

## THE INDELIBLE STAIN

*The dark and brutal history of convict transportation holds the key to a woman's untimely death...*

### 1

Esme Quentin's grim discovery that morning was shocking as much for its timing as its distressing nature. A cruel contrast to her carefree mood only moments before.

She'd had an uneventful journey to North Devon, arriving at the tiny historic port of Warren Quay earlier than anticipated for her meeting with Ruth Gibson, on whose farm she'd be staying. She parked her Peugeot beside some upturned boats and turned off the engine. It would be good to see Ruth again. Would they still recognise one another after thirty years? She climbed out of the car and stretched, savouring the smell of seaweed in the air as the breeze blew inland across the breakers.

She slammed the car door and headed for the small museum, a short way down the road to the harbour, where she'd agreed to meet Ruth. A poster on the door advertised the forthcoming visit of the Mary Ann, a replica nineteenth-century sailing ship, described as a 'Floating Museum on the History of Convict Transportation'.

As expected, the sign in the museum's window read 'Closed'. She checked her watch. Another hour before Ruth was due. A stroll by the sea would be the perfect way to pass the time.

She threw her sweatshirt around her shoulders and carried on down the hill towards the quay, winding her way between the hotel and the cottages, which in the nineteenth century would have housed labourers and their families who worked at Warren Quay when it was a busy port.

The hotel, like the museum, was not yet open for business. The outer door was closed and the curtains were drawn at the windows to the bar. Too early for guests to be at breakfast, though not too early for staff to be at work. She detected a distant clatter from the kitchen, suggesting the chef was already busy preparing food. She considered banging on the door to ask if coffee was being served but decided against it. Perhaps later.

She ambled along the path to the harbour wall, pausing to gaze across the still water of the harbour, encircled by the immense breakwater fashioned from granite boulders the size of a man to defy the ravages of the Atlantic Ocean beyond.

She continued down the steep stone slipway to the beach, pausing at the bottom to slip off her sandals and roll up her jeans.

Waves hurtled between the rock strata as though they were running late and she quickened her pace with them to reach the water's edge and splash in the shallows. As the wet sand oozed between her toes, she relished a bubble of excitement at the thought of spending the next few weeks in such a dramatic and unspoilt location. Not every day would herald the clear blue sky and sunshine of this particular August morning, of course, but childhood holidays had taught her that vagaries of weather rarely diminished the unique quality of this section of the Devon coast.

It had been a wise decision to seize the opportunity for a change of scenery and a new challenge. It was exactly what she needed right now. It would curb the restlessness she'd suffered in the months since Elizabeth's incident.

She looped the straps of her sandals together into one hand and paddled towards the opposite side of the beach. As she lifted her face to embrace the salted wind something flickered in her peripheral vision. She stopped and looked around. Was someone trying to catch her attention from the other side of the rocks?

She shaded her eyes with her hand. Debris was strewn along the tideline – tangles of orange binder-twine and bundles of bleached timber. And in the distance, something flapping in the wind from a bundle of brightly coloured fabric, like a heap of clothes left by a swimmer while taking to the water.

But no one was swimming today. The beach was empty. So what was she looking at?

She stood for a moment, deaf to everything but the snarl of the sea. It was just a pile of rags. That's all. But surely the colours were too vivid to have spent time in seawater? They'd be dulled, wouldn't they, if they'd washed up on the tide? A noose of unease tightened in the pit of her stomach. Perhaps she'd better take a look. Just to make sure.

She continued along the shoreline, turning inland before heading up the beach, annoyed with herself for not resisting the urge to satisfy her curiosity. Now she'd end up being late.

The unique strata of the cliffs loomed over the bay, like giant strands of folded toffee, eclipsing the early morning sun from the rocks and pebbles below. She stepped into the chill of its shadow and shivered. Two gulls screamed overhead. At the foot of the cliff she paused to gaze up at the tuft of green above then backed away, suddenly wary of unexpected rock falls.

The coloured cloth and littered tideline was out of sight now but she knew it was only a few steps beyond the jagged rock ahead. A quick scramble to the top, a quick look down and it would be done. With her fears dismissed and her buoyant mood restored, she could return to the quay to find Ruth.

The twist of apprehension tightened as she trudged closer. She reached the rock and paused to take a breath. Then she grabbed hold, launched herself up and peered over.

The scene hit her like a kick in the stomach. On the shingle below lay the battered and broken body of a woman.