaguar, the Land Rover and the Audi. They'd turn a pretty penny if only he had the right contacts. He saw Bainsy pointing to the lower window – a single pane, wide enough for them to get through easily; they were skinny wee guys, built for speed. Scotto fixed some duct tape to the leaded glass before knocking it gently with his favourite mallet. A lightning bolt cracked across the pane, and the accompanying snap echoed around the darkening garden, caught by the high hedges. The rooks took flight and headed for the cover of the trees.

They waited. No alarm, no lights. No shouts, no slippered footsteps rushing across the hall, no barking dogs. No response to the noise. Just the angry cawing of the circling birds.

Scotto tapped round the edges of the frame, easing the larger shards of glass on to the tape before lifting them clear of the wooden casing and settling them against the ivy. He lifted the remaining jagged pieces with his gloved fingers, chucking them over his shoulder where they nestled amongst the cream-coloured stones of the driveway. He

hefted himself up, sitting on the edge and swung his legs over, the soles of his trainers squeaking as he landed on the tiled floor.

Bainsy, the shorter of the two, took a running jump at it.

They flicked their phones on, swiped to torch and flitted the beams across the white tiles of the kitchen, the rugs, the eight-burner cooker and the copper pans hanging from the ceiling. The glimmer from Scotto's phone halted for a moment as it highlighted the wine rack. He'd heard there was a whisky collection here as well. That'd be worth a few bob if he could get it to the right guys in Glasgow.

Bainsy nudged him, telling him to get a move on, reminding him what they were here for. They sneaked through to the older part of the house where the hall's wooden panelling was festooned with weapons and armour, three storeys rising above them. The staircase circled all four walls to the top landing in the apex of the eaves, the clouded sky clearly visible through the roof window, as were the gyrating birds. Scotto looked up and felt uneasy; he'd never seen anything like it. The McGregor family had lived here for generations. They were minted.

And they were here for a bit of rock? It didn't make sense.

All around him he could see small valuables, easily disposable for cash. But Bainsy was only after the stone, the Devil Stone. He was obsessed with it.

The gossip around the village was that the McGregor family were away on a cruise, and Otterburn House, with its treasures and secrets, had been sitting empty, alone behind the wrought iron gates. It would be rude not to pay it a visit.

Scotto looked at the panelled walls with the stag's head trophies, the long drapes of tapestry portraying the family crest above, and below, the wide carpet, blood red and fastened by bright brass rods. He leaned on the newel post, sniffing, jerked his hood up a little higher, pulling a face at Bainsy. 'Something's crawled in here and fuckin' died. It's mingin'.

'It's an old hoose, of course it stinks. There'll be deid rats an' folk's

grannies up the chimney. Come oan, the old yin keeps it oan her fireplace. Find her bedroom and we find the ... Jesus! He pulled back at the sight of a giant stag's head on the half-landing, fourteen-point antlers, the beam of the torch catching its glassy eye. 'Ohhh, Ah nearly shat masel.' Bainsy sat down on the red carpet, his cuff gathered in his hand, jamming it in his mouth as tears streamed from his eyes, trying to stop laughing.

The stag regarded them with disapproval.

'Oh deer,' said Scotto, joining in with the laughter. 'Get it? Oh deer.'

'Fuck's sake, man, come oan.' Bainsy got to his feet, unsteady, farted and yanked up the waist of his jeans that had dropped down his hips to bare the legend Dolce & Gabbana on the waistband of his counterfeit boxers.

They started up the stairs again. Scotto looked at the figure in the window, wondering who the guy with the beard and doleful eyes was. Moses? Noah? Jesus? Some bloke in an amber tunic and burgundy robe, a lamb at his feet. He wished those brown eyes would stop following him.

Thou shalt not steal.

Bainsy was made of stronger stuff. He didn't give a toss about Jesus or the cross or what it all stood for. The faith of lambs right enough. He followed the master of the fire. And he was reclaiming the stone.

