

# HANGING HILL

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The funeral was held in an Anglican church on a hill just outside the ancient spa town of Bath. Over a thousand years old, the church was no bigger than a chapel, and its driveway was too small for the reporters and photographers who jostled each other for a good vantage-point. It was a warm day, the smells of grass and honeysuckle drifting across the graveyard as the mourners arrived. Some deer, which were used to coming here in the afternoons to nibble moss from the gravestones, were startled by the activity. They bounded away, leaping the low stone walls and disappearing into the surrounding forests.

As people filed into the church two women stayed outside, sitting motionless on a bench under a white buddleia. Butterflies swatted and flitted around the blooms over their heads but the women didn't raise their eyes to look. They were united in their silence – in their numbness and disbelief at the string of events that had led them to this place. Sally and Zoë Benedict. Sisters, though no one would know it to look at them. The tall, rangy one was Zoë, the elder by a year; her sister Sally, much smaller and more contained, still had the round, uncluttered face of a child. She sat looking down at her small hands and the tissue she'd been kneading and tearing into shreds.

'It's harder than I expected,' she said. 'I mean – I don't know if I can go in. I thought I could, but now I'm not so sure.'

'Me neither,' Zoë murmured. 'Me neither.'

They sat for a while in silence. One or two people came up the

steps – people they didn't recognize. Then some of Millie's friends: Peter and Nial. Awkward-looking in their formal suits, their formal expressions.

'His sister's here,' Zoë said, after a while. 'I spoke to her on the steps.'

'His sister? I didn't know he had one.'

'He does.'

'Strange to think he'd have a family. What does she look like?'

'Nothing like him, thank God. But she's asked if she can speak to you.'

'What does she want?'

Zoë shrugged. 'To apologize, I suppose.'

'What did you say?'

'What do you think I said? No. Of course the answer's no. She's gone inside.' She glanced over her shoulder at the doors to the church. The vicar was standing there, talking in a quiet voice to Steve Finder, Sally's new boyfriend. He was a good man, Zoë thought, the sort who could hold Sally together without ever suffocating her. She needed someone like that. He glanced up, caught Zoë looking at him and nodded. He held up his wrist, tapping his watch to indicate it was time. The vicar put his hands on the doors, ready to draw them closed. Zoë got to her feet. 'Come on. We may as well get it over with.'

Sally didn't move. 'I need to ask you something, Zoë. About what happened.'

Zoë hesitated. This wasn't the right time to be talking about it. They couldn't change the past by discussing it. But she sat down again. 'OK.'

'It's going to sound strange.' Sally turned the bits of tissue over and over in her hands. 'But do you think, looking back . . . do you think you could have seen it coming?'

'Oh, Sally – no. No, I don't. Being a cop doesn't make you a psychic. Whatever the public wish.'

'I just wondered. Because . . .'

'Because what?'

'Because looking back I think *I* could have seen it. I think I got

a warning about it. I know that sounds nuts, but I think I did. A warning. Or a premonition. Or some kind of foresight, whatever you call it.'

'No, Sally. That's crazy.'

'I know – and at the time that's what I thought. I thought it was stupid. But now I can't help thinking that if I'd been paying attention, if I'd foreseen all of this . . .' she opened her hands to indicate the church, the hearse pulled up at the bottom of the steps, the outside-broadcast units and the photographers ' . . . I could have stopped it.'

Zoë thought about this for a while. There had been a time, not so long ago, when she'd have laughed at a statement like that. But now she wasn't so sure. The world was a strange place. She glanced up at Steve and the vicar, then back at her sister. 'You never told me about a "warning". What sort of warning? When did it happen?'

'When?' Sally shook her head. 'I'm not completely sure. But I think it was the day the business with Lorne Wood started.'

