

**'Daniel Aubrey can do for Orkney what Ann Cleeves
has done for Shetland' MARION TODD**

THE DYING LIGHT

DANIEL AUBREY

**The longest day.
The deadliest sins.**

AN ORKNEY MYSTERIES THRILLER

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Dedication

For DD

you gorgeous human

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Map

ORKNEY



Saturday, 21st June, 1997 - 12.07 a.m.

IT WAS AFTER MIDNIGHT, but still light enough to see the farmhouse on the shore. Michael spotted it from the boat as they approached, a black mass looming above the jagged shapes of the other long-abandoned buildings, like the last remaining tooth in a rotten smile.

He gripped the icy railings, tried to suppress a shudder. Thought of his mum saying 'It's like someone's walked over your grave', and suddenly felt a wave of sadness, followed by a longing to hug her that he hadn't felt in years. It surprised him, and hammered home what he already knew but was trying not to admit: this was a huge fucking mistake.

A glance back at the others. Nobody else seemed to share his concern. He needed to get a grip, not let them see he was starting to panic. His chance to protest had come and gone an hour since, when they had been sat in Rabbie's chilly barn, getting blootered on bucky and weed and listening to 'What's The Story, Morning Glory?' on repeat. Not his choice; he would've agreed to anything not to have to hear 'She's Electric' for the fifth or sixth bloody time. But he told himself that, even if he had said anything then, he'd have been outvoted five to one. Rabbie, Jake, and the three girls all wanted to go. He'd have looked a right fanny. Plus, there was the look Alice was giving him with those big, beautiful hazel eyes of hers. He was seventeen now, not a bairn anymore. Probably the last of his pals to get laid, if their stories were true. It was honestly mortifying. And it was rare for Alice to get a night away from home; this was their first chance to spend some proper time together alone. So, when Rabbie, pished as fuck, had yelled they should steal his dad's boat, sail it to Copinsay and spend a night getting out of their tree on an uninhabited island, he'd whooped along with the others.

'Let's fucking do it!' he'd cried.

Might even have uttered: 'What's the worst that can happen?'

The rim of the northern horizon still glowed yellowy green. The sun was only briefly hiding below it; it would rise again in less than four hours, at the dawn of the year's longest day. High above the island, a dome of deep blue

was light enough to conceal all but the brightest stars and a tiny sliver of moon. Rabbie cut the boat's engine and the vessel drifted silently towards the small wooden jetty that came off the beach. From the deck, Michael could see they were coming in too fast, and they clattered into the jetty with a sickening crack. Rabbie was a bloody liability and he couldn't sail for shit, even if he had been sober. Copinsay was less than an hour's sail from South Ronaldsay, but they never should've attempted it without checking the conditions first. Michael kept his mouth shut though. He didn't query how Rabbie's dad could afford such a vessel either, or why a supposed cattle farmer would even need one. Rabbie was more a friend of a friend, they hadn't known each other that long, but he already understood that, when it came to him and his family, it was best not to ask too many questions.

He hopped off the boat, hoping not to go straight through the remaining rickety planks that hadn't been stepped on in decades, shot a look at the hull for damage as he did, then he held out his hand for Alice. The pier swayed beneath his feet like a rope-bridge as Jake jumped down too. Jake quickly turned back to help Kelly off before Rabbie could, leaving Michael and Alice to help Isla. From the look on Isla's face, he realised that, if he had spoken up earlier, he might only have been outvoted four to two.

'Last one in the house has to fuck Isla Gunn.'

Rabbie's voice cut through the half-light, followed by a splash seconds later as the radge bastard launched himself into the water. The island rattled with the cries of seabirds, a black cloud of them launching into the luminescent sky at the sound of intruders.

'Prick,' Isla muttered. She dropped her head, her blonde fringe falling over her eyes as she fiddled with the silver bracelet on her tiny wrist. Rabbie took off down the narrow strip of sand that led to the bulk of the island. The sea was coming in either side of it. Kelly and Jake were ahead of him, walking towards the old farmhouse at the far end of the beach. Isla and Alice hung back while Michael checked the ropes, then checked them again. Coming here was bad enough; getting stuck here would be a nightmare.

