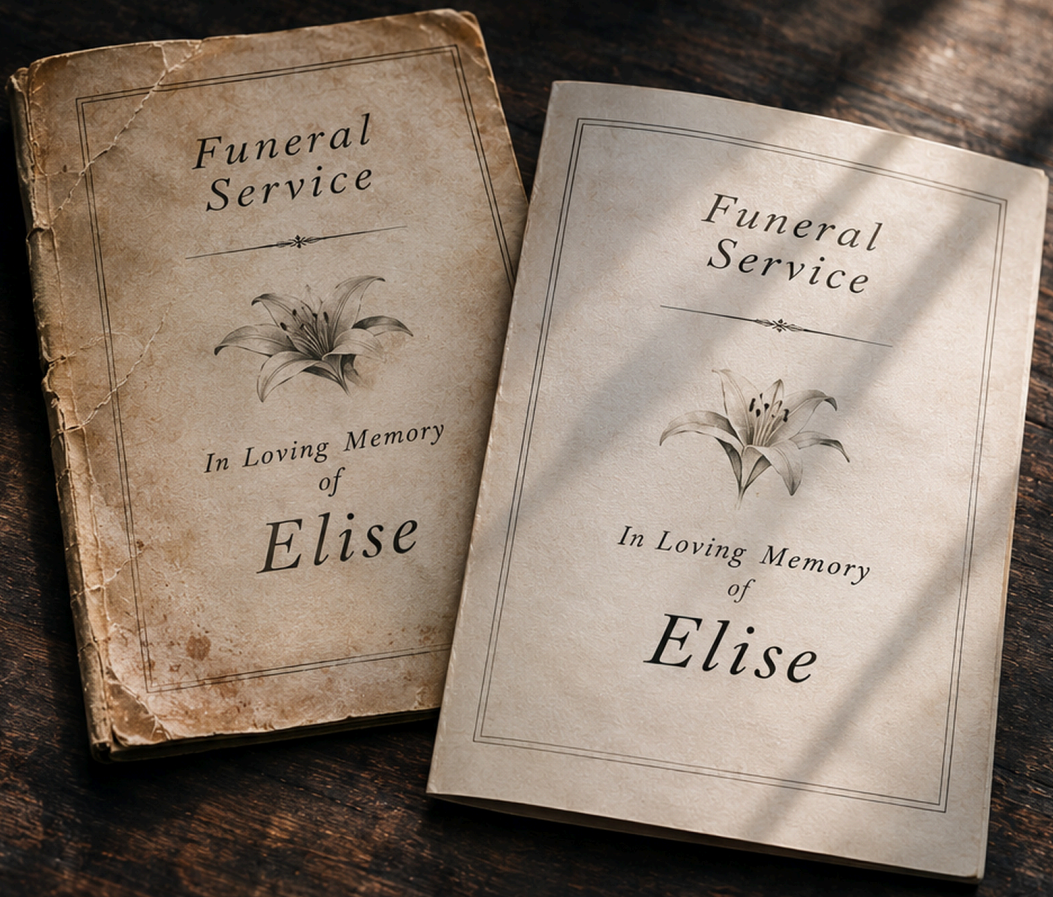
A PSYCHOLOGICAL THRILLER

MY SISTER HAD TWO FUNERALS



EVAN ASHCOMBE

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My Sister Had Two Funerals

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Content advisory

This novel contains depictions of captivity, coercive control, physical abuse, sexual assault, death and grief. Some scenes may be distressing.

Chapter One

The Second Death

Peter Callow had been trying not to look at his hands. Every few minutes he caught himself doing it again, rubbing the place where his thumb joined his forefinger, although there was nothing on his skin. The ambulance crew had brought him water and shown him where he could wash. Nobody had said he was in trouble. Peter kept asking anyway.

His terrier lay under the bench in the open police van, nose between her paws. Beyond the lane the woodland was screened by an old hedge, but Peter kept looking towards it. A horsebox had been turned around just beyond the cordon. Its driver was on the telephone, explaining at increasing volume why she would be late.

Detective Inspector Leila Morgan sat at the other end of the bench and introduced herself. Peter straightened when she sat down. The cup of tea between his hands shook enough to wet his trousers.

'I touched her. I said that to the other officer.'

'All right.'

'Only the shoulder.'

'Tell me how you came to find her.'

He looked at the dog. 'Moth went off the path. She doesn't usually. Unless there's a rabbit.'

Moth raised her head at the sound of her name. Peter reached down to her, then remembered his hands.

'I'd seen something grey down the bank. A coat, I thought. Somebody had dumped it. And then Moth wouldn't come away from it.'

'What did you do?'

'Called out. I can't remember the words.' He gave a brief, embarrassed smile. 'I keep trying to. Something like, Are you all right?'

'And then?'

'I went down. There was a hand, palm down, and I thought…' He stopped. 'I could still see the coat. I kept telling myself someone had dumped it.'

Leila waited. She wanted the sequence Peter remembered, not the one he might construct for her if she asked enough times.

'I touched her shoulder. I thought she might wake up.' His thumb resumed its work. 'She didn't. So I went back to where I could tell the ambulance where to come.'

'You didn't turn her over?'