# Part One

# 1

It had been a spring afternoon in early May, the time of year when the evenings were lengthening, and the primulas and tulips under the trees had long frayed and gone blowsy. The signs of warmer weather had made everyone optimistic, and for the first time in months Sally had come to Isabelle's for lunch. The sun was still high in the sky and their teenage children were out in the garden, while the two women opened a bottle of wine and stayed in the kitchen. The windows were open, the gingham curtains fluttering lightly in the breeze, and from her place at the table Sally watched the teenagers. They'd known each other since nursery, but it wasn't until the last twelve months or so that Millie had shown any interest in coming up here to Isabelle's house. Now, however, they were a gang – a proper little group – two girls, two boys, two years apart in age, but at the same private school, Kingsmead. Sophie, Isabelle's youngest at fifteen, was doing handstands in the garden, her dark ringlets bouncing all over the place. Millie, the same age, but a head shorter, was holding her legs up. The girls were dressed in similar jeans and halter-necks, though Millie's clothes were faded and threadbare in comparison to Sophie's.

'I'll have to do something about that,' Sally said ruminatively. 'Her school uniform is falling to pieces too. I went to Matron to see if I could get a second-hand one, but she didn't have any left in Millie's size. Seems all the parents at Kingsmead want second-hand now.'

'That's a sign of the times,' said Isabelle. She was making

treacle tart – weighting the pastry base with the handful of marbles she kept in a jar on top of the fridge. The butter and golden syrup were bubbling in the pan, filling the kitchen with a heavy, nutty smell. ‘I’ve always passed on Sophie’s things to Matron.’ She dropped the marbles and pushed the pie dish into the oven. ‘But from now on I’ll save them for Millie. Sophie’s a size up from her.’

She wiped her floury hands on her apron and stood for a moment, studying her friend. Sally knew what she was thinking – that Sally’s face was pale and lined, that her hair wasn’t clean. She was probably seeing the pink HomeMaid’s cleaning-agency tabard she wore over her faded jeans and floral top and feeling pity. Sally didn’t mind. She was slowly, after all this time, beginning to get used to pity. It was the divorce, of course. The divorce and Julian’s new wife and baby.

‘I wish I could do something more to help.’

‘You do help, Isabelle.’ She smiled. ‘You still talk to me. Which is more than some of the other mums at Kingsmead do.’

‘Is it that bad? Still?’

Worse, she thought. But she smiled. ‘It’ll be fine.’

‘Really?’

‘Really. I mean – I’ve spoken to the bank manager and I’ve moved all my loans around so I’m not paying so much interest. And I’m getting more hours with the agency now.’

‘I don’t know how you do it, working like you do.’

Sally shrugged. ‘Other people do it.’

‘Yes, but other people are used to it.’

She watched Isabelle go to the hob and stir the treacle. There were bags of flour and oats opened on the side. Every article bore names like ‘Waitrose’, or ‘Finest’ or ‘Goodies Delicatessen’. At Sally and Millie’s cottage all the packets had ‘Value’ or ‘Lidl’ written on them and the freezer was full of the feeble, stringy vegetables she’d struggled to grow in the back garden – that was a money lesson Sally had learned in a hurry: vegetable-growing was for the idle rich. It was far cheaper to buy them in the supermarket. Now she nibbled her thumbnail and watched Isabelle

moving around the kitchen – her familiar, sturdy back in the sensible mud-coloured shorts and blouse. Her apron with the flower sprigs on it. They'd been friends for years, and she was the person Sally most trusted, the first person she'd go to for advice. Even so, she felt a little shy of talking about what was on her mind.

Eventually, though, she went to her bag and pulled out a blue folder. It was shabby and only held together with an elastic band. She carried it to the table, set it down next to the wine glasses, pulled off the band and emptied out the contents. Hand-painted cards, embellished with beads, ribbons and feathers, all sealed down with varnish. She placed them on the table and sat there uncertainly, half ready to snatch them up and shovel them back into the bag.