The smell was stronger here, thick enough to chew, causing Bainsy to cough and flip up his hoodie again. 'Ah think they fucked off oan holiday and left the dug, and it's crawled intae a corner and died.'

'Smells like it crawled up your arse and died. That's rotten, pure rank, by the way.'

'Why's it so fucking dark?'

'The tint't windae. Ma pals got a motor like tha', cannae see a fuckin' thing. And naw, yer naw puttin' a light oan.'

Something, some feral sense of self-preservation, stopped them at the top of the stairs. A little pause to steady the nerves, yet they knew there was nobody in the house.

Bainsy turned to take a last look at Jesus, checking he was still immortalised in glass and not following them to remind them of the way of the light as they continued up and along into the valley of darkness.

Scotto stepped onto the first-floor landing. The beam of light over the ornate ceiling showed it was bigger than his flat back in Glasgow. The old woman, old McGregor, would have her bedroom up here. According to Bainsy, she was worth millions; she had diamonds, necklaces. She might even have a bloody tiara. And she had the Deilstane, resting on velvet in a glass display case, sitting on the marble hearth, fire and brimstone bleeding together. Bainsy had been telling him some shite about a stone that bled real blood. Too much of the old Mary Jane, that was Bainsy's trouble. Scotto had his own plan to steal anything small enough to pocket and get it back to Glasgow, get it sold and make some dosh. He'd keep that from Bainsy, who was insisting a blood-stained bit of rock was going back to its rightful owner.

At the moment, Bainsy was standing still, merely tilting his wrist as he shone the soft beam of his phone round the walls of the landing, the light moving over an oil painting of a few skinny horses before pausing on a large picture of some blonde bint in a long white frock. She looked a bit of all right, probably an ancestor of the McGregor family. Then the light picked up the slashes on the canvas. One horizontal, one vertical, the shape of an inverted cross. A feeling of faint pleasure grew somewhere in the back of his mind. He shone the beam from side to side seeing the shelves of leather books that lined every wall, the four archways that led off to different parts of the house and, in front of the banister, a grand piano.

'A fuckin' piano in the hall, eh?' Bainsy got a nudge from Scotto, a jerk of the head. 'What's that worth? How much d'ya think?'

'Aye right, Ah'll just stick it up ma jumper and away we go. Ya dick.'

But Scotto was looking at the candlestick on the piano lid, highly polished silver, worth a few bob but too big. More interesting were

the silver and gold trinket boxes, small enough to lift right now: eight of one, ten of the other.

Bainsy dropped the light beam towards his feet to see the blood-red carpet bordering the dusty wooden floor. The stink was worse here, bad enough to gag a ferret.

He looked down at the toe of his trainers as he kicked something soft; instead of the wooden floor, there was a patterned duvet, lying all fankled up, covering something.

Scotto's torch homed in. 'Some bastard's been here afore us. That wis ma plan – get the stone, get some good stuff, aw' oot oan a sheet, wrap it a' up then drag the whole shebang doon the stair. Looks like some bugger's done the job a'ready.' He scanned the light around, seeing the line of peaks in the duvet, in a row, like toes in a bed.

'Hey, look.' Bainsy shone the light across the floor, catching a maggot-ridden goat's head perched on a red velvet chaise longue; from it ran a trickle of dried liquid, two bright goblets on either side. Two daggers, their blades dull and stained, were arranged between. There was a black figurine, goat-headed, winged and forked-tailed as a centrepiece, and as the beam of light dropped, he saw the inverted cross and the charred book. Even he could guess, from its feather-thin pages, that it was a bible.

He started saying something that Scotto couldn't make out, then his eyes closed, opened again, and he smiled before moving the light down, giggling a little, jerking the phone, causing the beam to drop suddenly where it caught the ghostly white face staring at the ceiling with nacreous clouded eyes. Unable to stop himself, he looked along. Another face. Then another. Five of them in a row, cheek to cheek. Dried white skin clinging to thin cheekbones, mouths open, teeth bared. A single black slug was weaving its slippery trail across the grey forehead of a girl he recognised, a girl he had quite fancied in fact, Catriona McGregor.

