

WAILING FOR MURDER

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Prologue

They were draining the Sandford reservoir. Small things were emerging from the mud and baking in the heat, but I didn't see the roof of the car until three days into our stay.

By the fourth day the top of the window was showing.

By then I could see that there was something, or someone, inside.



Chapter I

I'm being watched.

But I'm going to pretend that I don't know it.

I'm lying on the baked grass staring up through the leaves of an enormous tree. Small things are crawling over my ankles. I can feel them but it's too hot to move. Mum's sitting on a blanket next to me; beyond her are David and Anya, the two other archaeologists. It's so hot they've stopped talking. Even the pigeons have given up. The only sound is a generator and a softer drone, a summer hum of bees and crickets. Every now and again a hot breeze

rattles the dry grass and the leaves rustle overhead.

"Have some coleslaw, Dan." Mum shoves a small plastic box my way. It's encrusted with congealed mayonnaise.

Pushing it back towards her, I roll on to my stomach to look across the lake. To my left is the dam. A group of people are standing on the top, staring down into the green soupy water of the emptying reservoir. Some of them are wearing hard hats and high-vis jackets. They must be very hot. Every now and then they tap the huge pipes that are pumping the water out of the lake into the fields behind and say things to one another and rub their chins. I'm not sure what they're going to achieve by looking at the water. It's so thick with weed and algae that it doesn't even make me feel cooler.

Further round to the right is a line of trees.

Below them is a girl sitting in the shade of a tree. I don't think she knows she can be seen. I think she thinks she's hidden. She's got her knees bunched up in front of her and she's peering across the lake with binoculars.

I wave and she drops the binoculars.

I knew I was being watched.

I roll over again and sit up, resting my chin on my knees so that I can stare at her across the lake.

"Who's that, Dan?" asks Mum.

"Dunno."

"Go and say hello," she says.

"Mum," I moan. "I'm not four."

She waves her hand at me. "Too hot to argue – s'just if we're here for weeks, you're going to need someone to talk to."

It's getting cooler now. It still feels epically hot but I can move out of the shade without fainting. The birds seem to have woken up and they're swooping over the lake eating insects. Mum and the other archaeologists are back under their white gazebo scratching at the dirt. They're looking for the grave of a woman called Edith the Fair. She died about a thousand years ago and no one knows where she ended up, but when they started to drain the lake, someone found a gravestone and some bones, and Mum, who's a bone expert, plucked me out of my happy city summer and brought me here. I'm sure she'd be thrilled if she found a gold necklace or

something, but she gets just as excited by a skeleton, and she seems to be able to find out all kinds of stuff about bones just from looking at them. It's a sort of superpower. A bone one.

Across the reservoir, the girl with the binoculars is talking to someone. It's another girl, this one lying on her back looking at her phone. Tracing an imaginary path round the lake I see that I've either got to walk at least a mile along the back, or I could go the short way and cross the dam through the hard-hat men.

If I want to say hello.

The church bell bongs. I try to guess the time without looking at my phone, which is getting low on battery. We've been here two days – this is the third – and without something to do or someone to talk to, I will probably die.

Clambering to my feet I brush sweaty strands of grass from my elbows and knees. Opposite, the girl straightens up and picks up her binoculars. I pretend not to notice and stroll towards the dam. Two men in high-vis jackets have their backs to me. They're still stroking their chins and looking down at the village below. I step on to the dam,

wandering past them and over to the other side of the water. I can see where all the sacks of rubble are propping the whole thing up.

"Hey. Boy!" a voice calls from behind me.

Turning, I see a woman who has followed me on to the dam. The sun is directly behind her, backlighting her triangle of thin hair, neither blonde nor grey. Perhaps it's what Mum calls tobacco tint. More exactly, nicotine yellow. Because she's more of a silhouette than a vision, I can't really see her face, but her voice sounds older. She points over to Mum.

"Have they found her then?" she shouts.

"Edith the Fair?" I shrug. "Dunno."

The woman nods her head. "Plenty of bodies."

"Just one, I think," I say.

"I don't mean there." Her voice lowers and she indicates the reservoir. "Here, and there." She waves her arm to include the woods and fields beyond. "I know for a fact there's one in that field."

"Really?" I ask, imagining burials behind every hedge. "Does anyone know?"

"Huh!" she says, turning back the way she came. "Not because I haven't told them. They only look

things up on their gizmos they don't listen to me."

"Oh?" I say.

"I've seen everything. All the goings-on."

"Really?"

"It goes back years. I've always said, always told 'em, but they don't pay a blind bit of notice. They think I'm away with the fairies, but I know what they say behind my back."

She's shaking her finger at me, and with every shake; the image of great archaeological discoveries fades. I've been taking her too seriously. "Sorry about that," I say.

I hear distant laughter. The woman swings round to look at my watcher.

"S'that girl," she says. "Always sneaking about in other people's business."

"What?" I say. But the woman's already scuttling off along the dam.

"I see you've met Newspaper Woman," says the girl when I finally wander over to where she's perched on a tree stump, barely in the shade. She has tight braids in her hair, lots of them, and she swings them round as she speaks so that they take off and

land, pittering against each other.

"Newspaper Woman?"

"Yes. She lives by the church, catches the bus into town every day and brings back free newspapers. Dumps them at the pub because she thinks Granddad likes doing crosswords. So we call her Newspaper Woman." She waves a hand at me. "Hello, by the way. I'm Florence."

"I'm Daniel," I say. "Or Dan if you like."

"Hello, Dan. That's my sister, Emma," says Florence, pointing at the other girl. "Did Newspaper Woman tell you about the bodies in the fields?" She looks at me sideways. "D'you want to come swimming with us?"

"In that?" I point at the green ooze in front of us.

"No, in the river. It's lovely. Cold, though – do you mind cold? Emma'll come too. Won't you, Em?" She kicks her sister, who rolls over, still apparently glued to her screen. "She's not interested in what's going on here, only interested in stuff that comes through the airwaves." Florence points up at the sky as if a movie was going on about three metres over our heads. "She has a new boyfriend."

"Haven't," says Emma without looking up.

"Have – he's called Adam and he keeps lizards."

"Snakes."

Florence shivers. "Whatever. If he's interested in reptiles, he's a psychopath."

"What are you talking about?" asks Emma, sitting up and staring at her sister. She stares at me for the first time.

"Who's—" she begins.

"Dan, and he's coming swimming with us, aren't you, Dan?"