

BLOOD RELATIONS

BY

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Ryan

Detective Sergeant Ryan McBride stared into Mullan's bedroom, the metallic smell of old blood stronger here. Prisha Hill, the supervising crime scene investigator, laid her hand on his arm.

"I've never seen anything like this," Prisha said. "Have you?"

"No," Ryan said. "No, I haven't."

Fifteen minutes earlier, arriving at the scene, Ryan roared past several patrol cars clattering up the grass verge in front of Hungry Hall, a decaying country house outside Antrim. A few constables stood talking by their vehicles. He jammed on the breaks, pulled into the driveway then backed up. Saw them glance over; a bit edgy now. A stocky woman officer, with short dark hair curling under her cap, leaned against a car beside two male constables, both tall and pale. Ryan lowered his window, getting a whiff of country air, manure, cut grass, and peat.

“Word to the wise.” He flashed his warrant card. “I’m Detective Sergeant McBride, Senior Investigating Officer.” He nodded towards the house. “That’s a crime scene. You’re supposed to be protecting it, not standing around chatting like a bunch of schoolgirls. Next time anyone tries to enter this driveway ask for ID, unless you fully know who it is.”

Their faces closed up with anger and embarrassment.

Ryan held up his hand. “That’s one of ours lying dead up there, a retired senior officer. If you let Chief Inspector Girvan drive past you like I did, it won’t just be a bollocking you get, it’ll be school-safety visits. Understand me?”

The woman broke from the group and walked over.

“Sorry, we just assumed, you know, by the way you hammered in. But you’re right, we should have stopped you.” She nodded over to one of the constables, shuffling his feet by the car door. “Frank there knows the son, Andrew Mullan, went to primary school with him. He’s right and upset. We didn’t see the victim but one of the other fellas up there did and was sick.”

At the house, Ryan’s partner, DS Billy Lamont, was talking to a crime-scene tech while struggling into a white Tyvek suit and trying to tuck his messy brown curls under a hood. Billy stood a little shorter than Ryan at just under six feet. He had light grey eyes in a pale, freckled face. He lifted his hand in greeting.

One of the crime-scene guys threw Ryan a suit and booties. He had his own gloves and he hopped along, trying to tug on the booties as they headed for the front of the house.

“Grim sort of a place, eh?” Billy said as they approached the door.

Hungry Hall stood four-square and solid enough on an acre of land, Ryan noticed the stonework, originally painted white, now had a grey, mossy tinge. A feeling of disuse, almost abandonment, lingered. The day didn’t help, either, overcast and sullen with low clouds.

“Who found him?”

“The cleaning lady. She’s waiting in the kitchen.”

They stopped at the door and looked in. The main hall was large, gloomy, and cold. Crime-scene officers bustled about. Even so, the place felt desolate. Ryan couldn’t put his finger on it. He shivered.

“Jesus, it’s freezing in here.”

“That’s a desperate smell.” Billy unzipped his suit a bit and pulled his hanky out, holding it to his nose.

Ryan picked up the scent of blood, along with rubbish, rotting food, and dust in the air.

“How often did this cleaning lady come?” he asked Billy. Billy, his partner of over three years, was quick to pick up all kinds of information at scenes.

“Not blooming often enough, you ask me.”

“Hello.” A slim woman in her fifties approached them. A CSI in a blue suit, she carried a metal case and had shoved a pair of plastic glasses on top of her hood. She had dark, almost black eyes, and sallow skin. In need of a bit of sun, Ryan thought. Like me.

“I’m Prisha Hill,” she said, nodding behind her as she spoke. “I oversee this bunch. I was just on the phone to my boss and he said you two were a couple of comedians. Well, I’ll tell you

this for nothing, you won't be laughing when you get upstairs." She hesitated. "DS Calvert, the local detective sergeant here, has been called away, but he got things started before he left."

Ryan and Billy had been pulled into this investigation by their boss, Chief Inspector Girvan. They usually worked closer to Belfast. "Okay then, Prisha, lead the way. Is Alice the pathologist?"

"No." She shook her head and smiled as they moved on, acknowledging their Senior Pathologist, Dr. Wallace McAllister's nickname. "He's on holiday in Wales, so we have his deputy coming. Dr. Mervyn Wheeler. Good man, I've worked with him before."

"Oh, yes," Ryan said with a quick smile. They had almost reached the first-floor landing. "I know Mervyn."

The scene in the bedroom was shocking. Blood everywhere, even on the ceiling. Prisha followed Ryan's gaze.

"Arterial spray."

"Jesus, that's a lot of rage...."