'I wouldn't shag Rabbie Cleat if he was the last man on Earth,' Isla said.

‘Don’t compliment the silly wank,’ said Alice. ‘He’s hardly a man. Especially not if what Sally McGregor says is true.’

The two girls laughed in that conspiratorial way that made Michael’s balls shrink.

‘First time you’ve cracked a smile all night,’ Alice said, looping her arm over Isla’s shoulder.

‘Aye, well, the night’s hardly going as planned, is it?’ Isla nodded to the trio further up the beach.

‘You and Jake? Fuck, is that why you agreed to come out tonight?’

‘Well, I’m not here for that bawbag Rabbie, am I? And this one here’s taken.’

Isla glanced at Michael, walking up the sand beside them in silence, and the two girls laughed again.

‘Jake won’t go for a girl like Kelly,’ he said.

‘Aye, that’s right, you two are best pals, aren’t you?’ Isla replied.

Michael shrugged. ‘We’re pals, sure. I don’t know about best pals.’

‘Ah, come off it, the two of yous are always going around together at school. You’re joined at the bloody hip.’

Michael felt his cheeks flush. He hoped in the half-light that the girls wouldn’t see.

‘Does he ever mention me?’ Isla asked.

‘You?’ The word almost caught in his windpipe. Jake Drever talked about a lot of girls a lot of the time – it was fucking tedious, to be honest – but Michael didn’t think he’d ever heard mention of Isla.

He couldn’t be the one to extinguish the dim flame of hope that had lit in her eyes, though.

‘I mean, yeah, he’s spoken about you before. He likes you.’

The pale light caught the whites of Isla’s eyes as they flicked between his. She turned to Alice. ‘If he shags as well as he lies, you’re in for a shite night as well.’

Michael felt blood heat his face again.

They caught up with the others. The beach split in two and ran either side of a triangular outcrop of land where the farmhouse had been built, along with a couple of other smaller houses. Steadings for the farm workers who had lived here when Copinsay was still a thriving community. Michael had heard the family that used to farm the land had thirteen children and there was even an old schoolhouse here somewhere. Metal cages covered most of the empty windows. Weathered signs implored them to keep out.

They didn't heed their warning.

Jake tried the front door of the farmhouse. This building at least was still intact, with glass in the windows and in remarkably good condition considering its last occupants had left over forty years ago. The wooden door was unlocked but stuck. Jake was about to put his shoulder to it when Rabbie steamed in from behind, beat him to it. The wood shattered and splintered as the door burst open. Rabbie went face first into the hallway floor, then exploded in a burst of that hyena-like laugh. Michael was standing behind the others. He watched as nervous chuckling spread through the group. It didn't reach him. One by one, they disappeared inside, leaving Michael standing alone, listening to the wind as it whistled between the buildings where the eerie half-light cast impenetrable shadows, and to the constant background sigh of the sea which seemed to wrap itself around him. Every now and then, a deep boom would rattle across the landscape, like cannon fire from a nearby battlefield. He realised it was the relentless march of the North Sea, pummelling the cliffs on the far side of the small island. It was strange being in a place where you knew there were no other people. He supposed this was the first time in his life that he had experienced it. His eyes were drawn to the black holes on the decaying steading opposite the farmhouse, and he tried to picture what it would've been like when people lived here. His imagination ran riot with visions of all the souls who had been and had now gone, and a shiver ripped through him again.

'Everything okay?'

Alice was hanging back in the doorway. She swept a strand of her auburn hair from her face.

He nodded. 'Just wishing I'd brought a jacket.'

Alice stepped closer. She smiled as she took his hands and wrapped them around her waist. 'You can cuddle up to me, that might help.'

When she kissed him, he felt a charge of electricity course across his skin, followed by movement in his trousers he hoped to God Alice wouldn't feel.

