

The Hornbeam Tree

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Chapter One

Strangely, the sky hadn't fallen. Nor had the ground split apart. Houses were still standing, trees remained rooted, people were walking on their feet. No, nothing had changed from the way it had been an hour ago, before she'd entered the building, yet now it all felt so different that she could be stepping back into another world entirely.

The automatic doors swish-closed behind her. She waited for a car to pass, then crossed towards a small patch of green. She could see Judy waiting and wanted to run towards her, but she carried on walking, zigzagging through the car park until she was close enough to make out the concern on her friend's plump, normally cheery face.

'Do you know what today is?' Katie demanded, looking at her over the roof of the car.

Judy eyed her, not sure how to respond.

'It's Day One of the rest of my life,' Katie informed her.

Judy looked surprised, then laughed as Katie gazed around, seeming to absorb a whole new world.

'Did you already know?' she asked, her eyes coming back to Judy.

Judy nodded.

Katie felt as though she was seeing her friend differently to the way she had a minute ago, then, shrugging it off, she smiled and got into the passenger seat.

'Would you have preferred me to tell you?' Judy asked, sliding in next to her.

'Would you have wanted to?' Katie countered, not without irony.

'No.'

Katie laughed at the frankness that was her own stock-in-trade.

'So what would you like to do now?' Judy asked, turning on the engine. 'On Day One of the rest of your life.'

Katie's gaze was fixed ahead. Her face was gaunt, seeming to cling to the bones, the shadows beneath her hazel eyes were grey and blue, the texture of her skin was like ash, powdery and pale. There wasn't much sign now of the full rosy cheeks or wickedly humorous eyes that for several years had graced the small photo over her newspaper column. Nor was she the heavy-set, energetic woman who'd worked so hard to win the villagers over when she'd first moved down from London. She'd changed a lot in the past year, and now she was going to change again.

'What about a coffee while we decide?' Judy offered. 'We can go somewhere here, in Bath . . .'

'You know, I think I'd just like to go home,' Katie responded.

Disappointed, though not altogether surprised, Judy slipped the car into gear and headed for the exit.

'Blast,' Katie said, as they turned left out of the car park towards Penn Hill. 'I keep thinking of things I should have asked.'

'There'll be plenty of time,' Judy assured her. 'Did you speak to Simon himself?'

Katie nodded. 'Not the kind of task he could delegate,' she responded, 'though I'm sure he'd have preferred to. You know, a funny thing happened,' she went on, feeling faintly light-headed as the memory popped up, 'when he told me, you know . . . When he said it was all over I suddenly fancied him in a way I never have before. It didn't last. It was gone in a moment, but it was pretty intense while it was there. To tell you the truth, I wouldn't have minded running with it a while, because the next thing I knew I was right back in reality, and that's no place to be at a time like this.' She sighed, then chuckled and let her gaze slide over a rank of shops as they passed by. 'He's a nice man. I'm going to miss him,' she said.

Judy looked at her, and because everything felt so dislocated and absurd, from the weather to the words, they started to laugh.

'I didn't think I'd ever say that,' Katie remarked, as they headed up over Lansdown Lane into the countryside. 'It's true though, I will.' Before Judy could comment she ran on with her next peculiar thought. 'I could become one of those irritatingly inspirational women who write best-selling books about their miraculous recoveries,' she declared. 'You know. The ones who manage to digest enough spiritual guff to vaporize tumours the size of footballs, or start up empires after their husbands have royally dumped them. What do you think?'

'If anyone can do it, you can.'

'They're annoying though, aren't they, those women?'

Judy laughed. 'Some, yes,' she agreed. 'But Heather isn't.'

'No, Heather's an angel who managed to get it together without writing a book and crowing from the hilltops,' Katie conceded, picturing her radiantly blonde spiritual counsellor in a fetching celestial get-up. She'd never have imagined finding anyone like Heather buried alive in a concrete jungle just outside Chippenham. What a find. These last months would have been a total nightmare without her, even with her they'd been hell.