Prisha nodded. "I know, right? And the victim being one of ours—a retired Chief Inspector for God's sake, Dr. Wheeler understands this will be a priority. He should be here any minute." She hesitated for a moment. "Don't take too long, detectives, he prefers a quiet room to work in." She turned to leave.

"Thanks," Ryan called after her. They stood for a moment, just looking. "Mervyn's getting as bad as Alice with all his little fussy habits," Ryan said.

"Who has fussy habits?"

Ryan turned and nodded to the white-clad figure standing in the hall. Dr Mervyn Wheeler. Jolly, rotund, and ginger-haired, his easy-going exterior hid a sharp mind.

"Oh, hello, Mervyn, about bloody time."

Ryan had shared a flat for a while with Mervyn when they were both at Queen's, Ryan studying law and Mervyn medicine. They had co-existed fairly amiably, considering their differences. Or perhaps, Ryan thought, because of them.

Mervyn hesitated at the bedroom door, like the others before him.

"My God, it looks like the Red Wedding in here. Hi-ya Ryan."

"Bit of respect, Mervyn, wouldn't go unnoticed."

"F**k off, Ryan. Bit of respect my arse."

"So," Ryan said. "I know you like a bit of peace and quiet to work so we're going to have a quick recee around, leave you to it..."

They left the bedroom and walked along the hall, entering a box room with a few cupboards pushed to the far wall, and a single bed with a bare mattress.

"It's almost as if no one lived here. What a bleak house," Billy said, shuddering a little.

"Nice to see your English 'A' Levels coming in handy there, Billy."

"What?"

"Bleak House, Dickens."

“Oh that.” Billy crossed to the window and looked out. “I never read the whole thing, too long.”

“Yet you finished Lord of the Rings.”

“Different thing, altogether.”

It was, and Ryan left it. He opened a couple of closet doors and peered in. Empty except for wire hangers jangling on a rod. The scent of mothballs wafted out.

“It looks like Mullan hardly used these rooms.” Billy said, as they continued up the hall.

Ryan stopped for a moment. “That was awful, that bedroom. Wasn’t it?”

“Yes, it was. Really bad.”

They both stood for a moment. “I don’t think I’ll ever forget it,” Ryan said.

“No, me neither.”

A white-clad technician peered out of Mullan’s bedroom, saw them there, and shouted over. “Come on back, Detectives, Dr. Wheeler wants to share.”

“Ah, there you are. Couple of things.” Mervyn stood in the blood-drenched room and beckoned them in.

Ryan looked at the body again. Mullan was dressed in boxers. He was a mess of blood. The sheets were soaked in it, all semi-dry now. Mullan’s heart had pumped arterial blood onto the nearby wall and around the room. An overturned lamp base had fallen at the side of the bed and a whiskey bottle lay in the middle of a brown stain on the carpet. The room smelled ripe, a mixture of blood and drink and other things Ryan didn’t want to think about.

“He thrashed about a lot,” Ryan said.

“Yes, indeed,” Mervyn replied. “He must have had a powerful will to live,”

He paused.

“Because he was killed twice.”

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Ryan

Mervyn waited to see the effect of his words and, satisfied that he had their full attention, he continued.

“To clarify. The blow to the head could have proved deadly if a bleed had occurred, and I’ll be able to tell you more later, but that’s not what killed him.”

He pointed at the blue stoneware lamp base lying on the floor beside the bed. Its white shade, now crumpled and blood-soaked, lay in the corner.

“I’m thinking the intruder picked up that lamp and bashed our victim on the head. A nasty blow. Later, the assailant, possibly realising that he had not killed Mullan, stabbed him in the chest, all over the belly, and one shallow thrust in the side there. Then the throat, in the carotid. Bit frenzied actually, seems to me, the roughness of it, the tearing. The blood loss would have been massive and irreversible. I say that only because Mullan was older and likely had a heart condition.”

“How can you tell?”

“An educated guess. Let’s just say I wouldn’t be surprised if we come upon some kind of blood thinners in the medicine cabinet. Warfarin, probably.” Mervyn then addressed a white-clad techie dusting for prints by the wall. “Have you found anything at all in this room? And did you check the bathroom cabinet yet?”

The man stood, removed his mask and shook his head. “No, but I found a small bloody mark on the bathroom floor in the corner under the shower curtain. It looks like a heelprint. I think the killer missed it. Everywhere else, wiped on most surfaces anyway. Used towels and took them away I assume.”

“Wiped?” Ryan did a slow three-sixty of the room.

“Not perfect, but enough to mess the scene. Didn’t care about the mess, just removal of any evidence, fingerprints etc. Anyway,” Mervyn continued. “As I said, the killer, as far as I can tell, bashed Mullan on the head, assumed he was dead, decided to check the place out. Perhaps picked up some items, went walkabout, came back a while later, realised they hadn’t quite killed him, picked up that knife there—it’s Mullan’s, his initials are on the handle, and proceeded to stab the bejesus out of him. Although at this point I can only assume it’s the murder weapon. Break-in gone wrong maybe?”