She began to giggle, her lips still pressed against his.

'Feels like you're warming up,' she whispered, and that only made things worse.

Fucking hell, this was incredible. He tried to clear his head, just be in the moment for once and enjoy it, but he was flooded with conflicting emotions. He wanted Alice so badly, he really did. But if that was the case, then why did he also feel the way he did about—

The sound of wood snapping inside the house, followed by Isla's shrill cry, split them apart.

In the living room, someone had put the battery-powered lantern from the barn on the window ledge. It flicked long spindly shadows across a sparsely furnished room where the air hung thick with damp under a claustrophobically low ceiling. There were curtains still half drawn across the windows, an armchair and a wooden rocking chair pushed close together, and in the corner of the room a table with three chairs. The fourth was in pieces at Rabbie's feet.

As Michael and Alice ran in, Jake picked up another of the chairs and swung it with all his might against the wall where it too exploded with a bone-crunching crack.

Isla screamed again, her hands over her ears. Kelly was laughing.

'The fuck are you playing at?' Alice yelled.

'It's bloody Baltic in here,' Jake said, picking up a third chair. 'We need firewood.'

'Are you being serious right now? This belonged to people. It was their furniture.'

‘Aye, well I don’t think they’ll be coming back for it any time soon, do you?’ Rabbie said, that God-awful laugh of his filling this hole of a room.

Michael flinched. Another belonging burst into pieces.

Rabbie picked up the final chair. Alice marched across the room, and grabbed his wrist as he was about to launch it at the wall where, in the pale blue light of the lantern, Michael could see discoloured patches where pictures had once hung. He wasn’t sure what had happened – maybe her nails had dug into his skin – but Rabbie cried out, dropping the chair. Kelly howled again, but Michael knew this was no laughing matter. Anger flashed across Rabbie’s face like accelerant catching fire.

Someone gasped as he slapped Alice, the sound of it like the crack of a whip. In the shock of it all, Michael stayed rooted to the spot. He should have reacted, but he didn’t. Instead, it was Jake who leaped forward, grabbing Rabbie by the arm.

A chorus of yelled voices and the things she had brought into their life as a result followed. Another scream.

‘The fuck are you doing, man?’

‘Get your fucking hands off me!’

‘Rabbie, stop!’

The ceiling seemed a foot lower. The electric light from the lantern was painfully bright.

When everyone calmed down, Jake stood between Rabbie and Alice, the three of them panting, Jake holding Rabbie back, Alice holding a hand to her cheek. Michael felt his throat close as Rabbie turned his gaze to him, the whites of his eyes gleaming in the blue light.

His lips curled into a sneer. ‘You wanna come get your bitch, Wishy Washy. Put her back on her leash.’

He should’ve said something, he knew he should.

But he didn’t.

Alice turned. She didn’t look at Michael. She stormed past him, out of the room, without saying a word.

He followed, chasing the sound of her stamped footsteps up the uneven wooden stairs. He found her in the bedroom at the end of the landing, sitting on a bare mattress on an old iron frame. There was a window across from her, but the glow from the twilight sky was too weak to force its way through the salt-crusted glass. He could barely see Alice's face, but he could hear that she was crying.

The bedframe groaned as he sat beside her, but the mattress was still surprisingly firm.

He placed his hand on hers. She snatched it away.

'Why didn't you say anything?'

Michael sighed. 'I'm sorry.'

'Seriously, that's it? "I'm sorry"?''

'I ... I don't know what you wanted me to do. It's his boat, we can't—'

'So, he can do what he wants? He can hit me because we need his boat to get home?'

'No, of course not, I just mean—'

'Save it, Wishy. You're all the fucking same.'

'Who are?'

A dim light swept through the room; the beam from the island lighthouse on the nearby clifftops. It caught on the tears on Alice's cheek as she looked towards the window. She wiped them away with her sleeve. 'Men. You're so full of talk, but the minute anyone actually needs you...'

