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THE MOOR

A DCI RYAN MYSTERY

LJ ROSS



PENGUIN BOOKS

Charlie O'Neill had never spoken of his inconstant wife, long dead to him now.

But others had. The circus had whispered about the woman who'd left her man and child to run off with a rich country-man with a big house. Esme O'Neill had disgraced her family and dishonoured her faith. She wasn't fit to be remembered, this woman whose character had been so maligned.

Except, none of it was true. Sam knew that now.

Her mother had not left them, she had been taken.

It was a heavy burden, this new knowledge. If she spoke out, it would be tantamount to betrayal; unthinkable and unforgivable. Fear curdled in her belly as she thought of her father's anger and of the uproar that would follow if she went to the police. But she could not ignore what she had seen, and she could not allow others to continue as they had for so long, believing her mother to be unworthy.

She knew what she must do.

Heart heavy, she turned away and melted back into the shadows.

CHAPTER 1

Sunday, 2nd June 2019

Thirty miles north of the city of Newcastle upon Tyne, Detective Chief Inspector Maxwell Finley-Ryan watched a flock of birds swoop across a cloudless Northumbrian sky. Sunday mornings were made for this, and it had been far too long since he'd been able to enjoy a quiet moment of reflection and contented idleness while he watched the world go by. Life as a murder detective didn't lend itself to lazy lie-ins or meandering walks along the riverbank but, at the none-too-gentle insistence of his sergeant—and his wife—he'd agreed to take some time off and recharge his batteries.

He was giving serious thought to the prospect of depleting them again by joining his wife in the shower, when the front door bell rang.

"Foiled again," he muttered, and trotted downstairs, telling himself he'd quickly dispatch whichever political

campaigner or religious missionary was presently darkening his door.

But, when he yanked the door open, the rebuff died on his lips.

A girl of no more than eleven or twelve stood on the porch step, a backpack hanging over one shoulder. A tanned, freckled face was framed by a crop of reddish-brown hair that had been stuffed beneath an ancient baseball cap, and her jeans were caked in mud and God only knew what else. Ryan had no time to finish his assessment before the girl tipped up her cap and fixed him with a direct, green-eyed stare.

“Are you the bloke from the news?” she demanded.

Ryan raised a single black eyebrow and folded his arms across his chest.

“That depends,” he said. “Who’s asking?”

She shuffled her feet, which were clad in scuffed trainers that might once have been white.

“Look, I need to know if this is the right place,” she said, unconsciously mirroring his stance. “You look like him.”

Ryan’s lips twitched.

“Like who? Because, unless it’s James Bond, I’m not sure I’ll be flattered.”

She flashed a smile, which was gone just as quickly.

“Detective Chief Inspector Ryan,” she said. “I saw him—I saw *you*—on the news a while ago. You’re supposed to be the best.”

“At what?”

“Catching killers.”

There was a short, humming silence as Ryan took a closer look at the girl’s face and saw what he’d missed the first time around. Beneath the bravado and oversized hat, there was something else.

There was fear.

“Where are your parents?” he asked, peering towards the driveway to see how she’d made it this far. “Come to think of it, how did you find out where I live?”

She smiled again.

“You can find out most things, if you ask the right people,” she said, and ducked beneath his arm to scuttle inside the house, bringing a strong aroma of horses with her.

“Hey!”

Ryan let the front door slam shut and hurried after the girl, just as Anna came downstairs and caught a flash of movement headed in the direction of the kitchen.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“Monkey on the loose,” Ryan threw over his shoulder.

Anna let out a muffled laugh and followed him into the kitchen, coming to a surprised halt as she was met with a girl of around ten, who had wasted no time in helping herself to a chair at their large breakfast table and was eyeing the bowl of fruit in the middle with hungry eyes.

“Who’s this?” she asked.

“Good question,” Ryan growled.

"I'm Samantha," the girl said, watching them closely. "You can call me Sam, if you like."

"That's a pretty name," Anna said, and offered her the bowl of fruit. "Have we met before?"

Sam's shoulders tensed as the woman drew near, then relaxed again. There was a kind look in her eyes.

"No, you don't know me," she mumbled, reaching for an apple. "I came—I needed to see *him*. It's important."

She flicked a glance across to where Ryan remained standing a safe distance away, tall, raven-haired and, to her eyes, everything a hero was supposed to look like.

"You still haven't told me how you found this address," he said.

"It doesn't matter how," she shot back, between loud bites. "I need your help. My mum's been murdered, and I want you to find out who did it."

Anna and Ryan exchanged an eloquent look.

"You're telling me your mother was murdered? When did this happen?"

All suspicion forgotten, Ryan took a seat while Anna melted away to put the kettle on. Moments like these called for coffee and, in the girl's case, strong hot chocolate.

Sam began to fiddle with the cuff of her sweatshirt, picking at the fraying edge.

"Eight years ago," she said.

Ryan did the maths.

"You would have been...two, or three?"

"Two," she nodded.

He ran a hand over his jaw and sighed. It wasn't that he didn't believe her, exactly, but it was hardly a compelling case so far.

"Okay. Tell me your mum's name, and why you think she was murdered."