Her attention moved out over the sparkling green valley where sheep grazed and horses stood like paintings in the afternoon sun. Suddenly, a huge wave of panic rolled in from nowhere. I don't want this to be happening. It has to stop. Now! Please make it stop! She took a breath, and, like Canute, summoned her will to send the tide back to where it had come from. She wouldn't let it engulf her now. There was too much to do, to think about and put right. Her thoughts suddenly began hovering around the real danger area, Molly, but she quickly marshalled them back to the innocuous patchwork of passing fields and woodlands, and wondered how the tree she sponsored was faring. It was around here somewhere, she just couldn't quite remember where.

'Yes, we can do that,' Judy told her.

Katie frowned. Had she said something? Asked a question without even hearing it? Then quite suddenly she recognized the spot. 'Can we stop?' she asked. 'Over there. I think that's the right place.'

Surprised, Judy glanced at her, but flicking on the indicator she pulled into the lay-by and brought the car to a halt.

Katie gazed along the narrow track that led into the woodland. With all the misty bands of sunlights and glossy leaves it seemed as enticing as a fairy tale, and pushing open the door she stepped out on to the dusty patch of earth. The sun slipped behind a cloud and she frowned. A moment later it was back, like a child playing peek-a-boo and she walked into the copse, breathing in the woody scent of the air, absorbing the many shades of green, enjoying the playful sparkles of light that shone down through the leaves. She'd never been informed of which actual tree she sponsored, only of the woodland it was in, so on reaching a small clearing she looked around and decided to take her pick. It wasn't long before she settled on the towering old beech that was set slightly back from the glade, because, to her mind at least, there seemed something permanent and irresistible about it. She moved towards it, aware of the ground underfoot feeling soft and sponge-like, and the birdsong sounding more melodious and inviting.

Not until she reached the tree did she realize from the smooth grey bark and sharply serrated leaves that it wasn't a beech at all – it was a hornbeam. She blinked in surprise. Such serendipity. Such a dizzying coincidence, for hornbeam was used to help ease the feelings of exhaustion at the mere thought of facing an ordeal. It was exactly how she was feeling now, exhausted by the thought of what lay ahead. She gazed up at the tree's magnificent canopy of tooth-edged leaves, so green and soft, and delicately pointed at the tips; the three-lobed cups of its fruit sprouting in thick

clusters of paler green, the unwieldy tangle of branches that for some reason made her think of a mother's arms.

What had made her come here today? What unknown hand had guided her? She rested the palm of one hand on the trunk, then her cheek. The bark was warm and fluting with age. It smelt of earth and damp and was prettily patched by moss. It would live for another hundred years or more, this tree of hers, never moving from this spot, watching the seasons come and go, releasing its leaves and fruit, and producing new in spring. She put her arms around it, and after a while was certain she could feel the gentle force of its energy flowing into her.

She'd never done anything like this before. Tree-hugging. Usually she left it to the New Agers who were into this sort of thing, while she scoffed from the sidelines, but her eyes and mind had been opened to many things this past year, and now here was another revelation. This sense of permanence and safety, of being in the right place at the right time, and of being so much smaller than nature yet as intrinsically a part of it as this tree, was what she needed to feel here, at this hour, on this day.

Judy was waiting beside the car when she returned, the expression on her round face with its large, velvety brown eyes and quirky mouth showing affection and understanding, even though she couldn't know about the tree or the strangeness of that brief encounter. How could she, when Katie barely understood it herself? But it mattered, Katie was certain of that, fruitcakish as it was. She was glad they'd stopped. She might even come again.

As they drove on towards home she was grateful for Judy's silence, because she felt the need to be quiet now. Shock worked its way through the senses in a randomly confusing fashion, she was finding, alighting on one, then another, then several together. It was bizarre, because a part of her had been expecting this. Well, dreading it, actually, but it had been there for a while, stalking her personal horizon like a shy lover, or, more accurately, a countdown clock. Now suddenly it was galloping towards her like a terrifying knight in dull, black armour, intent on carrying her off to a place she didn't want to go. She turned her head, as though to avoid the collision.