'Sally?' Isabelle lifted the pan off the heat and, still stirring, came over to look. 'You didn't do these, did you?' She peered at the top one. It showed a woman wearing a violet shawl, sprinkled with stars, that she had pulled across her face so only her eyes were showing. 'God – they're beautiful. What are they?'

'Tarot cards.'

'Tarot? You're not going all Glastonbury on us, are you? Going to tell us all our futures?'

'Of course not.'

Isabelle put down the pot and picked up the second card. It showed a tall woman holding a large, transparent star at arm's length. She seemed to be gazing through it at the clouds and the sun. Her tangly dark hair, flecked with grey, hung long down her back. Isabelle gave a small, embarrassed smile. 'That's not me, is it?'

'Yes.'

'Oh, honestly, Sally – you're a bit too flattering with the cleavage, if you don't mind.'

'If you look through them all you'll see lots of faces you know.'

Isabelle shuffled through the paintings, stopping from time to time when she recognized someone. 'Sophie! And Millie too. You've painted us all – the kids too. They are *beautiful*.'

‘I was wondering,’ Sally said tentatively, ‘if I might be able to sell them. Maybe to that hippie shop in Northumberland Place. What do you think?’

Isabelle turned and gave her an odd look. Half puzzled, half amused, as if she wasn’t quite sure whether Sally was joking or not.

Instantly Sally knew she’d made a mistake and began hastily pulling the cards together, a blush of embarrassment racing up her neck. ‘No – I mean, of course they’re not good enough. I knew they weren’t.’

‘No. Don’t put them away. They’re great. Really great. It’s just that . . . Do you really think you’d get enough from them to help you with the – you know . . . the debts?’

Sally stared down at the cards. Her face was burning. She shouldn’t have said anything. Isabelle was right – she’d make hardly anything from selling the cards. Certainly not enough to make a dent in her debt. She was stupid. So stupid.

‘But not because they aren’t good, Sally. They’re brilliant! Honestly, they’re great. Look at this!’ Isabelle held up a painting of Millie. Little crazy Millie, always smaller than the others and surely not a product of Sally, with the choppy fringe and mad, shaggy red hair, like a little Nepalese street child. Her eyes as wild and wide as an animal’s – just like her aunt Zoë’s. ‘It’s just great. It really looks like her. And this one of Sophie – it’s lovely. Lovely! And Nial, and Peter!’ Nial was Isabelle’s shy son, her older child, Peter Cyrus his good-looking friend – the hell-raiser and the favourite of all the girls. ‘And Lorne – look at her – and another of Millie. And another of Sophie, and me again. And—’ She stopped suddenly, looking down at one card. ‘Oh,’ she said, with a shiver. ‘Oh.’

‘What?’

‘I don’t know. Something’s wrong with the paint on this one.’

Sally pulled it towards her. It was the Princess of Wands – pictured in a swirling red dress, struggling to hold back a tiger that strained on a leash. Millie had been the model for this one too, except that something had happened to her face on this card.

Sally ran a finger over it, pressed it. Maybe the acrylic had cracked, or somehow faded, because although the body and clothing and background were as she'd painted them, the face was blurred. Like a painting by Francis Bacon, or Lucian Freud. One of those terrifying images that seemed to see beyond the skin of the subject right through into their flesh.

'Yuk,' said Isabelle. 'Yuk. I'm glad I don't believe in this stuff. Otherwise I'd be really worried now. Like it's a warning or something.'

Sally didn't answer. She was staring at the face. It was as if a hand had been there and stirred Millie's features.

'Sally? You don't believe in stuff like that, do you?'

Sally pushed the card into the bottom of the pile. She looked up and blinked. 'Of course not. Don't be silly.'