Sam wrapped her fingers around the enormous mug of hot chocolate Anna set in front of her.

"Thanks," she mumbled, and took a fortifying sip before continuing. "She was called Esme. Esme O'Neill. But her real name was Esmerelda."

Ryan didn't so much as flinch, although he'd never investigated a victim with so whimsical a name before.

"Esmerelda O'Neill," he repeated. "Go on."

"My daddy and everyone told me she ran off," she explained. "They said she'd left me when I was a baby and I'd always thought...Everyone said she was bad, but now I know it wasn't her fault. I know she never left me."

"How do you know?" Ryan prodded.

"I remembered what happened," she replied, in the kind of tone that implied it was obvious. "Yesterday, I remembered while I was mucking out Pegasus' stable. I saw what happened."

"You...saw your mother being killed?" Anna murmured, and reached across the table to touch the girl's fingers in sympathy.

Sam nodded, and blinked furiously against unexpected tears. The woman's hands were tender, as her mother's had been, and she smelled nice.

Ryan gave her a moment, then spoke carefully.

“This would have been back in 2011,” he said. “Do you know what time of year? Anything else that might help me to understand?”

Sam looked at him from beneath the rim of her preposterous hat with such aching sadness that Ryan felt his gut twist.

“It happened the last time we were in Newcastle,” she said. “We haven’t been back since, but...I think we always used to come in June.”

“We?” Anna asked, taking the words out of Ryan’s mouth.

“O’Neill’s Circus,” Sam said. “My great-grandfather started it. I think we used to come to Newcastle every year, but this is the first time we’ve been back since...since she died.”

She’d almost said, ‘since she left,’ but that wasn’t true. Not now.

“I remember how it happened,” she continued, in as firm a voice as she could muster. “She was strangled. I was there but, when I try to think of *who*, I can only see a shadow—”

She broke off suddenly and set the apple core on the table, bearing down against the memories which threatened to crowd into her mind again.

“Will you help?” she asked, compelling him to listen. “Please?”

Ryan gave a short nod.

“It’s my job,” he said simply, and was rewarded with a smile that would have lit up the darkest sky.

CHAPTER 2

“Make way for the Yorkshire Pudding King!”

Detective Sergeant Frank Phillips’ humble declaration greeted Anna on the doorstep a short while later. In deference to the milder weather, his stocky body was showcased in a pair of khaki cargo shorts that looked as though they’d survived both world wars, and a blinding pink shirt embroidered with a pattern of tiny green palm trees. He’d rounded off the ensemble with a liberal sprinkling of Old Spice.

Rendered momentarily speechless, Anna had no time to warn him of the unexpected addition to their lunch party before he stepped inside, wiping his comfortable Hush Puppies on the hallway mat.

His wife followed, with the long-suffering air of one who had seen it all before.

“Anyone would think you’d never eaten a roast dinner,” Detective Inspector Denise MacKenzie grumbled, leaning in to bestow a quick peck on Anna’s cheek as she shrugged

out of her summer jacket. "I had to strong-arm him away from the bacon, this morning."

Anna gave herself a mental shake.

"Ah, there's something I should mention—"

But Frank was already making his way towards the kitchen and, a few seconds later, they heard his booming voice carry along the hallway.

"Who's *this*?"

Sam's eyes widened as another man entered the kitchen. He was older than Ryan; short and tough-looking with a boxer's physique—not that he looked particularly dangerous at that moment, dressed in a flamingo-pink shirt and shorts that revealed pale, hairy legs that clearly weren't accustomed to regular sunshine.

"Frank, meet Samantha O'Neill," Ryan said, watching her with the ghost of a smile. "Sam, this is my sergeant and good friend, Frank Phillips."

"I don't want to speak to anybody else," she scowled. "I only want to talk to *you*."

Phillips was affronted.

"Story of my life, that is," he grumbled. "All the lasses love a pretty boy."

Sam drank the rest of her hot chocolate, to hide a smile.

"Well, hello!"

MacKenzie set her handbag on the kitchen countertop and made a discreet assessment of the girl, who stared at her with wide eyes.

"This here's Samantha," Frank said, moving across to sniff at the meat roasting in the oven before looking out bowls and a whisk to get started on the Yorkshire pudding batter. That was their little tradition, he thought—he would make his legendary puddings, if Anna made the gravy to pour on top of them.

While Phillips set about washing his hands, the girl glanced between them in a mixture of hope and confusion.

Ryan kept his voice light.

"Would you like me to call your dad?" he offered.

She shook her head, firmly. Until she knew which of them was responsible for her mother's death, nobody at the circus could be trusted.

Including her father.

"Is there anyone else?" Ryan asked. "A grandparent, or an aunt or uncle?"

Sam's lip wobbled, only slightly.

"No," she whispered. "There's nobody else I want you to call."

There was an infinitesimal pause, then Ryan nodded.

"In that case, why don't you stay for lunch while we figure out what to do next?"

Phillips polished off the food on his plate and paused briefly, twiddling his fork before reaching across to claim the last slice of beef. Unfortunately, he was beaten to it by the lightning-swift jab of another fork belonging to the young interloper sitting beside him.