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HOLY ISLAND

A DCI RYAN MYSTERY

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PENGUIN BOOKS

CHAPTER 1

December 21st

Hours later, hunched against the bite of the early morning December air, Liz Morgan dug in her heels and called her dog through the gate which led up to the ruins. She hurried, sensing that dawn was near. Only slightly out of breath, she weaved through the stones, feeling the peace amongst the ancient walls which seemed to sag slightly in their retirement. Much like herself, she mused, thinking not for the first time that her early morning dog walks no longer shifted the weight which seemed to have settled itself comfortably on her hips.

Rounding a corner, she prepared herself for the rush of cold air from the sea and was not disappointed. With the Priory at her back, she stood and watched the dawn rise, illuminating Bamburgh Castle against a wash of blue mist. It stood on its craggy mount on the mainland to the south and its warm, rust-coloured stone was beginning to burn

with colour in the early light; a fitting tribute to a castle which was once home to long-forgotten kings of England. Her eyes watered against the breeze and she pushed back the hair which fell across them, greying at the temples. Absently, she ruffled the fur of the chocolate Labrador who was familiar with the routine and settled himself beside her while she paid her silent tribute.

Minutes passed comfortably before Liz turned away and strolled around the perimeter, with the vague intention of heading home for breakfast and a warm shower. The walls seemed to whisper as the wind howled through the cracks, watching her progress, silently waiting.

They didn't have to wait long.

With her breath clouding the chilly air, Liz huffed around the edge of the headland and followed the barking dog which ran ahead of her.

Then she shuddered to a standstill, her knees buckling.

"Bruno!"

Automatically, she called her dog back from its exploration of what lay ahead. Horror came next, with an acid flavour. Retching against the bile which flooded her throat, Liz stumbled backwards, her body unconsciously denying what her eyes could not. She struggled to breathe, to get past the first waves of shock. Eventually, she forced herself to look again.

The girl who had been Lucy Mathieson lay naked on a thick altar. Crumbled stone walls sheltered her from the worst of the wind and sea and brought a certain solemnity.

Her body was arranged carefully, arms and legs spread-eagled to remove all vestiges of dignity, even in death. Ugly bruises smudged the lifeless skin on her throat and arms. Long dark hair lay fanned out behind her in a graceful arc, matted with blood at her temple and damp from the rain which had fallen overnight. Her eyes, which had once been a lively cornflower blue, were now filmed white and stared unseeingly towards the new dawn.

In a cottage on the other side of the village, Ryan knocked back his first cup of coffee and savoured the hit of caffeine as it swam through his veins. He'd spent another sleepless night listening to the waves slapping against the shore, wishing for oblivion. He moved to a window overlooking the causeway and rested his tall frame against the wooden sill. Eyes the same colour as the overcast sky watched the tide roll smoothly back towards the sea and he knew that, in another hour or so, the causeway road would be open from the island to the mainland. Lights flickered on the other side of the channel and provided small consolation that he was not the only soul awake at that hour. Another five minutes, he told himself, and he would go for that run he'd been putting off for weeks.

"Yeah, right," he muttered, watching a couple of two-man fishing boats heading back towards the harbour.

As a kestrel swooped low on the rocky beach outside his window, his thoughts turned to work.

You're not at work, came the sly reminder that his services would not be required by the Northumbria Police Constabulary in the immediate future. His lip curled, and he dragged a hand through disordered, coal-black hair.

"Arseholes," was all he said, but he was more angry with himself. The department had suggested that he take a leave of absence for at least three months. As if they knew what was best for him.

As if they had given him a choice.

He rested his forehead against the cold glass of the window. Taking time away from the job could be the best thing he'd ever done. Only problem was, he had too much time on his hands. The quiet had a way of opening the door to memories best forgotten.

Heavy-lidded eyes drooped wearily then flew open again at the sound of a sharp bang. He had a brief moment to think that it could have been the sound of the brutal hangover rattling around his head, then the sound came again, more insistent this time. He pushed himself away from the window towards the door.

The banging grew louder.

"Yes—I'm coming!" The smooth accent became more clipped when he raised his voice. A leftover from his days spent in a boarding school where the Queen's English wasn't just expected, it was demanded—along with appropriate dress and manners. A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth as he caught his reflection in the hallway mirror.

Not exactly abiding by house rules, there, Ryan, he thought, noting the rumpled woollen jumper and faded jeans, the stubble on his jaw.

Maxwell Charles Finley-Ryan. He preferred just 'Ryan'. Life was complicated enough without adding a series of ridiculous names into the mix.

He fiddled with the locks and eventually the door swung open. He struggled to place the woman who stood shivering in front of him. Mid-fifties, trim, with short, ash-blond hair styled in a bob which was currently weather-blown and damp. Her hands clutched at the lapels of her anorak and shook slightly. A dark brown Labrador whimpered at her heels.

Dawn? Jeanette? He thought he had seen her working in one of the craft shops in the village.

"Ah..." He tried to remember the basic social graces but she cut across him, the words tumbling out of numb lips.

"I found her up at the Priory. You have to come with me."

Ryan lifted a brow, but instinct was setting in. Her pupils were like pinpricks. Her hands shook, and her breathing was unsteady.

"Okay, look...Liz?" He remembered with a flash of insight that she had sold him a flowery scented candle he'd sent to his mother. "Come inside, out of the cold."

"No, no, you have to come *now*." Her body shuddered as he tried to take her arms in a gentle grip.

"I'm going to help you, but first you need to come inside and sit down."