Michael's mouth swung open to protest, but he had thought better of it, and so he decided against it. He hauled himself up off the hard mattress and walked over to the window, leaned his head against the abraded glass and looked out at the crumbling old buildings around them and the fields beyond. Four hours until sunrise was going to feel like forever. He wished he could go back to the fight, say something. No, fuck that, he wished he could go back to the barn, speak up then. Or maybe earlier in the night, when he'd first met up with Alice, when he could've decided to spend the night with her instead of calling in on Jake. The lighthouse blinked again, and as it did, Michael caught sight of something written on the wall along the edge of the

window. He leaned in close. There were faint lines and marks etched in pencil on the peeling wallpaper.

It took him a moment to realise what it was.

‘No way! Alice, come see this.’

She didn’t move.

He turned back to the markings on the wall. Lines and letters, barely visible in the low light. S. Groat, ‘23. C. Groat, ‘27. Initials and surnames of the people who used to live here. Must’ve been the children who’d occupied this room.

‘Someone’s written on the wall here,’ he said. ‘It looks like they’ve been measuring how tall the bairns were growing. Jesus, I can’t believe these are still—’

He stopped.

For a brief few seconds, he thought he’d imagined it. Something shifting in his peripheral vision through the window.

Then he saw it again.

‘Alice.’

No sound.

‘Alice, seriously, come—’

‘Piss off and leave me alone.’

‘There’s someone outside.’

His voice was still barely above a whisper. This time, he heard the creak of the bedframe.

Seconds later he felt Alice’s breath on his cheek. ‘What?’

Michael didn’t take his eyes off the window. Off the spot where he had last seen the dark shape disappear after flashing across the open space between the buildings.

‘Stop fucking around, Mike.’

‘I’m not, I swear on my mother’s life I saw—’

There it was again. A person. No doubt in his mind.

Whoever it was, they ran from behind the derelict steading and into the old schoolhouse.

‘There! Tell me you saw that!’

He turned to Alice, her face as pale as bone in the low light. She said nothing, but the way the blood had drained from her skin spoke for her. He hadn’t imagined it.

They weren’t the only people on the island.

THURSDAY, 5TH JUNE. PRESENT
DAY.

1

IT WAS THE SILENCE that unsettled him. It seemed unnatural, even out here, like the hills themselves were holding their breath.

DI Fergus Muir stepped away from the gaggle of police vehicles blocking the single-track road to Rackwick and stood at the edge of the tarmac, his hand to his brow, screening out the early morning sun so he could see the large boulder in the distance across the lush moorland. There was no wind, that was the issue. The sea was only a mile or two away in either direction, but the crisp June air seemed remarkably still. Even with the melee of men and women in uniform, buzzing around the road and the path out to the Dwarfie Stane like the insects among the heather, there was a discernible hush over the valley. Like the peace here was so thick even a crime scene couldn't penetrate it. It made Fergus wonder if that was what had brought the man out here to die.

'You on the lookout for trowies, aye?'

Fergus smiled at the sound of the approaching voice. He didn't need to turn to face them to know who it was. If a silence could ever be shattered, PC Jim Brannigan was the man to do it.

'It's a bit bright the day,' he said. 'Don't think I'll have any luck.'

It was still early, a little after eight, but the sun had long since risen above the cliffs on the far side of the valley. It wasn't yet strong enough, however, to burn off the effects of a poor night's sleep. The call had come a little over two hours ago and Fergus had jolted awake, surprised at having nodded off at all. Sleep had still eluded him a few hours earlier, when the rain had started and the first shafts of sallow daylight had begun to creep between the curtains, the pain in his stomach gnawing at him again. He had glanced at the bedside table, seen the near-spent blister pack of aspirin and the empty glass and decided this time he would swallow two of the powdery tablets dry rather than climb out of bed and fetch water.

Now, he ran his hand through his thatch of slate-grey hair as he kept his gaze on the huge slab of sandstone a few hundred metres away. To anyone