# WHIRLIGIG

by

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*The whirligig of time brings in his revenges*

William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*

To our children, for they carry the future in their hands.

# Prologue

The old oak whispers in the dead of night, fresh leaves rubbing against each other as a cool breeze catches the branches in a playful embrace. The tree stands alone in the glen, deep roots lying exposed on the surface where a rough track has worn away the thin topsoil. Higher up in the tree and concealed by the canopy, a rabbit gently swings suspended from a wire. The rabbit slowly descends through the hours of darkness, the movement so slight that it appears not to move at all. Minute increments, just one small step at a time. Measured.

The rabbit's head is held at a quizzical angle, as if this aerial view of the ground below were a novelty. But the rabbit's eyes are dull with death and stare uselessly as they bulge out of a furry face, morphed into an agonised sneer. The neck is broken and a wire snare holds the animal tight in a deathly grip. The wire continues higher into the tree where it joins with a peculiar mechanism constructed from bone and exquisitely carved wood. This arboreal ossuary is alive insofar as the other untrusting occupants of the tree are concerned and they watch its movements and listen to the rhythmic creak of its mechanical heart with suspicion. Each measured drop of the rabbit provides fresh impetus

to bone gears transmitting rotary movement via the main pulley, meshing with each interconnected neighbour in an intricate ballet of bone wheels, cogs and spindles, all held in place within a skeleton case of polished branches and carved twigs. In the heart of the caliber silently beats a balance wheel, a perfect disc of silver and gold.

As the stars wheel around the tree, clockwork on a celestial scale, so the tree-borne mechanism performs an intricate dance to its creator's tune. Dawn touches the eastern sky, and a blackbird bursts into song, notes falling over each other in pleasing progressions. A robin, then thrush and small flock of goldfinches join the chorus until the solitary tree is alive with songs enough to welcome in another day. The mechanism reaches a conclusion and a bone shaped like a barbed javelin falls out of the tree onto the rough tyre tracks below, a well-used route for vehicles following the lay of the land along the valley floor. As the bone falls, it pulls a captive filigree metal thread that snakes sinuously down from the tree. The wire passes through a carved contraption shaped like a wishbone, holding the edges apart to present a gaping noose just above normal walking height. The wire is mostly concealed in the tree's shadows, the leaves and branches serving to obscure any pattern to a casual observer. The birds quieten as the mechanism speaks, the more timorous fly off to find a quieter spot from which to proclaim the dawn. The blackbird studies the mechanism with a bright black eye until all motion stops, then finally satisfied that it offers no threat, returns to the important business of announcing that this is his tree. The Hanging Tree.



# FRIDAY 06:21

The front door slammed with such violence that the whole house shook, quivering timbers seeking comfort in the cold embrace of stone. Margo tensed in her bed, feeling the floor shake in sympathy. Nervously, she lay waiting for the angry wasp sound of his quad as it disappeared down the lonely track that led away from the isolated cottage. Only when the engine noise had faded did she allow herself to finally relax. He'd be gone all day, setting traps for the rabbits, laying poison for the birds of prey, shooting the mountain hares. Death. Death and violence were all she ever associated him with now.

Her hand tentatively reached out from under the covers and felt her face, flinching as her fingers encountered the bruise around her eye. It wasn't too bad. She had become a connoisseur of bruises, burns, broken bones. All of them her own. She could tell without looking that her eye would be swollen, the redness around the socket already turning to purple and black as ruptured blood vessels had spilt their red cargo overnight. She mentally ran through the foundation she'd apply, the beauty products she'd accumulated that artfully concealed the worst of the damage. Now that he was gone the nervousness left her like a shed skin, a protective

coat that was no longer needed. A butterfly flickered in her womb and the nervousness returned – but this time it was a visceral feeling, this time the nervousness was for a life other than her own.

Margo had hoped, in the way that so many women do, that the announcement she was bringing his baby into the world would change him. Turn him from a sadistic bully into the man she'd always wanted him to be: tender, loyal, loving. Loving. The word hung in her mind like some impossible concept, a young girl's dream of how her life should have been before it had turned into a living nightmare. Instead, the announcement had only made him worse and whatever demons drove him had been merciless in their response, leaving her concussed and broken on the cold stone kitchen floor. Her first thought had been for the baby, barely more than two months old. The second missed period had confirmed the truth of it to her and the doctor had made it official. She remembered the doctor's troubled eyes, they had shown concern, worry. "Is there anything you'd like to ask me, anything worrying you?"