It was gone. Everything was normal. She was in the car with Judy, signalling to turn right on to the road that would take them home. For a fleeting moment she seemed to boil with rage, then a sick, pleading desperation flooded her heart. She managed to suppress both. She had now to work out how she was going to handle it all. With dignity, was the first thought that came to mind, and grace and calm. No hysterics, no pleading or ranting, or bitterness or self-pity. No clinging to the impossible, or trying to make deals with God. Just acceptance and strength, and endless understanding and support for Molly. Oh dear God, Molly.

Focusing again on her surroundings, she realized they were on the main Bristol to Chippenham road, speeding past Marshfield, a centuries-old village that was fast turning into an urban sprawl, then The Shoe that was cleared in a blink, then Ford that had a good restaurant in its pub. Not long now and they'd be home. Fortunately Membury Hempton, where both she and Judy lived, wasn't one of West Wiltshire's

outstanding villages, so they weren't too bothered by tourists, even though most of the cottages, and some of the larger houses, dated from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the church went back to ancient times. It just didn't have the olde worlde charm of its neighbours such as Castle Combe, Biddestone and Lacock.

Now they were carving it up down the high street, two forty-something bombshells in a Fiat Panda, past the nursery school on the right, and the doctor's surgery and post office-cum-village store on the left. A few of their neighbours were gathered around the small war memorial on the grassy central island, gossiping and enjoying the fine weather. Recognizing Judy's car they waved and smiled. It had been a struggle for Katie, a Londoner born and bred, to make them all accept her when she'd arrived last year, but things were finally starting to improve now, largely thanks to Judy, who'd encouraged her to involve herself in the community. She had much to be thankful to Judy for, and wasn't in any doubt that it was going to stack a lot higher in the coming days and weeks. Where would she and Molly be without Judy, the district nurse, who'd fast turned into the best friend they'd ever had? She couldn't even begin to think, so stopped trying.

'Would you like me to come in?' Judy offered, as they passed the pub and turned into Sheep Lane. Katie's cottage was at the end, opposite the secluded, half-moon duck pond that was home to a noisy assortment of coot, mallards and moorhens.

'It's OK,' Katie answered. 'I'm sure you've got a lot to be going on with.'

'My time is yours today. Maybe I can answer some of your questions.'

Katie smiled. 'Actually, if you don't mind . . .'

'You'd like to be alone,' Judy finished in a Garbo voice. 'That's fine, just promise me you'll call if you need anything. You know where I am.'

'Of course,' Katie responded.

After they pulled up next to the white picket fence that hemmed in her small garden, Katie sat gazing at the quaint, grey stone cottage that had been home to her and Molly since they'd been forced to downsize, and felt as though she was seeing a photograph, or a painting, something that wasn't quite real. Roses bloomed either side of the front door they rarely used, a Virginia creeper framed the sitting-room and kitchen windows and the orange, weather-roughened roof tiles glinted like amber in the sun. The only other cottages down this lane were Mr and Mrs Preddy's, attached to the back of Katie's, and Dick Bradley's, which was the other side of the pond, next to the cowfield and overhung by the gnarled limbs of a very old sycamore.

'What are you going to do now?' Judy asked.

'Write a letter, I suppose,' Katie answered. 'I'd been hoping I wouldn't have to, but I don't have a choice now, so I might as well get it over with.'

'It'll work out,' Judy told her gently. 'You'll get the answer you want.'

Katie nodded, and after climbing out of the car she stood just inside the gate watching and waving as Judy reversed round the duck pond and drove back up the lane. Once the sound of the engine died away the place seemed eerily quiet, with just the odd squawk from a duck, a smattering of birdsong and the lumber of a tractor engine somewhere far away. The sun felt very intense. She thought the apples on the tree next to the shed seemed redder than they had this morning, while the potted plants around the well were starting to wilt. She walked along the front of the cottage and around the side to where the hose was curled up on the wall next to the back door. Trotty, their fluffy little mixed-breed, had obviously heard her, because she was scratching the door to get out.

'Hello, you daft old thing,' Katie smiled, scooping her up for a spot of fussing. 'Did you miss me? Eh? Is that what all this is about?'

