

BLOOD-TIED

Two days after her sister Elizabeth is attacked and left unconscious. Esme discovers Elizabeth has a secret past...

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It began with a telephone call. Not late at night or in the small hours of the morning, which might have served as a harbinger of bad news, but early in the evening. Yet something unnerved Esme Quentin the moment the telephone rang. Perhaps it was a sixth sense which forewarned her, developed over years of being on her guard. Certainly nothing which had gone before, no event that she could recall or snippet of information she could bring to mind had hinted at what she was about to hear and prepared her for what was to follow afterwards. For Esme it was the first step on what would prove to be a strange and bewildering journey.

When the call came Esme was kneeling in the large inglenook fireplace in her cottage, trying to relight the wood-burning stove which she had mistakenly allowed to go out, so engrossed had she been in her current research project. Local Ordnance Survey maps were strewn across the floor and reference books lay open on every available surface in the room. She was plotting the route of the long since defunct Shropton Canal, recording snippets of historical information to put into her report, in accordance with her client's brief.

April had started a cold and wet month and she was glad of the comforting warmth of the woodstove in her living room where she worked. It was only when the chill of the room penetrated her absorbed state that she realised the fire had died. If it had been later she might have opted to go to bed and tackle the job the next morning but the fascination of her task, and the early hour of the evening prompted her attempt to reignite the embers.

The shrill pitch of the telephone startled her. She frowned and wiped her charcoal-blackened fingers on her jeans. For a moment she didn't move, just stared towards the instrument,

gripped by a sense of dread. Then a compelling urgency took over. She scrambled to her feet and stumbled across the room to answer it.

‘Esme Quentin. Hello?’

The distress of her niece, Gemma, at the other end of the line was evident.

‘I’m at Shropton hospital,’ she said, in a shaking voice.

At first Esme didn’t understand. Gemma was a theatre nurse, so it was perfectly usual for her to be at Shropton hospital, but as Esme opened her mouth to frame a question Gemma’s next words explained everything and sent a stab of horror through Esme’s body.

‘It’s Mum,’ Gemma continued, emotion threatening to overpower her. ‘She’s been beaten up. Badly. You better come. They don’t know if she’ll survive.’