He led her through the little passageway to the sitting room with its cosy fireplace and worn leather sofa. He wished he had lit a fire. He had another moment's regret that he hadn't cleaned up the remnants of last night's bottle and a half of red wine, but by the look on the woman's face she wasn't aware of her surroundings. The dog sloped in after them, unwilling to leave her.

"Now," he said, easing her onto the sofa. "What's happened? Have you hurt yourself?"

"No, not me!" Her face was anguished. "It's Lucy—she's lying up there in the Priory."

He watched as fat tears began to run down her cheeks and a sick feeling rolled in his gut.

"What happened to Lucy?"

"I don't know, but she's dead." Her voice was hollow and hitched with deep, ragged breaths. "I used to babysit her when she was little. Her mother...oh God, Helen—how will I tell her?" Her eyes closed and when they opened again, they were dark with grief. "She was just a baby. She was still just a baby." She began to weep; deep, heart-wrenching sobs which shuddered through her small frame.

Ryan's chest constricted. It seemed that, no matter what the department ordered, death followed him wherever he went.

"Are you sure?"

She managed a sharp nod. "She was gone."

He believed her.

"Wait here," he murmured, then moved quickly to the telephone in the hallway, looked up the number of the local coastguard and put the call through. There was no police force stationed on the island.

"Alex?" The phone was answered after a couple of rings and he knew the coastguard would have been up for an hour already on his present shift.

"Yeah?" The voice with its musical Northern lilt was friendly. "Got an emergency?"

"I need you to secure an area up at the Priory. No access to the general public, to anybody other than me at this point."

"What? Look, you can't—"

"There's a girl lying dead up there."

There was a humming silence at the end of the line before Alex's voice came through again in hushed tones.

"Are you sure?"

Ryan thought of the woman in the room beyond. There was always hope that Liz had been wrong.

"Get hold of the local doctor and tell him to meet us at the entrance to the Priory. We'll find out for sure." He couldn't let the whole neighbourhood start helping themselves to a glimpse of the crime scene. "Nobody goes past the entrance, in or out, without my knowledge. Bring tape to cordon off the area and something to put over your feet and clothes—overalls if you have them."

Ryan paused to open the front door, sniffing at the air. "Bring some tarpaulin or plastic sheets too, it looks like rain.

I'll meet you up there as soon as I can. Contact the police on the mainland. Ask the control room to refer it to Gregson and tell them to get a team over here."

Alex let out a long breath before answering. "My father's the doctor on the island, so I'll get in touch with him now. It's going to be another hour before the road will be clear for the police to cross, though. Ah, Ryan, are you going to..." He cleared his throat awkwardly. "Look, I've never done anything like this before." The coastguard on Lindisfarne held a special dispensation to act as an initial response team in case of emergencies, but so far that had involved breaking up a couple of half-hearted pub brawls and a squabble between two tourists over who had backed into the other's SUV. Murder definitely broke new ground.

"I'll walk you through it. Five minutes, Alex—ten max."

He replaced the handset and moved back into the sitting room, pausing in the doorway for a moment. Liz sat huddled, seeming older and more fragile than before. Her face was pale, her eyes too dark and her hands still shaking.

"Liz," he said gently, and watched her body jerk. "Is there somebody I can call? Can I get you something, a glass of water maybe?"

"I need Sean." She recited the number.

He called her husband and explained the situation. The immediate concern in the other man's voice told Ryan that he would not have to wait long before there was another knock on the door. It was good that she had somebody.

Ryan spent a few minutes taking down a brief statement, snatches of information from Liz before she broke down completely. Her husband arrived soon after and, as Ryan watched them leave, he thought about how Liz's first instinct had been to run to him rather than to the husband she loved. Mouth grim, he grabbed his phone and the field kit he kept in the hallway cupboard.

It seemed like his three months' sabbatical was up.

Ryan vaulted over the visitor's gate at the entrance to the Priory, his long legs eating up the ground, shoes covered in plastic. He noticed the lack of deterrent to the public, which would need to be remedied immediately. Evidently, the coastguards had been slow to arrive. He pulled out a roll of police tape and didn't question the cynicism which had driven him to pack it when he moved to Lindisfarne. He rolled out the tape across the entrance and along the fence.

"Have to do for now," he grumbled.

He cast his eye around the vicinity. The place was secluded, the village accounting for ninety per cent of the structures on the island, with only a few scattered holiday homes by the beach or on the outskirts. Turning, he could see the edge of the village to his left and the harbour, which spread out towards the fort with the coastguard hut at its base, to his right. No cars parked suggestively nearby, no people except for the girl who awaited him.

His eyes tracked as he walked carefully across the mossy grass which grew between the walls. He snapped pictures as he went—forensics would get it all, but you never knew what you might miss the first time around. No obvious footpath or footprints other than the well-worn path which led around the perimeter of the site, but he trod carefully to the side in any event. Without any obvious indication of where he would find the body, Ryan followed Liz's description and steeled himself, scenting that he was near as he wound through the high, arched walls and was met with an unmistakably sweet smell.

It wasn't the first time he had seen death. His system jumped but didn't revolt as it wanted to. A girl who had once been lovely was draped across a wide stone slab. Her legs were parted, and only long experience allowed him to keep looking without feeling hideously voyeuristic. The animals had started to do their work, he noticed dully, but it led him to estimate that she had been dead only a few hours. Her body looked rigid but not as wooden as some he had seen. Rigor mortis might have set in, but only fairly recently if he was any judge. He snapped pictures from all angles and then panned out to take in the full scene.

He lowered his camera and frowned. The girl looked like she had been *arranged*. She lay there naked, palms both upwards, outstretched. Blood from the gash he could see matting the hair at her temple had been used to mark her forehead and palms, to sweep lines along her torso from chest to navel. Her hair seemed to have been combed out