Trotty's answer was to lick with more feeling, before scurrying off to find her ball.

Katie watered the flowers, threw the ball and felt the sun beating down on her head. How long before Molly was due to come home? Another hour? Maybe two or three if she decided to go to her friend's. Molly didn't always communicate her plans these days, she was either too busy to remember, or too angry to share. It wasn't always like that though, because there were still plenty of days when Katie was the best mum in all the world, as opposed to she-who-must-be-disobeyed-and-never-seen-out-with.

The kitchen was cool and shady, thanks to the thick stone walls. It was surprisingly large for a small cottage, with two overhead beams, a big china sink, terracotta floor and a staircase in one corner that led up to the three bedrooms above. The pantry was beneath the stairs, the door to the sitting room was next to it, and a deep sill window looked out over the pond, lane and cowfield. At the centre was a table with four chairs, which was where, once she'd made a cup of tea, she was going to sit down to write to Michelle.

As she put the kettle on she wondered what she was going to say. It was a letter she'd tried not to think about over the past few months, but it was here now, needing to be written. Considering the rift that had grown up between them, the petty jealousies, which in truth were mainly hers, and the pride that made it hard for her to ask for anything, particularly from her beautiful and gifted younger sister, nothing about this letter would be easy.

'Dear Michelle, God and I are having a difference of opinion over my lifespan and currently he's winning, so please can you come back to England to take care of Molly?'

She guessed she'd have to be a little more tactful, and detailed, than that. After all, it could prove quite a blow to Michelle to learn that her only sibling wasn't going to be around for much longer. She liked to think Michelle would care, though she

wouldn't blame her if she didn't. She'd explain that the hysterectomy, chemotherapy and radiotherapy hadn't zapped all those dreaded diseased cells sufficiently to prevent more popping up in the liver, which had also had a good blast, but somehow the message wasn't getting through. They were marvellously comfortable where they were, thank you very much, and no way was anyone or anything going to budge them. Which all added up to Dr Simon being very, very sorry but there was no more they could do.

'Dear Michelle, I'm sorry I haven't been in touch for a while, but I hope you're well. Your last letter was from Pakistan, so I'm presuming that's where you still are, as you normally let us know when you move on. I hope your work in the Afghan refugee camps isn't too harrowing, though I'm sure it must be. You're very brave, the way you take on other people's troubles and try to help them, so I wonder if you could take mine on now. I wish I could say it will only be until I detach from this mortal coil, which shouldn't be too long, though they won't give me an exact time, but I'm afraid Molly is going to be in need of someone to take care of her after, and as you're her only relative . . .'

She wouldn't write that either, but she imagined it would be something along those lines, polite, to the point, and careful not to revisit any past resentments or fall into any kind of emotional blackmail. She wondered where Michelle was right now, this minute, and what she was doing. She'd have no idea that her world was about to be rocked too, and from a quarter she probably least expected. Was she going to mind? That was a patently stupid question, because of course she'd mind. Michelle was extremely dedicated to her way of life.

There was a time, she was thinking, when Michelle would have done almost anything for them to be as close as when they were growing up, but though Katie had loved Michelle, as they'd become adults and begun finding their own ways in the world, Katie, to her shame, had rarely dealt well with how charmed Michelle's life had seemed in comparison to hers. Not that she, Katie, hadn't done well, because she had, she'd just never quite been able to overcome a feeling of resentment towards Michelle that was, in truth, much more rooted in admiration than in envy. She'd never let Michelle know that, though & she didn't even admit it to herself if she could help it. Better not to think about Michelle, and just get on with her own life.

She was still sitting at the table, tea gone cold and surrounded by pages of scrunched-up paper, when she heard Molly's voice outside, calling to Trotty. Quickly she scooped everything into a drawer and went to busy herself with the few dishes in the sink. Everything must seem normal. Life was tootling along happily, nothing was about to change & except the major treatments had stopped, making a difference to where Molly went after school, because now she could come home instead of going to Judy's or wherever else she'd been taking herself off to lately.

