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# DEATH ROCKS

A DCI RYAN MYSTERY

LJ ROSS



PENGUIN BOOKS

## CHAPTER 1

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*Saturday, 23<sup>rd</sup> March*

*Northumberland*

Of all the ruined castles of Northumberland, Dunstanburgh reigned supreme.

In the seven centuries since its foundations were first laid, walls had crumbled and wood rotted away with the winds that swept in with the relentless tide of the North Sea, but the fortress remained; rugged and magnificent atop its craggy headland, an imposing reminder that it would endure, long after the people who trampled over its remains were dead and gone.

Roger Aitken thought of this, and of his own mortality, as he approached the thirteenth tee of

the Dunstanburgh Castle Golf Course. The course was situated to the north of the castle complex, and ran parallel to the sea, affording a beautiful view of Gull Crag—a sheer, vertical rockface that had once been a natural defence for the castle’s northern perimeter, but was now a protected heritage site for birds and other sea life.

He paused, resting lightly against the club he carried, and lifted his head to the salty breeze that rolled in from the sea, which glimmered in the morning sunshine.

“It’s a pretty sight, isn’t it?” He nodded to another club member, Pete, who caught him up after a successful putt on the twelfth.

“Aye, it never gets old,” he said, smiling proudly at the towering edifice that rose up like a mythical Camelot. “Makes you wonder what medieval soldiers thought, when they first caught sight of those walls.”

“Probably wet themselves,” the other man said, and wheezed a hearty laugh. “That’s if they made it halfway up those rocks, or the hill on the other side, without gettin’ an arrow between the eyes first.”

The two men chatted for a while longer, exchanging mild gossip about who would be

the next Men’s Team Captain after old Kev’s retirement. Naturally, both denied any interest whatsoever in taking up the role themselves, before Roger declared it was time he was getting along, while thinking privately that it was also high time he started canvassing for votes back at the clubhouse.

“Watch the crosswind on the thirteenth,” Pete advised. “It’s unlucky for some!”

Roger narrowed his eyes against the glare of the sun, breathed in the crisp air, and took a shot that landed within a foot of the hole.

“Not for me,” he winked. Laughing at Pete’s good-natured expletive, he sauntered towards the green, swinging the putter lightly in one hand while he looked out across the bay immediately to his left. It was known locally as ‘Death Rocks’, or ‘Boulder Bay’, on account of its large basalt rocks, which were dangerously slippery and had been the cause of many an unfortunate mishap over the years.

As he neared the green, he positioned himself and wiggled his hips for good measure, preparing to tap the ball into the hole. Before he could, there came a piercing shriek from one of

the gulls circling the skies overhead, loud enough to break his concentration.

“Stupid birds,” he muttered, and looked up to find an unusual number of them circling a spot near the edge of the course, where the long grass met the rocky shoreline.

Thinking it was likely to be a dead fish or some other carrion, Roger turned his attention back to the ball sitting neatly on the grass in front of him.

But the sound of the gulls continued, their cacophony only seeming to grow louder.

Unable to focus, he abandoned his putter on the ground and stomped towards the edge of the course, intending to chuck something to clear the flock and send them flapping elsewhere. He held up a hand to shield his eyes and peered across the dinosaur egg-shaped rocks to a spot a hundred yards away, where at least twenty gulls formed a cluster of excited, greedy chatter. It was impossible to see what they feasted upon, but, given their number, he assumed it was something larger than the usual wayward crab.

He cupped his hands and gave a loud shout.

It startled the birds for a moment, sending a few of them flapping up into the sky with an

indignant cry, only to settle again within a matter of seconds.

Seconds was all he needed to catch sight of something colourful—and distinctly human.

*A jacket? Trousers?*

His skin prickled, a slow feeling of dread that crept along his spine.

Then, the gulls shifted, and he saw something else; something that could not be mistaken.

*A hand.*

*The remains of a face.*

“Everythin’ all right, Roger? You look as if you’ve seen a ghost!”

Pete’s voice called to him across the green, and with slow, careful steps, Roger backed away from the edge of the course, swallowing hard against the bile that lodged in his throat.

“Whatsamatter, man?” his friend puffed, having jogged the short distance between them. “You’re not havin’ a stroke, are you?”

Roger shook his head. “No,” he muttered. “No...it’s—it’s over there, on the rocks. I think there’s a body.”

Pete’s face registered comical shock. “A *body*? Are you sure?”

Roger nodded, and passed a shaking hand over his face as he tried to dispel the image.

“Maybe someone just turned their ankle, or banged their head and can’t get up again?”