Isabelle scraped the chair back and carried the pot to the hob. Sally pulled the cards into an untidy pile, shoved them into her bag and took a hurried sip of wine. She'd have liked to drink it all at once, to loosen the uneasy knot that had just tied itself in her stomach. She'd have liked to get a little squiffy, then sit out in the sun on deckchairs with Isabelle the way they used to – back when she still had a husband and the time to do what she wanted. She hadn't realized how lucky she was back then. Now she couldn't drink in the sun, even on a Sunday. She couldn't afford the good sort of wine Isabelle drank. And when lunch was finished here, instead of the garden she was going to work. Maybe, she thought, rubbing the back of her neck wearily, it was just what she deserved.

'Mum? *Mum!*'

Both women turned. Millie stood in the doorway, red-faced and out of breath. Her jeans were covered with grass stains, and her phone was held up to face them both.

'Millie?' Sally straightened. 'What is it?'

'Can we switch on your computer, Mrs Sweetman? They're all tweeting about it. It's Lorne. She's gone missing.'

## 2

At the police station, just two miles away in central Bath, Lorne Wood was all anyone could talk about. A sixteen-year-old pupil of a local private school, Faulkener's, she was popular – and fairly reliable, according to her parents. From the get-go, Sally's sister, Detective Inspector Zoë Benedict, hadn't had even a speck of confidence that Lorne would be seen alive again. Maybe that was just Zoë – too pragmatic by far – but at two o'clock that afternoon, when one of the search team beating the undergrowth next to the Kennet and Avon canal found a body, she wasn't in the slightest surprised.

'Not that I'd ever say "I told you so",' she murmured to DI Ben Parris, as they walked along the towpath. She kept her hands shoved in the pockets of the black jeans the superintendent was always telling her she shouldn't wear as a warranted officer with a duty to the image of the force. 'You'd never hear those words come out of my mouth.'

'Of course not.' He didn't take his eyes off the group of people up ahead. 'It wouldn't be in your nature.'

The site had already been cordoned off, with portable screens fixed in place across the path. Hovering outside the screen were ten or twelve people – barge owners, mostly, and already a member of the press, dressed in a black waterproof. As the two DIs pushed their way through, warrant cards held up, he raised his Nikon and fired off a few shots. He was a sure sign that word was getting out faster than the police could keep up with, thought Zoë.

An area of nearly two thousand square metres had been cordoned off, away from the eyes of the public. The path was loose, chalky gravel giving way on one side to the bulrushes of the canal, on the other to a tangle of undergrowth – cow parsley, nettles and grass. Officers had left a gap of about fifty metres between the screens and the inner cordon, limited by police tape. Thirty metres or so past that, in a part of the undergrowth that formed a natural tunnel, stood a white tent.

Zoë and Ben pulled on white forensic suits, tightened the hoods, and added gloves. They ducked into the tent. The air inside was warm and packed with the scents of crushed grass and earth, the ground crisscrossed with lightweight aluminium tread plates.

‘It’s her.’ The crime-scene manager stood a foot inside, making notes on a clipboard. He didn’t look up at them. ‘No doubt. Lorne Wood.’

Behind him at the end of a walkway the crime-scene photographer was circling a muddy tarpaulin, taking video.

‘The tarp’s the type they use to cover firewood on the barges. But no one on this stretch of canal is missing one. The guy threw it over her. To look at her you’d think she was in bed.’

He was right. Lorne was lying on her back, as if asleep, one arm resting on top of the tarp, which was pulled up to her chest like a duvet. Her head was lolling to one side, turned up and away from the tent entrance. Zoë couldn’t see her face, but she could see the T-shirt. Grey – with ‘I am Banksy’ across the chest. The one Lorne had been wearing when she’d left her house yesterday afternoon. ‘What time was she reported missing?’

‘Eight,’ said Ben. ‘She was supposed to be on her way home.’

‘We’ve found her keys,’ said the CSM, ‘but still no phone. There’s a dive team coming to search the canal later.’

In the corner of the tent a technician dropped a pair of black ballet pumps into a bag. He put a red flag in the ground, then sealed the bag and signed across the seal. ‘Was that where they were found?’ she asked him.

He nodded. ‘Right there. Both of them.’

