BLACK GABLES

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Published in the UK in 2024 by Everything with Words Limited,
Fifth Floor, 30–31 Furnival Street, London EC4A 1JQ

www.everythingwithwords.com

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Printed and bound in Great Britain by
CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library.

ISBN 9781911427438



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The school lies at the edge of a dark lake in the village of Black Gables where the hills are haunted by the curlew's call. The school and village take their name from two looming black gables, all that's left of an old workhouse where many died. The walls between the gables are all gone and the gables form a ghostly entrance to the school, standing there like the backs of two stone beasts, all bramble overgrown and the wind whistling through dead windows. And beyond is the Stygian lake with its strange waters that change colours. The school building is of black stone and it looks like an old mansion in a creepy film, surrounded by ancient elm trees with twigs like witches' fingers that seem like they're about to reach out and throw anyone passing into the lake. Crows and pigeons lurk on the broken slates of the roof and wait for

schoolyard crumbs. They are the largest pigeons I have ever seen, with pale green-grey eyes and greasy dark feathers.

I wish Mum could have warned me about the school before we moved to Black Gables, this tattered ribbon of a village surrounded by boggy hills and old orchards buried in monstrous weeds and thick, green fog from the lake.

But Mum can't tell me anything. She lost her memory after the accident. She doesn't even know who I am. I wish I could scream "I'm Rosella Frawley, your only daughter who loves you," but it would be useless, because she'd forget it a second afterwards. That's why we came here. She grew up in Black Gables and the doctors seem to hope being here will jog her memory and bring her back to me and Dad. Something. Anything. The lake air. The birdsong from her childhood. The wind whistling through the bulrushes.

I will do anything to help Mum, but I don't know about this place and I don't like it one bit. Three crows with ghostly gobstopper eyes freaked me out this morning when they landed on my windowsill and strangely started pecking the glass. I swear they were giving me you're-not-welcome-looks. Black Gables is miles from nowhere. The roads are narrow with bends like Curly Wurly bars. They

are dirt tracks with loose gravel that if you fall would leave a deep cut.

The village is just a grocery shop, a pub, a long-shut florist with a rusty painted tulip sign and a very old-fashioned drapery shop, with clothes from the last century on display and some very weird mannequins with missing limbs. Rain is always moving in from the hills. The cars are streaked with mud, and I have a feeling this will be one of my Saturday chores: a basin of hot water to clean Dad's car. And there is no end to the clouds, stuck like tissue paper to the skies of Black Gables.

Sometimes it makes me wonder. Will I ever see the sun again? Will I ever go to the ice cream parlour in the mall, sit on a high stool and lick the pistachios from my cone and crunch them between my teeth slowly to get that sweet nutty flavour? Of course there are no ice cream cones and no malls in Black Gables. Houses here don't sell well apparently. The dark glen with the crow-black lake and crooked trees save the auctioneer from driving along the muddy roads and turning the front door key for viewings.

There's so much fog here, all the time. Sometimes, it is so thick the trees appear to have no branches. The houses no roofs. The school no classrooms. People say the fog gets

so thick, you can get lost in it and never find your way home. If someone goes missing, the villagers say their cries for help are lost to the blustery lake, wind and rookeries.

And people have gone missing in Black Gables – but no one ever talked about that before I came here.