In panic, he dropped the torch and darkness fell on them.

Scotto pointed to the archway through to the bedroom and screamed.

Bainsy saw two red eyes in the darkness, staring right back at him.

SCOTTISH BALLET'S PRODUCTION OF *La fille mal gardée* at the Theatre Royal in Glasgow had been hailed a triumph; the clog dance had been reimagined, the maypole sequence re-choreographed and the finale sent a crescendo of joy and praise echoing around the auditorium. The curtain dropped, and the pain, the sweat, the exhaustion of the dancers were forgotten in the euphoria.

Kate Miller sat beside her mother's wheelchair, eating a bar of Fruit & Nut, waiting for it to be over. Her own interest in dance began and ended with *Strictly*. Ballet was not Kate's thing, too much jumping around in silly tights for her liking, but her mother had loved every minute of the performance, no doubt rolling back the years to when she used to dance. Being a 'solidly built girl', Kate had never tried ballet.

And it cost a fortune. Just as these tickets had. Much more than Kate could afford with three kids living off her single wage.

As the principals took their curtain calls, tears softened her mother's eyes. Kate gave her a clean hanky before joining in with the standing ovation. Her mother raised her hands as far as her arthritic shoulders would allow, clapping with enthusiasm.

They waited, her mother rabbiting about the performance and the new principal male dancer, Borshov, as the other patrons filtered out the theatre. Her mother tapped his picture in the programme, as she explained some technical points. Kate nodded mechanically and risked a look at her watch, keeping an eye on the front doors and judging it was still too busy for the chair to exit easily. She sat back and waited as her mother droned on. Kate had parked in the Cambridge Street car park and, while dancing had kept her mother sylphlike in her youth, she was now a fair weight to push up that hill.



An usher came to chat to them, enquiring if they needed any assistance, which was shorthand for asking them to leave. The name 'Anna' was scripted in black on the bronze badge pinned to her red waistcoat. Had they enjoyed it? Of course they had. Kate listened as her mother prattled on, taking Anna's slim hand, forcing the usher to crouch down to speak to her eye to eye. This was going to take some time; her mum enjoyed a good blether.

But Anna was well rehearsed in these situations. She gradually straightened up, releasing her hand from the old lady's grasp. It was a cue that their conversation was over.

Kate nodded in gratitude, stood up and released the brake with her toe and slowly rolled the chair down the slope of red carpet as her mother kept up her incessant chatter, not noticing the folded programme slip from her lap. Anna walked alongside, nodding, saying, Oh, you were a dancer, were you? Did you ever perform here? By the time they reached the main doors Kate knew that Anna was engaged, studied pharmacy at Strathclyde University and had a rescue dog called Peanut. As they reached the foyer, somebody called for Anna's assistance, no doubt another part of the familiar routine, thought Kate, as the usher said goodbye and that she hoped to see them again before being swallowed by the darkening auditorium. A tall woman glided towards them, must have been an ex-dancer from the way her black hair was pulled back into a classic chignon. She handed the programme to Kate's mother, with a shy smile.

'You'd miss that when you got home,' she said, her voice low and melodious. Then she was gone, the eye-catching yellow of her dress disappearing into the crowd milling on the pavement.

'You hold on to that,' Kate told her mother; the programme had cost a hard-earned tenner. She began pushing her mum towards the multi-storey. It was twenty to ten, a quiet summer evening in the city. The air was still warm with a gentle hint that the chill of the night wasn't far away. The street was emptying, pub doors were open, but

most of the drinking now was in back alleys, backcourts, under gazebos and makeshift marquees that evidenced the recent pandemic. Glasgow had, on nights like this, morphed into Paris. Kate thought it was lovely to see. Two young men came round the corner, their jaunty stride bouncing them along, looking as if they had no intention of getting out the way.