'No. I was afraid to.'

His first statement gave the same sequence. That mattered more than whether he found better words for it this time.

'Did you see anyone else on the path?'

'Two riders, by the bridge. They were going away from me. There was a tractor, somewhere, but I don't know if that was today. You know how you hear the same things every morning.'

'We'll establish what we can.'

He looked directly at her for the first time. 'Will they say I've done something wrong? For touching her?'

'You found somebody who wasn't responding and you called for help.'

'Yes.'

'We'll need your account of what happened. That's why I'm asking.'

He nodded without seeming much relieved. His wife was coming to collect him after her shift at the surgery. He asked whether the woman had anything with her that gave her name.

‘Nothing we’ve been able to confirm yet,’ Leila said.

‘Right.’ He looked down at the phone beside his untouched tea. ‘I keep thinking someone’ll be ringing her. Being cross because she’s late. That sort of thing.’

Outside, another driver reached the barrier and began reversing along the lane. Leila thanked Peter, told him the police might need to speak to him again, and left him with Moth. She could still hear him telling the dog to lie down after she’d shut the van door.

The bridleway ran beside an old orchard. Windfalls had split in the grass, and the air smelled faintly of rot. A few late apples still hung among the branches. The track curved at a field gate and the ground fell away into hawthorn and bramble. It was a place where someone could step out of sight in three strides and still hear every horse crossing the bridge.

Leila signed the scene log and followed the designated route. Owen Hale waited above the bank, an access map open on his phone. The shoulder of his protective oversuit had split along the seam.

‘Did that happen here?’ she asked.

‘The moment I put it on. Haven’t caught anything with it, before you ask.’

‘Get a replacement before you go down again.’

‘Already asked.’

Owen had missed a patch when shaving. He had nevertheless recorded the ambulance crew’s route before anyone began interpreting footprints on the bank. Leila trusted him with things that bored other people.

‘No bag?’ she asked.

‘Not found. No phone. We’ve started the unidentified-person enquiries and traced the two riders. They didn’t see her.’

They stopped at the point Nadia Webb, the crime scene investigator, had marked for them. Below, the woman lay on her left side, her hair spread across her cheek. A grey coat had fallen open at her throat, revealing a blue jumper. One of its toggles was missing. The exposed hand rested in the grass, neither clenched nor open. She

looked young to Leila, perhaps twenty-eight, perhaps younger. Her face was turned towards the brambles.

Nadia came up from the bank and showed them the places where the vegetation had been pressed flat. Rain and the first responders had already disturbed some of the ground. Elsewhere, hoof marks cut through impressions Nadia hadn't yet identified.

'Could she have come down from the path herself?' Leila asked.

'Yes. But those disturbances don't tell us how, or when.' Nadia indicated a narrow strip of ground the first responders had avoided. 'We may get something more useful here.'

'What about her shoes?'

'Photographed. Nothing distinctive yet.'

They were dark, ordinary shoes, with soles ill-suited to a wet bank. The soles carried mud, as any shoes worn along this track would have.

'Any distinguishing marks?'

'Left wrist. Small tattoo. Proper images are being taken.'

The cuff had slipped far enough back for Leila to see an angled set of black lines. Something folded, she thought, perhaps a bird. One wing seemed lower than the other. From where she stood she couldn't tell if that was the design or the curve of the woman's wrist.

Owen leaned nearer, then stopped at the edge of the marked route. 'Someone might know that.'

'Possibly.'

Before leaving the scene, Leila asked Nadia for identification photographs and told Owen to preserve footage from both roads into the lane. Owen marked the nearer junction on his map, then looked up at her.

'The other road too?'

'Yes. She's here. We don't yet know how she came.'

Beyond the cordon a delivery driver was attempting to find a way around the road closure. He kept addressing his questions to a young constable who already had three people waiting for him. Owen went to help.

There was also the farmer's report of a pale vehicle. Leila asked Owen to keep the man's original account, not just the summary headed *possible delivery vehicle*. She'd decide what it meant when they knew where he'd been standing.

By the time Leila left, the lane was full of people trying to do their work around one another. Peter's wife had arrived; he stood beside her car while Moth investigated the verge. Leila wondered whether he would ever walk that route again.

In her notebook she had a missing coat toggle, a pair of ordinary shoes and a paper bird. The woman below the bank still had no name.

* * *

On Tuesday morning Clara found Sophie's nursery bottle in the cutlery drawer, between the spoons and a vegetable peeler with a cracked handle. She had been looking in the fridge. It was her own fault: she'd emptied the dishwasher late, while listening to a message from work, and apparently lost interest in the difference between a spoon and a bottle halfway through.

Her daughter was eating toast on the kitchen floor, cross-legged beside a plastic horse. At three, Sophie had an exhausting faith in rules she'd invented herself.

'Breakfast is supposed to be at the table,' Clara said.

'The horse doesn't fit.'

'It's a little horse.'

'He's eating with me.'

Clara considered explaining that a toy horse did not eat. It was seven forty-five. She had already explained the difference between a coat and a cardigan twice, and had lost the first argument to a horse.

'At least put your plate on the floor mat.'

Sophie dragged the plate onto the mat without moving herself. Clara decided not to appeal.