Margo had attempted gaiety when she'd responded in the negative, and knew she'd failed when the doctor had lowered her voice to a conspiratorial tone. "You know we're here to help. With anything, anything at all." She'd almost run from the surgery, afraid that everyone could see through the artfully applied make-up and see the battered woman underneath.

It was their pity she desperately wanted to avoid. Their pity and judgement delivered with all too knowing eyes. The gamekeeper's cottage at least offered her the privacy to keep herself to herself, hide herself away, hide secrets that should never be allowed to escape. She swung her legs

out over the side of the bed, a sharp intake of breath as a healing rib complained, then to the bathroom to wash and repair what damage she could. Her face stared back at her, expressionless, beaten in spirit as well as in flesh. Margo waited in vain for the tears to flow. They never did these days. She told herself that she was out of tears, but she knew the truth of it. Tears were for those who still had hope, who still gave a fuck, if only about themselves. She glanced down at her belly, too early for any tell-tale bulge to show but she felt different, her breasts felt different. She felt as if she was about to come into flower for the first time in her life and that frightened her more than he did.

Mounted on his quad bike, Oscar seethed with anger, a litany of thoughts constantly revolving in his head and finding release in vocal outbursts as he manoeuvred the quad down the glen.

"Stupid bitch. Fucking pregnant. Who wants a fucking kid?"

The bike kicked under him as the tyres hit potholes and stray rocks and he found some pleasure in forcing the quad back onto the track, wheels expertly placed within the ruts of previous journeys. The back of the quad was laden with snares, illegal snares designed to kill outright – or hold any unfortunate animal in agony until he had the pleasure of ending a life. A rifle was strapped into place beside him, although the local deer population would scatter out of the glen at the first sound of his coming. He glanced at the third item in his arsenal, a tin of strychnine masquerading as engine oil, wondering how much he would need to force an abortion, then turned his attention to the track ahead.

For some unaccountable reason the memory of his parents

came unbidden into his thoughts, their holier-than-thou pronouncements more often than not accompanied by the lash of the belt whilst he grew as feral as any wild animal.

"Fuck them!" he announced to the air. A fresh wave of anger broke over him as he faced the certain knowledge that he was in no way equipped to bring up a child himself. Anger had accompanied him all his life, a constant boiling of emotion under the skin. His peers understood it and knew when to back off. Like the deer, they valued self-preservation and took care wherever Oscar was concerned. As a result, he found from an early age that he was accepted as a leader, someone who acted as a beacon to those whose personal inadequacies and failings found a natural home in his company. His disciples only served to amplify his worst excesses, applaud his cruelty and encourage him to transgress those lines even they would not dare to cross.

Oscar had left a trail in life as obvious as the one formed by his bike, crossing the glen day in, day out, in all weathers. His employer knew enough about him, more than enough to hold him on a tight leash. But Oscar didn't care; he worked the job diligently, burning heather, feeding the pheasants and grouse, killing anything else with an enthusiasm his employer chose not to notice. He was cunning, though. Any tagged eagles he poisoned had their transmitter signals masked, tin foil wrapped around the leg until the bird resembled nothing more than a turkey ready for the oven. Oscar took great delight in transporting the corpse, sometimes for a hundred miles or more, until the signal was allowed to be detected far away from the estate he worked. Sometimes he enjoyed targeting other estates, other gamekeepers who had looked at him in the wrong way. A rare smile touched his lips as he considered the latest victim of this ploy, due in court this

week. The smile swiftly disappeared as he saw the oak tree approaching. One day he'd burn the fucking thing down. It stood in mute judgement every day, since that silly bitch had been found hanging from its contorted branches. Perhaps the laird hadn't expected him to take the job, not when he had to face the tree every working day. But the job was the only one he'd ever been offered, and the cottage came with it – somewhere he could live without the pressure of eyes boring into his back. Plus, there was the bonus of work satisfaction, the killing. He'd almost inadvertently made the glen one of the top shooting ranges in Scotland, the number of birds that flapped inanely towards the guns increasing year on year.

It was, he decided, a mutually beneficial arrangement. One that also suited the inhabitants of the little highland town where he'd been born, growing into something uncontrollable until he was ostracised to this lonely glen. Suited him, and suited the local police, tired of facing him after every violent episode.

"Fuck them!" He spat this last expletive out as he thought of the police, the regular beatings he'd suffered in the holding cell after each arrest. Nothing stuck, no charges were ever brought to a satisfactory conclusion – he'd made sure of that.