“Right then. Thanks Mervyn. And since you’re well on your way to solving the case and all, shall I just pop over later and perform the post-mortem for you?”

“Lordy, Ryan. I was just trying to help. You’re such a touchy boy.”

Ryan ignored him. "And no prints anywhere?"

"Apparently not on any surfaces we've checked so far. We'll need to access family and friends, anyone who might have been normally in the room. Get some shoe prints, too, of course." He nodded at the bathroom, "If that turns out to be a heel."

"Okay." Ryan had a final look around, followed Billy to the landing, and stood with him at the bannister. "Mervyn assumed the knife was just lying around, but what if he kept it by his bed for protection?"

"Protection from who?"

"I don't know. Let's go talk to the cleaning lady."

"We can assume for now that the front door was the site of ingress," Billy said.

"Ingress?' Really?"

"Means place of entry, Ryan. Keep up."

"I know what it means, Billy, I've just never heard you use that particular word in a sentence before," Ryan said, heading down.

"So facetious," Billy replied, clattering behind.

Mrs. Reynolds, the Mullan's' cleaner, sat at a well-worn farmhouse table in the kitchen. Behind her, a picture window faced the rear garden, a large, grey-green rectangle of patchy mixed grass and weeds. A copse of thin pines quivered in a gusty wind at the back. Grey clouds huddled together and spat fat drops of rain against the glass. That same wind pushed through the windows and produced an occasional desolate, high-pitched keening. The kitchen was warm. Someone had lit the cooking range. Ryan noted scuff marks on the floor and a trace of black powder here and there. The room had been processed, things were in motion. DS Calvert had indeed started the investigation before he'd left.

Mrs. Reynolds sat with a mug of tea cooling in front of her. A formidable woman, square jawed and big boned, she wore a fraying, full-coverage linen apron, washed to a light shade of parchment. Her face matched the apron in texture and colour. She cut a dowdy figure, except for a large pink shower cap pulled down firmly over her hair.

A young policewoman washed dishes in the sink.

"Sir?" The constable looked from Billy to Ryan while she dried her hands.

"Thanks, Constable," Ryan squinted at her badge, "Evans. No need to stay, I think."

She hurried out, and Billy rubbed his hands together. "Finally, a bit of heat. Here, Missus, can I warm up that tea for you? Ryan, you want a cup?"

"Thanks Billy, wouldn't say no." Anything to shake the chill from his bones. He sat down across from Mrs. Reynolds.

"Okay, love? How're you doing?"

"As well as—you know." She glanced over at Billy, who was fussing with the kettle. "Aye, make a fresh pot, will you, son? And put a couple of extra teabags in it. The cup that wee lassie made was weak as water."

"Right you are, nice strong cuppa coming up."

Ryan smiled briefly, a woman after Billy's heart. Mrs. Reynolds seemed to notice Ryan's expression.

"Oh, I completely forgot about this. Won't be needing it now I suppose."

She pulled off the shower cap, revealing tight grey curls lined up with military precision down the middle and both sides of her head. Ryan studied her hair, impressed despite himself. Mrs. Reynolds favoured him with a coy smile.

"My daughter, Francine, does my hair." She patted her curls. "She's a hairdresser over in Antrim there. She's a waiting list for appointments as long as yer arm."

"Yes," Ryan said. "That's a lovely hairdo you have there. Very neat."

She beamed. "If yer wife or yer mam want an appointment, I'm sure I could..."

She was not to be dissuaded. He eventually handed her his card and she scribbled her home number on it. "There you go, call anytime. I'll sort you out with our Francine."

Billy interrupted the conversation by placing a tray between them. He passed the cups around and they settled in.

Mrs. Reynolds drank her tea with relish. She didn't seem to be suffering from any of the usual signs of stress. Billy's colour, on the other hand, was only now returning to normal, which for Billy was the shade of curdled milk.

"Did you notice anything strange when you approached the house? Was the front door locked?" Ryan sipped his tea, strong enough to curl your toes.

"Nothing strange, just the same as always. The front door was locked, yes, I used my key to get in. I noticed the smell just after I arrived. I knew what it was. We've a farm, you know, we slaughter animals. I'm used to it. I went upstairs. I got to the end of the hall and saw blood on the bedroom wallpaper. Called Mr. Mullan's name, but I didn't go any further, didn't look at anything else. Just came back down and called the police."

"To clarify, you didn't actually see the body?"

"Do you think I'd be sitting here like Lady Muck if I had?"