



**SHE HAS ALMOST
EVERYTHING.**

**THE REST
SHE'LL TAKE.**

MAGPIE

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BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE PARTY*

Magpie

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Dedication

*For Justin,
plot consultant extraordinaire*

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Part One

1

THE HOUSE WAS PERFECT. Well, not perfect exactly, because houses never are, but at least the imperfections were liveable with. The flooring, which had clearly been bought in bulk by the developer, was a shade too light, the wood-laminate a touch too smooth to pass for real. The plantation shutters were plastic and layered with thin spores of dust. Someone had made the odd decision to put a bathroom on the second floor with doors that led out onto a roof terrace. Marisa stood on this terrace, her sandals shadowed on biscuit-coloured patio stones, and she looked down to the garden below, which had a strip of lawn lined with potted plants, the soil newly turned. She noticed the quiet, which was rare for London, especially when you were this close to a main road. When she commented on this, the woman who was showing her around nodded.

‘Yes, it’s got a lovely sense of calm to it.’

It was this that ultimately persuaded her. Marisa’s own childhood had been studded through with noise. In her memories, it was always the sound she remembered first. The discordant hesitations as her father attempted to play the piano. The slamming of an oven door, the jangle of an overloaded dishwasher shelf. The raised voices of her parents’ arguing. The shrill caterwaul of her newborn sister’s crying. And then, when Marisa’s mother had left, baby clamped to her, the house in the countryside had fallen silent. There had been no explanation.

Her mother had hugged Marisa tightly before leaving, whispering into her ear that she would return for her just as soon as she’d ‘got back on her feet’. Marisa can remember looking down at her mother’s shoes and wondering what was wrong with them. They were a pair of penny loafers, the coin glinting through the ox-blood leather. She had tried, once, to winkle out the penny with stubby fingers, but it hadn’t come loose. Looking at her mother’s shoes, Marisa wanted to know why she needed time to get back on her feet when she was already on them. She wanted to know why her mother was going. Most of all, she wanted to know what was going to happen to her and why she was being left behind. She was seven.

Her father had worn pyjamas and slippers for a succession of long, stuffy days

and his stubble had grown out into a patchy beard. In those sludgy, ill-defined weeks after her mother had left, Marisa tried to load the dishwasher the way her mother had liked, rinsing off the plates and putting the knives in handle first. After a while she grew tired of the domesticity and left the dirty crockery piled up in the sink. And then she had been sent to boarding school and there had been a whole different set of noises to contend with.

This house was the antidote to all of that, she saw now. She had examined it online, zooming in to look at the grey front door and the steps leading up to it. The brick was the colour of toasted hazelnuts. The road was, in the parlance of estate agents, 'leafy' and in a prime catchment area for the local school which had been rated 'outstanding' by Ofsted. That was important, because they were going to get pregnant as soon as they moved in together. That had been the plan, and thinking back to her discussions with Jake, she felt an unspooling of tension, as if a warm stone had been placed in the palm of her hand.

Jake was her safety, her berth, her rock, her anchor. She had used all these words to describe him, albeit not to his face as he wasn't given to shows of emotion. This was partly what had drawn her to him: he was unruffled by events and his solidity was uncompromising. He showed her how much he loved her through the things that he did, rather than the words he said. She knew Jake mistrusted overt displays of affection because he found them insincere. After Marisa's childhood experiences, where passion was deployed by her mother like heavy artillery in a battle with no clear end, she was relieved by Jake's undemonstrative nature.

When she visited the house, it felt right for them: a sanctuary of sorts, but light-filled and blank enough to furnish with their own character.

The kitchen was in the basement, every possible dividing wall knocked out so that the room stretched outwards like a beach. There was a mid-century walnut table with eight spindly-legged chairs, and low-slung lights with pale blue enamel shades over the island unit. An industrial-sized cooker that looked like it could be used to launch a rocket. A fridge buffed to a perfect metallic shine, with an in-built water system that dispensed ice cubes when you slotted your glass into place. A vast television hung on the white wall, an inky black square with a dot of red light in the corner as if it were a painting that had just been sold.

The woman said she felt Marisa was just the right person to move into the house. Marisa smiled.

'These things can be so ...' Marisa searched for the right word. 'Instinctive, I guess?'

‘Instinctive,’ the woman nodded. ‘Exactly.’

It was when the woman opened the glass doors into the garden, folding them back on themselves like origami, that the bird flew in. It swooped in low and fast so that neither of them had a chance to stop it.

The woman ducked, shielding her head with her hand. Marisa winced. She hated birds. The flap of their wings. The sharpness of their beaks. The smallness of their dead pebble eyes.

A magpie. Black and white with petrol-streak purple across its feathers. The bird flapped around, panicked by its sudden incarceration. It was large, almost the size of a crow. It darted right up into the corner of the ceiling farthest away from where they were standing.

‘Shoo!’ the woman shouted, walking towards the bird, raising her arms up and down by her sides to scare it off. ‘Shoo!’

‘I don’t think—’ Marisa started. She had been going to say that she didn’t think it was wise to scare it, but the bird shot off before she could finish the thought. The tip of its powerful wing crashed into a small, intricately painted vase on the top of the bookshelf. The vase teetered and then fell, splintering into pieces on the floor, shards of it gathering along the skirting board.

Then, as if some spell had been broken, the bird seemed to understand where it was. It flew in a straight line out of the open doors, passing so close to Marisa’s face that she could feel the atomic weight of its movement in a gust of displaced breeze. It smelled mossy and slightly rotten. She imagined for a moment that she could sense the tickle of a feather, as if the magpie had grazed against her cheek in the mad flurry of flight.

‘Good riddance!’ the woman shouted after it, sliding the doors swiftly shut. The doors slotted into place with a sucking sound, and the muted noises of faraway traffic were cut off. The woman and Marisa existed once again in the centrifugal force of their glass and concrete bubble, with the outside world of feathers and fury made instantaneously separate. It felt peaceful, but also unnatural.

‘I hope that didn’t put you off,’ the woman said.

‘No,’ Marisa smiled. ‘Sorry about the vase though.’

The woman waved her hand as if to show it was of no great significance.

‘These things happen.’

They shook hands warmly and Marisa told the woman she would have a think and then she would be in touch.

In truth, she didn’t need to think about it. Jake was happy to leave decisions