‘Kicked off? Pulled off?’

‘Taken off. They were like this.’ The CSM held out his hands, straight and neatly together. ‘Just placed there.’

‘Is that mud on them?’

‘Yes. But not from here. From the towpath somewhere.’

‘And this grass – the way it’s been flattened?’

‘The struggle.’

‘It’s not much,’ she said.

‘No. Seems to have been over quickly.’

The photographer had finished videoing. He stepped back to allow Zoë and Ben to approach the body. The tread plates divided into two directions at the foot of the tarpaulin and circled the body. Zoë and Ben went carefully, taking the side that led to Lorne’s face. They stood for a long time in silence, looking down at her. They’d both been working in CID for more than a decade and in that time they’d dealt with just a handful of murders. Nothing like this.

Zoë looked up at the CSM. She could feel her eyes wanting to water. ‘What’s made her face go like that?’

‘We’re not sure. We think it’s a tennis ball between her teeth.’

‘Christ,’ said Ben. ‘Christ.’

The CSM was right: a piece of duct tape had been placed across Lorne’s mouth. It was holding in place a spherical object that had been jammed inside as far as it would go, luminous green tufts visible at the top and bottom. It had forced her jaw open so wide she seemed to be snarling or screaming. Her nose was squashed into a bloodied clot, her eyes were screwed up tight. There was more blood in her hair. Two distinct lines of it ran from under the duct tape down to her jaw – almost in the places the jaw of a ventriloquist’s dummy would be hinged, except that they met her jaw almost under her ears. She must have been lying on her back when the bleeding had happened.

‘Where’s it coming from?’

‘Her mouth.’

‘She’s bitten her tongue?’

The CSM shrugged. ‘Or maybe the skin’s split.’

*'Split?'*

He touched the corners of his mouth. 'A tennis ball forced into her mouth? It would put strain on the skin here.'

'Skin can't spl—' she began, but then she remembered that skin *could* split. She'd seen it on the backs and faces of suicide victims who'd jumped from high buildings. The impact often split their skin. The thought put a cold weight in her stomach.

'Have you pulled back the tarp?' Ben was leaning over, trying to peer under the tarpaulin. 'Can we see?'

'The pathologist's asked no one else to touch it – asked that you come to the PM. He – I— Both of us want her down to the mortuary just as she is. Tarp and all.'

'So, I'm guessing there's a sexual element?'

The CSM sniffed. 'Yes. You can definitely say there is. A strong sexual element.'

'Well?' Ben checked his watch and turned to Zoë. 'What do you want to do?'

She dragged her eyes away from Lorne's face and watched the officer on the other side of the tent label the bag with the shoes in it. 'I think . . .' she murmured ' . . . I think I want to take a walk.'

### 3

For a while Lorne Wood had been part of Millie and Sophie's little group – but then, about a year ago, she had seemed to grow apart from the other girls. Maybe they hadn't had that much in common to begin with – she had been at a different school, was a year older and always struck Sally as more sophisticated. She was the prettiest of them all and she seemed to know it. A blonde with milky skin and classic blue eyes. A true beauty.

That lunchtime the teenagers gathered around the computer in Isabelle's study, trying to get all the gossip they could, trying to piece together what had happened from Facebook and Twitter. There wasn't much news – the police hadn't made any public statements since the one they'd issued this morning, confirming she was missing. It seemed Lorne had last been seen by her mother yesterday afternoon when she'd headed into town, on foot, for a shopping expedition. Her Facebook page hadn't been updated in that time and no calls had been made on her mobile: apparently, when her parents had rung, the phone was switched off.

'It could just be a tiff,' Isabelle said, when the kids had gone back outside. 'Fed up with her parents, run off with a boyfriend. I did it when I was that age – teach your parents a lesson, that sort of thing.'

'Probably,' agreed Sally. 'Maybe.'