Kate felt her mother tense in the chair, gnarled knuckles gripping tighter on her handbag. She subtly looked round, trying not to appear nervous, but the only people in sight were two women in front. One was dressed in blue, her neat bob swaying as she laughed at something, linking arms with her companion, the tall lady in yellow. They were chattering as they walked, slowly, probably recalling the performance. The two young men came close to the wheelchair then sidestepped, saying hello. The taller one, who was slightly more sober, blew her mother a kiss, to which the old lady responded, 'I wouldn't kick you out of bed.'

Near the car park Kate spun the chair, pulling her mother up the kerb rather than pushing. As she turned the chair back round on its rear wheels, a young woman, her long floral dress winding round her legs, totally absorbed in undoing the buttons of her light summer coat, almost bumped into them.

'Oh, sorry, wasn't looking where I was going.' She swiped her purple corkscrew hair from her smiling face, seemed to notice where they had come from. 'Excuse me, but have you walked up from the Theatre Royal?'

Kate opened her mouth to answer but her mum was too quick.

'Oh, yes, it was—'

'You didn't see a set of keys, did you? As you walked up? I think I've dropped them somewhere between here and the theatre.'

'Oh, dearie me,' said Kate's mum. 'No, we didn't see anything, did we?'

The young woman pulled her phone from her pocket. 'I've already called the theatre. I'd better nip back and see if anybody's found them.'

The trouble is, I'm sure they were in my hand when I left.' She shrugged, like it was hopeless. 'Well, I thought, I was sure.'

'The staff are still there – they were closing the doors when we left,' said Kate, wishing the woman would get out their way.

'I really need to get a move on.'

Kate murmured under her breath, yes, why don't you.

'Did you enjoy the ballet?' asked the old lady, sensing a gap in the conversation that she needed to fill.

Kate placed her hand on her mother's shoulder, sensing something off about the disparity of the young woman's stillness and her anxious words.

There was a slow beat before the summer coat flapped as the woman nimbly sidestepped to their right and Kate felt her handbag being jerked from her left shoulder, breaking the soft contact between her hand and her mother. The handbag was away, tucked under the arm of a skinny lad on a bike, pedalling quickly up Cambridge Street. Kate must have shouted as the two women in front turned to see the thief travelling towards them. They parted company, seemingly moving out of the way to give the bike a clear path. Kate saw the one in the yellow dress step out, right into the path of the bike. The boy raised both his arms like he was celebrating victory, the bike jackknifed, and he was in mid-air. Kate saw her handbag catapulting along the gutter, her phone and purse erupting from the open clasp.

'Oh, good God,' cried her mother, her hand on her chest, but the words were stuttered, her breathing laboured. A grey pallor rose in the old woman's face, her lips turning purple and her hands clamped on the arms of her chair as she fought for breath. Kate immediately reached for the mobile phone in the bag that was no longer there. Along the road the woman in the yellow dress was on her mobile, kneeling down beside the young man writhing on the ground.

Kate took another look at her mother and shouted, 'Can you call an ambulance?'

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POPPY THE LABRADOR BOUNCED to her feet, snarling before Betty and Doug heard the battering at the front door. It was too late at night for a casual visit; Betty Knox was already in her housecoat, thinking about going to bed. She held the dog by the collar and looked through the spyhole.

Wee Billy McBain and his daft cousin, the one with the stupid hair, were standing in the front garden. Bainsy was the bad boy of the village, always off his head on something or other, on the lookout to nick anything that wasn't nailed down. Rumours were that he had started carrying a knife. She didn't open the door but dragged the reluctant dog back into the living room where her husband was snoring again, the news muted on the television. She nudged his knee.

'Doug? Get the door, it's that McBain waster and his wee pal. Get rid of them.'

He muttered, 'Whit?' But she shooed him from his sleep.

She was too tired to be mugged, and certainly not by the likes of Billy McBain. 'Tell them to get to France. Whatever they're wanting they're not getting.'

