

## Prologue

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‘Honestly, Mrs Hadley,’ said Meggie McGregor, wiping her eyes. ‘That sense of humour of yours will be the death of me yet!’

Jasmine Hadley allowed herself a rare giggle. ‘The things I tell you, Meggie. It’s lucky we’re such good friends!’

Meggie’s smile wavered only slightly. She looked out across the vast lawn at Callum and Sephy. Her son and her employer’s daughter. They were good friends playing together. *Real* good friends. No barriers. No boundaries. Not yet anyway. It was a typical early summer’s day, light and bright and, in the Hadley household anyway, not a cloud in their sky.

‘Excuse me, Mrs Hadley.’ Sarah Pike, Mrs Hadley’s secretary, approached from the house. She had shoulder-length straw-coloured hair and timid green eyes which appeared permanently startled. ‘I’m sorry to disturb you but your husband has just arrived. He’s in the study.’

‘Kamal is here?’ Mrs Hadley was astounded. ‘Thank you, Sarah.’ She turned to Meggie. ‘His fourth visit home in as many months! We’re honoured!’

Meggie smiled sympathetically, making sure to keep her mouth well and truly shut. No way was she going to get in the middle of another inevitable squabble between Kamal Hadley and his wife. Mrs Hadley stood up and made her way into the house.

‘So, Sarah, how is Mr Hadley?’ Meggie lowered her voice to ask. ‘Is he in a good mood, d’you think?’

Sarah shook her head. ‘He looks about ready to blow a fuse.’

‘Why?’

‘No idea.’

Meggie digested this news in silence.

‘I’d better get back to work,’ Sarah sighed.

‘Would you like something to drink?’ Meggie pointed to the jug of ginger beer on the patio table.

‘No, thanks. I don’t want to get into trouble...’ With obvious trepidation, Sarah went back into the house.

What was she afraid of? Meggie sighed. No matter how hard she tried, Sarah insisted on keeping her distance. Meggie turned back to watch the children. Life was so simple for them. Their biggest worry was what they’d get for their birthdays. Their biggest grumble was the time they had to go to bed. Maybe things would be different for them... Better. Meggie forced herself to believe that things would be better for the children, otherwise what was the point of it all?

On those rare occasions when she had a moment to herself, she couldn’t help but play ‘what if’ games. Not the big ‘what if’s that her husband sometimes liked to indulge in, like ‘What if a virus wiped out every single Cross and not a single nought?’ or ‘What if there was a revolution and all the Crosses were overthrown? Killed. Wiped off the face of the planet.’ No, Meggie McGregor didn’t believe in easting her time on big, global fantasies. Her dreams were more specific, more unattainable than that. Her dreams were all around one subject. What if Callum and Sephy...? What if Sephy and Callum...?

Meggie felt a peculiar, burning sensation on the back of her neck. She turned to find Mr Hadley standing on the patio, watching her with the strangest expression on his face.

‘Is everything all right, Mr Hadley?’

‘No. But I’ll survive,’ Mr Hadley moved forward to the patio table to stand over Meggie. ‘You were deep in thought there. Penny for them?’

Flustered by his presence, Meggie began, ‘I was just thinking about my son and your daughter. Wouldn’t it be nice if..?’ Appalled, she bit back the rest of her sentence, but it was too late.

‘What would be nice?’ Mr Hadley prompted, silkily.

‘If they could... could always stay as they are now.’ At Mr Hadley’s raised eyebrows, Meggie rushed on. ‘At this age, I mean. They’re so wonderful at this age – children, I mean. So... so...’

‘Yes, indeed.’

Pause.

Kamal Hadley sat down. Mrs Hadley emerged from the kitchen to lean against the door frame. She had a strange, wary expression on her face. Meggie felt nervous. She started to get to her feet.

‘I understand you had a wonderful time yesterday.’ Mr Hadley smiled at Meggie.

‘A... a wonderful time?’

‘Yesterday evening?’ Mr Hadley prompted.

‘Yes. It was quite quiet really...’ Meggie replied, confused. She looked from Mr to Mrs Hadley and back again. Mrs Hadley was watching her intently. What was going on? The temperature in the garden had dropped by several degrees and despite his smiles, Mr Hadley was obviously furious at something – or someone. Meggie swallowed hard. Had she done something wrong? She didn’t think so, but God only knew that being around Crosses was like walking on eggshells.

‘So what did you do?’ Mr Hadley prompted.

‘P-pardon?’

‘Last night?’ Mr Hadley’s smile was very friendly. Too friendly.

‘I... we stayed home and watched telly,’ Meggie said slowly.

‘It’s nice to have a relaxing evening at home with your own family,’ Mr Hadley agreed.

Meggie nodded. What did he expect her to say to that? *What was going on?* Mr Hadley stood up, his smile now a thing of the past. He walked over to his wife. They both stood just watching each other as the seconds ticked by. Mrs Hadley began to straighten up. Without warning, Mr Hadley slapped his wife full across the face. The force of the blow sent Mrs Hadley’s head snapping backwards to strike against the door frame.

Meggie was on her feet in a second, her horrified gasp audible, her hand out in silent protest. Kamal Hadley gave his wife a look of such contempt and loathing that Mrs Hadley flinched back from it. Without a word passing between them, Mr Hadley went back into the house. Meggie was at Mrs Hadley’s side in an instant.

‘Are you OK?’ Meggie’s hand went out to examine the side of Mrs Hadley’s face.

Mrs Hadley knocked her hand away. With a puzzled frown, Meggie tried again. The same thing happened.

‘Leave me alone,’ Mrs Hadley hissed at her. ‘When I needed your help, you didn’t give it.’

'I... what...?' And only then did Meggie realise what she'd done. Mrs Hadley had obviously used Meggie as an alibi for the previous night and Meggie has been too slow to pick up on what Kamal Hadley had really been asking her.

Meggie's hand dropped back to her side. 'I think I should get back to work...'

'Yes, I think that would be best.' Mrs Hadley's look was venomous before she turned and walked back into the house.

Meggie turned around. Callum and Sephy were still playing at the other end of the vast garden, oblivious to everything that had just happened. She stood and watched them, trying to capture herself some small part of their pure joy in each other. She needed something good to hold on to. But even the distant sound of their laughter couldn't dampen down the deep sense of foreboding creeping through her. What would happen now?