The tree loomed close now, dominating the otherwise treeless landscape. A burn bubbled alongside the track, heather clung to sparse soil, the purple flowers scenting the chill morning air. Higher up the glen, bright yellow gorse and patches of broom signalled summer's approach and then a dark mass of cash crop conifers hugged the distant mountains until they too thinned out in the upper reaches. It was, in its own primitive way, quite beautiful. Oscar saw, but did not comprehend. He slowed down his approach. In places the tree roots lay exposed on the ground where the

bike tyres had worn away the surrounding soil. He stood up in his seat to avoid having his bones rattled by the action of tyres over the uneven roots, and his head was at a perfect height to catch the near invisible wire noose that lay in wait.

The force of the impact caused the wire to bite deeply into his neck, almost severing his head from his body as his cervical vertebrae parted with an audible crack. The quad bike carried on without him, before a random stone tipped it into the burn, flooding the engine. The ensuing silence was broken only by the wet gurgling sounds Oscar made as he jerked uncontrollably on the wire, a percussive countermelody to the soft bubbling sound of the burn. Shit and piss stained his rough clothing as his bowels opened involuntarily, pooling under his twitching marionette body to mix with the blood pumping from a neck wound. The wire had opened his flesh to form a gaping red grin, a second mouth, mute and savage. The last thing he saw was the hanging rabbit's quizzical death face, looking more like a final valediction of justice before his world faded into nothingness.

The kinetic energy absorbed by the tree destroyed the mechanical construction in the branches above. Carefully carved and engineered bone cogs flew in all directions, the wooden infrastructure turned to matchwood. The parts landed silently in the surrounding heather or fell pattering like tiny hailstones where they impacted the track. Only two steel wires remained, suspending the rabbit and Oscar aloft where they performed an aerial pirouette, bloodied bodies coyly facing each other then slowly turning away again. The sun shone through the branches and leaves, the dappled light lending a theatrical touch to the macabre scene. Before too long, the first flies scented the feast and nature began the inevitable process to reclaim her own.

In the cottage, Margo was dressed, her long red hair tied back into the ponytail that Oscar preferred. She viewed her face critically in the mirror, make-up and arnica barely disguising the darkening bruise despite layers of foundation. She pursed her lips, applying bright red lipstick as a distraction, a ruse to focus attention away from her eyes. The sheets would need to be washed; she'd bled during the night. Margo stripped the bed, efficient in her movements even though she held herself awkwardly, body stiff on one side where pain gnawed at her ribs. A new sheet pulled from the chest of drawers, fresh pillowcase, all in white and scented with a hint of coconut from the gorse blossoms she'd collected, imprisoned in a muslin bag.

She held the bag in her hands, pulling it tight towards her face to drink in the perfume. She felt imprisoned too. Trapped in this loveless relationship, captive in this isolated cottage, yet she was the jailor as well as the captive. If only… Margo stopped it there, she could no longer countenance any repeat of that mantra, no exploration of what might have been. If only! The words rang hollow, repeating in her mind despite her willing them to stop. "You've made your bed and now must lie in it." Her mother's voice: judgemental, strong with the certainty of religious fervour. Hateful. Margo's inability to blindly follow that same narrow path of righteousness her parents trod had driven her to this, unloved, discarded, unfit for the kingdom of heaven. Was it any wonder she had ended up like this? Knocked up, knocked about – just another piece of human garbage nobody cared about.

The day stretched in front of her like a forbidden prize; hours without Oscar and his vicious quips, his punishing fists. This time would end too soon. The sound of the quad bike heralding his return would start her shivering with fear,

painfully aware that any wrong move, any misplaced step, comment or perceived inadequacy would be sufficient cause for him to lash out. She started with the kitchen, scrubbing the floor clean of her blood where she'd fallen last evening, rearranging the furniture, righting fallen chairs. Her eyes fell on the knife rack, a housewarming present from one of the few women still willing to accept her as one of their own. In her darker moments she'd imagined uses for those knives. A swift end to her own misery, a long deep cut up the arm to expose the maximum arterial vein, blood fountaining out in reducing pulses. Or him. Taking a knife to him. She'd imagined it often enough, but it would have to be deep, and accurate – otherwise he'd finish her in a moment.

The child inside her, though. What could she do? She couldn't stay with him, yet she had nowhere else to go. The only way out of the glen was along the track and it would have to be by foot. He had the only transport. He'd see her for sure, watch her as she stumbled along the rough track, waiting to ambush her and deal with her as he wanted. He didn't want the child and she knew he wouldn't hold back from punching her in the stomach in an effort to loosen the foetus's tenuous hold on life. Her hands instinctively cradled her womb, eyes wide with fright as she realised how trapped she was, how trapped they both were.