

DEATH TAKES A BATH by Sharon Lynn

EXCERPT

CHAPTER 1 The First Discovery

“What’s nine-one-one in England?” I squeaked at my cell.

Black dots dancing before my eyes, I stabbed at the mic icon on the phone and repeated the question.

“I found one number for emergency services in Great Britain,” the soothing electronic voice informed me. “Nine-nine-nine.”

My fingers trembled, and the phone smacked to the ground. As I reached to retrieve it, Roddy, the cottage’s fluffy black-and-white rabbit, hopped to inspect the object.

Jaw clenched in a death grip, my vision getting cloudy, I forced myself to stand still and count slowly to five. The world stopped spinning, allowing me to reach for the phone.

“Don’t eat that,” I warned Roddy in a passing imitation of my mother. I scooped him up for comfort and maneuvered my cell so I could see the screen.

“Okay. Here we go.” I pushed the numbers as I said them. “Nine, nine, nine.”

“What service do you require?” a voice on the other end inquired. “Ambulance, police, fire, or Coast Guard?”

“Um.” *Coast Guard?* My brain short-circuited on the unfamiliar option. If there was one thing you never needed in the Arizona desert, it was the Coast Guard. My body swayed unsteadily as I contemplated the question.

“Are you able to speak?” the voice prompted.

Emergency. I needed to tell them. “Ear,” I stuttered, unable to form a sentence around the horror of the situation.

“You’re here, yes. If you are unable to speak, tap twice if you are in imminent danger.”

The professional but concerned voice had its intended effect of calming me. Shaking my head, I changed tactics. Instead of discussing the details of what I’d found, I asked for the police.

After a complicated exchange that gave me time to form my response, a male police officer asked my emergency.

Shuddering, I said, “Hi. My name is Madeline McGuire. I’m an exchange student from America, and I found an ear.” The words tumbled from my mouth. “A human ear. A freshly severed human ear.”

Saying it out loud made it real. Bunny in arm, I sunk to the floor, clinging to fluffy comfort. The image of the blood-stained ear spilling out of the salt-packed box loomed in my mind, stirring the acids in my stomach.

The voice of the officer broke through my thoughts. “You did the right thing to call. Do you have the address of your location?”

“Ash Tree cottage on Greenway Lane, Bath, England.”

“I’ll stay on the line until a constable arrives,” he told me.

Teeth chattering, I nodded robotically.

“Miss?”

“Yeah. Okay. I’ll be fine. Fine,” I said, not sounding even a little fine. “I’ll make coffee. This seems like a coffee moment.”

“I’ve found that tea is quite soothing in difficult situations,” the officer offered.

Ignoring the suggestion, I treaded into the kitchen, Roddy clutched to my chest, the phone pressed to my ear.

“I could have done without your discovery, Roddy,” I muttered. When I brought the rabbit in from the pouring rain, I let him roam free long enough for him to chew a hole through the cardboard of a newly delivered package.

“What was that, miss?” the policeman on the line asked.

“Oh, sorry. Talking to my rabbit.”

“Miss?”

“Nothing. I’m fine.”

I hadn’t blinked in a long time. A tremor rippled through me as I set the rabbit on the kitchen floor. With a weird detachment, I noted that Roddy’s black-and-white fur matched the checkerboard tile. The pattern became mesmerizing, a safe place for my mind until I collapsed against the counter.

Catching myself, I said, “Coffee. Coffee is good.” Filling the electric kettle, I flickered the “On” switch, then retrieved the French press. A mostly empty bag of stale coffee sat behind the press.

Dumping the ground beans into the glass cylinder, I filled the press with hot water.

It was a mundane task that I had done hundreds of times. I wondered, *could I make coffee without my ear?*

As I pushed the plunger to infuse the water with grounds, I almost shoved the contraption onto the floor. Catching it just in time, I shakily poured myself a cup. Ignoring the scalding heat, I gulped.

Caffeine coursed through my system, making me jumpy as I thought about the consequences of receiving a body part. An ear in the mail would make a little sense back in Chicago, where I was getting my archeology degree. Mobsters still controlled parts of the city, and the paper always mentioned grizzly retribution crimes.

As I took another sip, I imagined finding the package while at college. The dorm would buzz with gossip, wondering what the intended recipient had done. And I would know it wasn’t meant for me.

I had only been in Bath for two days. I didn’t know anyone in England, especially not well enough to offend them.

Did that mean the homeowners where I had a room were being warned? My stomach curdled at the thought. I hadn't met them yet, but I considered them friends after the year of emails we exchanged. Bad people wouldn't own a bunny, would they?

Losing control, I hunched over, retching dry heaves.

I leaned my back against the pantry door and slid to the floor. Roddy hopped in my lap, comforting me.

"Miss?"

I yelped, causing the rabbit to bound off of me, his powerful legs digging into my jeans. I'd forgotten the phone.

"Hello?"

"Constable Bailey is on your street. His collar number is 16941."

"There's a pull chain to open the latch on the gate. The box is in the mudroom. Tell him to come in."

"Mudroom?" For the first time, my dispatcher sounded unsure.