Pete started to move towards the rocks, but Roger put a staying hand on his arm.

“I’m telling you, the bloke’s long gone. We need to call the police, that’s what we need to do.”

While the two men hurried back towards the clubhouse, the castle looked on, a silent sentinel keeping the secrets of all who passed beneath its shadow.

## CHAPTER 2

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*One hour later*

Detective Chief Inspector Maxwell Finley-Ryan, known simply as ‘Ryan’ to all who mattered, gripped the steering wheel of his car and resisted a strong urge to drive into oncoming traffic—even if it *would* provide the means to escape his sergeant’s enthusiastic crooning to what, he was reliably informed, was “a proper eighties banger.”

Detective Sergeant Frank Phillips began to tap the dashboard with invisible drumsticks, and Ryan’s lips twitched.

“Frank, for the love of God, pull yourself together—”

Phillips wriggled a pair of ludicrously bushy eyebrows. “Sing along if you know it!”

Ryan couldn't prevent the smile that spread across his face, and, feeling like a prize idiot, began to sing in harmony with his friend, the pair of them wailing about Josie being on a vacation far away with cheerful abandon as they rattled northbound along the A1.

By the time they reached the turn-off for Dunstanburgh Castle, they'd covered much of the forty miles between Northumbria Police Headquarters in Newcastle upon Tyne and their destination, which was the pretty village of Craster, situated a mile and a half south of the castle ruins. They'd also managed to cover much of Spandau Ballet's back catalogue and made an impressive start on Billy Ocean.

Exhausted by his own efforts, Phillips enjoyed the passing scenery and folded his hands over his paunch—which was considerably less padded than before, thanks to a fearsome post-Christmas workout regime Denise had concocted with the help of one of her workout friends, Melissa, who'd christened his twice-weekly torture sessions, "Turkey Burn Time".

*Sadists, the pair of them.*

"What's the story wi' this one, then?"

Ryan recovered his voice. "I had a call from one of the local officers," he croaked. "You might remember she was the first attending officer when we had that business in Bamburgh, last year?"

Phillips made a rumbling sound of agreement. "Aye, nice lass. Knows her onions, and wants to get ahead."

Ryan nodded, because he'd come to much the same assessment of DC Charlie Reed. "Well, she caught another one," he said. "This time, it's a body on the beach up at Boulder Bay—"

"Death Rocks, you mean?"

Ryan might have lived in the North East for almost twenty years but, at times, he still felt like a visitor. "Is that what it's called?"

"Depends who you speak to," Phillips conceded. "I used to go up to Craster as a lad, and I remember the locals always used to call that stretch 'Death Rocks' and tell us to mind ourselves if we were playin' round that way."

"Well, it seems somebody didn't heed that warning," Ryan said. "A man was found dead on the rocks earlier this morning."

"If he slipped, what does Reed need us for?"

Ryan headed up the most senior team of murder detectives in that part of the world, under the umbrella of 'Major Crimes' within the Criminal Investigation Department of the Northumbria Police Constabulary. It tended to be serious or suspicious cases that drew their attention, and a simple accident, whilst unfortunate, didn't fall into either of those categories.

"Reed said something felt off about it, and wants a second opinion," Ryan explained. "I guess we'll find out when we get there. Faulkner's already on site, and I've put Pinter on notice that he's to expect a visitor to the mortuary within the next couple of hours." He referred to the senior Crime Scene Investigator, and the police pathologist who would perform a post-mortem examination in due course. "Just a minute," he added, peering at the GPS map on his car screen, then at a passing sign welcoming them to the village of Craster. "It would've made more sense to drive around to Embleton village or directly to the golf club, which is closer to the scene than Craster. Why did you suggest this route?"

Phillips tried to look innocent, and failed miserably. "All right, I'll level with you, son. Craster's known for the best kippers in the world; I tell you, it's *famous* for them—"

Ryan lowered his speed as they entered the village and, sure enough, the sign for *L Robson & Sons - Home of the 'Craster Kippers'* came into view.

"Are you trying to tell me that you deliberately misdirected me, so you could get your laughing gear around a kipper roll?"

Phillips nodded. "Well, I was actually hopin' for a kipper scotch egg, but let's not split hairs," he said, waving that away. "It'd be a tragedy not to stop in and sample one, while we're here. You could think of it as an exercise in community outreach—"

"All right, all right," Ryan muttered. "Don't gild the lily."

Phillips grinned to himself. "There's a nice walk from here to the castle," he added. "You can get around to the golf course from there, so it'll be just as easy."

Ryan sent him a withering look, but felt his own stomach respond to the scent of smoked