

EXTRACT

The Wicked Girls
Alex Marwood

Prologue

1986

There's a blanket, but from the aroma that rises from its folds, she guesses it's never been washed. The cells are overheated and, despite the fact that Jade balled it up and pushed it into the corner of the room when they first brought her in here, the stink of stale piss and unwashed skin is hard to ignore. Officer Magill picks it up and holds it out towards her, wadded in her hand. 'You're going to have to wear this,' she says. 'Over your head. Apparently they're not allowed to see your face.'

It's hardly necessary. Jade's face was all over the papers months ago, and will be all over them again tomorrow. She looks at the blanket, repelled. Officer Magill's eyes narrow.

'You know what, Jade?' she says. 'You're welcome to go out there uncovered if you want. They're all dying to see you, believe me. It's no skin off my nose.'

They've seen me already, thinks Jade. Over and over. In the papers, on the news. That's why they make us queue up for those school mugshots every year. It's not for our families. It's so there's always a picture to sell to the papers. So they have something to hang a headline on. THE WORLD PRAYS. FIND OUR ANGEL. Or, in my case, ANGELIC FACE OF EVIL.

Through the open door, she can hear Bel screaming. Still screaming. She started when the verdict came in, and it's been hours since then. Jade has been able to hear only silence through the thick cell walls. No sound gets through: not the baying crowd, not the hurried feet passing by in the throes of preparation. Occasionally, the metallic slick of the eyehole cover being pushed back, or the sonic boom of another heavy door slamming shut; otherwise, stone-built silence, the sound of her own breath, the sound of her racing heart. When Officer Magill opened the door, the noise was overwhelming, even here in the basement: the feral, chanting voices of strangers wanting Justice. The crowd wants her. Her and Bel. This much she knows.

Magill holds the blanket out again. This time, Jade takes it. They'll make her wear it one way or the other, willing or not. Their hands brush, and Magill snatches hers away as though the child's skin is coated with poison.

Bel sounds like an animal, shrieking in a snare.

She'd chew her own arm off if it helped her get away, thinks Jade. It's worse for her than it is for me. She's not lived her life in trouble, like I have.

Officer Magill waits, her mouth downturned. 'How do you feel, Jade?'

For a moment Jade thinks that she's asking out of concern, but a glance at that face shows her otherwise. Jade gazes at her, wide-eyed. I feel small, she thinks. I feel small and alone and scared and confused. I know they're shouting for me, but I don't understand why they hate me so much. We didn't mean it. We never meant it to happen.

'Not good, is it?' asks Magill eventually, not requiring a reply. 'Doesn't feel great, does it?'

Bel's voice, the sound of struggle in the hallway: 'Nonononono! Please! Please! I can't! I want my mum! Mummeee! I can't! Don't take me out there! Nononono dooon't!'

Jade looks back at Officer Magill. Her face is like a Halloween mask, all swooping lines in black and red. She glares with all the loathing of the voices of the mob outside. Jade is guilty. No one has to act as though they presume her innocent now.

That's it, that's us: not 'the suspects', not 'the children in custody'. We're The Girls Who Killed Chloe. We are the Devil now.

Magill glances over her shoulder to see if any of her superiors are listening, then lowers her voice.

'Serves you bloody well right, you little bitch,' she hisses. 'If it was up to me they'd bring back the death penalty.'