Doug Knox was nothing if not obedient; he padded his way to the front door and opened it, still in torpor, and had no resistance when the skinhead rushed past him, knocking him against the wall.

'Jesus, gonnae get the polis.' The cousin's thick Glasgow accent came through loud and strong from the front garden. 'Get the polis, will youse?'

Bainsy looked close to tears. Knox could smell vomit on his breath, could see the fear and the tremor.

Was this a scam they were trying to pull? Knox was wary, but he doubted it. The cousin stayed out in the garden, staring blankly. He was so unsteady on his feet, Knox went out to give him some assistance, horrified to see the teenager's bleeding hands, the blood smears on his face.

Betty was at the door now. She knew shock when she saw it – the

pale face, the rapid breathing – and there was blood dripping from his fingertips. 'Oh, son, what's happened to you?' She put her arm out, and the teenager began to cry, sobbing and holding onto her as if for dear life itself.

'There's something fair amiss here, Doug,' Betty said, taking the cousin by the shoulders and marching him into the kitchen, where she sat him down on a chair and wrapped his hand in a clean towel. She could see a sliver of glass was embedded deep in the skin. She held onto him, looking straight into his eyes, asking him what his name was.

'Scotto.'

She asked him what the problem was. Had there been an accident? Was somebody hurt?

Scotto shook his head.

He was in a state: his big blue eyes red-rimmed, the flattened waxed peaks of peroxide hair, snot running from his nose, the blood-smeared face, two skinny bloodied hands of scarred skin and bitten nails. 'They're a' deid, all on the flair wi' slugs and stuff everywhere. We thought it wis a deid dog but it wisnae. It wis a deid goat, oan the wall, wi' its eyes hingin' oot . . .'

'William McBain, what have you been smoking?' shouted Betty over her shoulder.

Scotto pulled her back to face him. 'Up at the hoose, they're a' deid. Call the polis, Ah'm telling you, at the big hoose.' His head jerked on his scrawny neck. 'Up the hill, they're a' deid.'

'Otterburn House? What do you mean they're all dead?'

'A' deid and rottin' on the flair, Jesus! A' puffy. Stinkin'. There wis a deid dug and a deid goat and . . . oh God!'

'They were supposed to be on a cruise,' muttered Betty to her husband. 'I'll phone up, make sure everything's okay.' She walked to the hall, while her husband tried to piece together what the two young men were saying. What had they seen? Had they imagined it? Bainsy had a reputation for smoking all sorts. Betty came back in and shook

her head. 'No answer on the landline, and Barbara's mobile's not connecting.'

'They must be away. I'm calling the cops,' said Knox, looking at Scott who was still shaking, knee pumping like a piston, his face grey. The white towel round his hand was slowly turning crimson. He didn't trust these two one bit, but something had happened and it had scared them. At the end of the day, they were just daft lads, not even in their twenties. Knox's boys were the same age. There but for the grace of God . . .

'Get yer finger oot! They're a' up at the hoose, deid on the fuckin' flair. Fur Christ's sake . . . Oh, man . . .' Scotto was wailing now.

'You mind your language, son. Doug? Go next door and get Moira and Jim. I'm no' getting left with these two. You get the police.'

'Ah'm telling you, they're a' deid.' Scotto started sobbing. 'Ah'm telling you, the Devil wis right there, starin' at us wi' big red eyes.'

Betty rushed him to the sink as he began to retch again.

Knox got on the phone. 'I'm Douglas Knox, I live in the last bungalow in the village before the road turns up to Otterburn House. Billy McBain and his pal, Scotto somebody, knocked on our door tonight. They're in shock, I mean, deep shock. One has shards of glass in his hand, and they say they broke into the house and found bodies on the landing. And no, I don't know if it's true. From what they're saying I think it's the McGregor family. I think they may have come to some harm. The boys keep saying they're all dead.'

'All of them?' asked Constable Whyte.

Knox nodded. 'All of them.'