It was nearly one thirty. Time to get going. She began to pack up her things, thinking about Lorne. She'd met her only a handful

of times, but she recalled her as a determined girl, with a slightly sad air. She remembered sitting in the garden with her one day, when she and Millie were still living with Julian in Sion Road, and Lorne saying, quite out of the blue, ‘Millie’s so lucky. You know – for it to be just her.’

‘Just her?’

‘No brothers or sisters.’

That had come as a surprise to Sally. ‘I thought you got on with your brother.’

‘Not really.’

‘Isn’t he kind to you?’

‘Oh, yes, he’s very kind. He’s kind. And he’s nice. And he’s clever.’ She pushed her hair away from her pretty face. ‘He’s perfect. Does *everything* Mum and Dad want. That’s what I mean. Millie’s lucky.’

It had stuck in Sally’s mind, that exchange, and it came back to her now as clearly as if it had happened yesterday. She’d never heard anyone say it was a disadvantage to have a brother or a sister before. Maybe people thought it, but she’d never heard anyone actually voice it.

‘I wish they wouldn’t do that.’ Sally looked up. Isabelle was standing in the window, frowning out at the garden. ‘I’ve lost count of the number of times I’ve told them.’

Sally got up and joined her. The garden was long, planted with fruit trees and surrounded by huge poplars that rustled and bent when so much as a breath of wind came through. ‘Where are they all?’

Isabelle pointed. ‘See? At the end. Sitting on the stile. I know what they’re thinking.’

‘Do you?’

‘Oh, yes. Pollock’s Farm. They’re wondering if they can get down there before we notice.’

Isabelle’s house was a mile to the north of Bath on the escarpment where the steep slopes of Lansdown levelled out. To the north-west were the lowlands and the golf courses; to the east, and butting up to Isabelle’s garden, was Pollock’s Farm. It had

been derelict for three years since the owner, old man Pollock, had gone mad and had started, so people said, drinking sheep dip. The crops stood dead in the field, weed-choked; dead brown maize heads drooped on their stems. Half-dismantled machinery rusted along the tracks, pig troughs filled with stagnant rainwater, and the decomposing pyramids of silage had been broken into by rats and gnawed until they seemed like the crumbling ruins of a forgotten civilization. The place was notoriously dangerous – not just for the hazards in the fields, but for the way the land stopped abruptly in the middle, interrupted by an ancient quarry that had cut a steep drop into the hillside. The farmhouse was at the bottom of the quarry – you could stand in the top fields and look down through the trees on to its roof. It was where old man Pollock had died – in his armchair in front of the television. He'd sat there for months, while the seasons changed, the house decayed and the electricity was turned off, until he'd been discovered by a meths addict searching for privacy.

'The boys are worse since that happened. Honestly, it's like a magnet to them. They gee each other up. They just love frightening themselves, daring each other.' Isabelle sighed, turned away from the window and went back to the cooker where the treacle tart was cooling on a rack. 'It doesn't matter what I say. They pretend they don't but I know they still go there. Or if not them, then someone. I went down there about a month ago – and it's awful. The place is littered with crisp packets, cider bottles, every disgusting thing you could imagine. It won't be long before one of them steps on a syringe. I found a beer can in Nial's bin the other day and I don't trust Peter. I've seen scabs around his mouth. Do you know what that means?'

'No.'

'I don't either. I suppose I automatically thought drugs. Maybe I should tell his mother – who knows? Anyway – that place.' She gestured at the window. 'It doesn't help at all. The sooner the probate is sorted and they've sold it the better. I've told the gardener over and over again to close the stile off – but he just won't get round to it. They're at this age and you can't help thinking . . .'

She gave a little shiver. Her eyes went briefly to Sally's bag. Perhaps thinking about Millie's face on the tarot. Or maybe Lorne Wood. Missing for sixteen hours. Then her expression cleared. 'Don't worry,' she said. 'I'll keep an eye on her. I'll run her over to Julian's at six. There's absolutely nothing for you to worry about.'