'I've got about a hundred hours of bloody homework,' Molly grumbled as she bumped in through the door with Trotty in one arm and her school bag over the other. 'And if you start getting on at me about anything now I'm going to go ballistic, because I've had like a really bad day and I hate that bloody school. It stinks.'

Everyone in it's a moron and no way am I staying on to do sixth form there. What have we got to eat?'

'Yes, I'm fine thank you, darling,' Katie replied cheerily. 'How nice of you to ask. Would you like a sandwich? I can stuff it with your attitude and see how you'd like to swallow it.' It wasn't what she wanted to say, but it was how they spoke to each other these days, and right now she wanted everything to stay the same.

Molly's green eyes flashed with hostility. 'You are just like, sooo not funny,' she told her.

Katie grinned. She knew there was a chance Molly might too, because her mood could swing from strop to sunny in the blink of an eye. Alas, it seemed today the pendulum was stuck, because she fired off one of her filthier looks, put down Trotty and tugged open the fridge door.

Katie watched her, feeling too many emotions to deal with at once, so she opted for love, then immediately dropped it, because it came all cluttered up with a need to embrace and gush. Molly would think she'd lost the plot completely if she suddenly clasped her to her bosom now and began spouting Mummy-talk as though Molly were four rather than fourteen. So she settled for a more normal maternal scrutiny of Molly's appearance, which was far too grown-up for Katie's liking, with all her make-up and unfastened buttons. It would be hard to reveal much more of the ample young breasts that were being hoisted together by a couple of sturdy underwires without popping them out altogether, she reflected. The skirt was shockingly short too, and Katie would lay money she only had a thong underneath. Katie had to admit, though, had she ever been blessed with buttocks and legs like Molly's her mother would never have been able to get her hemlines down either. They were Michelle's buttocks and legs. She had Michelle's eyes too, moss green, slanted at the corners and utterly bewitching. Katie hoped Molly was nowhere near realizing yet how devastating they were. The rest of her was much more like Katie, or how Katie used to be, a full, peachy mouth, creamy skin with permanently reddened cheeks, delicately carved jawline and spiky raven hair. Actually, the hair colour was her father's, but that was about all she'd inherited from him, though she'd probably be able to tot up a few hefty debts and several embarrassments when he finally decided to depart this particular dimension.

'I thought you weren't allowed to wear eyeliner at school,' she said.

'That was my last school,' Molly reminded her. 'At this one you can wear what you like. Did you get the new Heat magazine?'

'No, I don't believe I did.'

Molly rolled her eyes and crunched noisily into an apple. 'I asked you to,' she said. 'Oh my God, I've got to do this essay on communism,' she suddenly gasped. 'You've got to help me. It's like, really boring, and so not anything to do with real life . . . Mum, are you listening?'

Katie blinked in surprise. 'Do I look as though I'm not?' she asked, having heard every word.

'No, but you know what you're like. You drift off and then I've got to say things all over again.'

'You have to do an essay on communism,' Katie told her. 'Would you like to make a start now, or shall we . . .'

'No way. I've got to go up and check my emails and get changed before I go out.'

'Where are you going?'

'Over to Kylie's to do some homework. And please don't start. I'm like, so not in the mood.'

Katie listened to her stomping up the stairs, and having no energy to protest she turned back to the table and sank down on to a chair. This distance that had crept between them wasn't unusual, she knew that, most mothers experienced it with girls Molly's age, but she could feel Molly's loneliness as acutely as she could her own and knew that deep down inside Molly was as scared as she was. If only they could talk about what was happening, but during her treatment Katie simply hadn't had the strength to, and since it had ended they'd both been in a fool's paradise hoping it had all gone away now.

Letting go of a long, shaky sigh, she sat back down to continue her letter, knowing she had to make herself do it today. It would probably take a couple of weeks to get there, and though she didn't imagine she was leaving home feet first just yet, time wasn't exactly her friend now. She looked at her watch to check the date. September 7th, so the earliest Michelle might get here was the middle of the month. That was presuming, of course, she was willing to come, and after the coldness Katie had treated her to over the years, Katie would hardly be able to blame her if she weren't.