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ROSS

HOLY ISLAND

A DCI RYAN MYSTERY

HOLY ISLAND
– A DCI RYAN MYSTERY
By LJ Ross

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For Ethan, with love always

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'Here within these hills, in this space of ground, is all the world. All anger and vanity and covetousness and lust, yes, and all charity, goodness and sweetness of soul. God and the devil both walk in these fields.'

~ Hugo Walpole

PROLOGUE

December 20th

Winter was an unforgiving time on Holy Island. Harsh winds from the North Sea whipped through the cobbled streets and wove through the squat, stone cottages which huddled together as if for warmth. Above the village the Priory loomed, crippled but still standing after a thousand years.

Inside it, Lucy lay shivering, her skin exposed and helpless to temperatures which had fallen well below zero. Now and then her body jerked, a spasm of pain which racked her slim form as she rested beneath a sky that was littered with stars.

She thought that her eyes were open, but couldn't be sure. It was so dark.

She tried blinking, a monumental effort which exhausted her, but gradually she began to focus. The familiar outline of the Priory took shape, its walls towering around her like black fingers against the ink-blue sky.

The stones provided little shelter and even less comfort. She was shivering badly now, her body reacting to shock and hypothermia.

Why was she here? Her mind tried to penetrate the pain and confusion.

She had been drinking, she remembered suddenly. There was a lingering taste of red wine on her tongue alongside something more metallic. She swallowed and there was an immediate burning sensation in her throat. She found herself gasping for breath, mouth wide and searching as she drew in panting gulps of cold air. She tried to lift her hands, to ease the burn, but her arms were so heavy.

Why couldn't she move? Panic gripped her and her fingers began to fumble around for something, anything. The pads of her fingers brushed against solid rock and she tried to feel her way to the edge, the small movement making her nauseous.

"Help! Help me, please!" Her voice was no more than a breathless rasp. Tears began to leak from her eyes.

She listened for a moment to the sound of the waves crashing against the shore below, deafening against the hush of the evening. She strained to hear other sounds, hoping and praying that her pitiful call might be answered.

Miraculously, she heard the crunch of footsteps approaching.

"Here! I'm here! Please..." she bit her lip hard enough to draw blood. "Please."

The footsteps maintained their unhurried gait and followed their inevitable path.

A shadow fell above her, the face invisible against the pitch darkness. But she heard the voice.

"I'm sorry, Lucy. You have to believe that."

Fear and disbelief stilled her restless body. She tried to move towards the sound, to seek out its source, but shook her head in frustration.

Sorry?

Her mind struggled to process the words, to believe her ears.

"You – you can't..." she whispered. She tried to open her mouth again, but no further sound came out.

Protected by a blanket of darkness, he looked down at her for a long moment, memories swirling, mixed with regret. He raised trembling hands to her throat and felt the pulse beating wildly there. He paused, wondering if he had made a mistake in bringing her here.

Not this time. There would be no more mistakes.

Death did not come easily for Lucy but, in the lingering moments before the light was extinguished, she thought of home.

CHAPTER 1

December 21st

Hours later, hunched against the bite of the early morning December air, Liz Morgan dug in her heels and called her dog through the gate which led up to the ruins. She hurried, sensing that dawn was near. Only slightly out of breath, she wove through the stones, feeling the peace amongst the ancient walls which seemed to sag slightly in their retirement. Much like herself, she mused, thinking not for the first time that her early morning dog walks no longer shifted the weight which seemed to have settled itself comfortably on her hips.

Rounding a corner, she prepared herself for the rush of cold air from the sea and was not disappointed. With the Priory at her back, she stood and watched the dawn rise, illuminating Bamburgh Castle against a wash of blue mist. It stood on its craggy mount on the mainland to the south and its warm, rust coloured-stone was beginning to burn with colour in the early light: a fitting tribute to a castle which was once home to long-forgotten kings of England. Her eyes watered against the breeze and she pushed back the hair which fell across them, greying at the temples. Absently, she ruffled the fur of the chocolate Labrador who was familiar with the routine and settled himself beside her while she paid her silent tribute.

Minutes passed comfortably before Liz turned away and strolled around the perimeter, with the vague intention of heading home for breakfast and a warm shower. The walls seemed to whisper as the wind howled through the cracks, watching her progress, silently waiting.

They did not have to wait long.

With her breath clouding the chilly air, Liz huffed around the edge of the headland and followed the barking dog which ran ahead of her.

Then she shuddered to a standstill, her knees buckling.

“Bruno!”

Automatically, she called her dog back from its exploration of what lay ahead. Horror came next, with an acid flavour. Retching against the bile which flooded her throat, Liz stumbled backwards, her body unconsciously denying what her eyes could not. She struggled to breathe, to get past the first waves of shock. Eventually, she forced herself to look again.

The girl who had been Lucy Mathieson lay naked on a thick altar. Crumbled stone walls sheltered her from the worst of the wind and sea and brought a certain solemnity. Her body was arranged carefully, arms and legs spread-eagled to remove all vestiges of dignity, even in death. Ugly bruises smudged the lifeless skin on her throat and arms. Long dark hair lay fanned out behind her in a graceful arc, matted with blood at her temple and damp from the rain which had fallen overnight. Her eyes, which had once been a lively cornflower blue, were now filmed white and stared unseeingly towards the new dawn.

* * *

In a cottage on the other side of the village, Ryan knocked back his first cup of coffee and savoured the hit of caffeine as it swam through his veins. He'd spent another sleepless night listening to the waves slapping against the shore, wishing for oblivion. He moved to a window overlooking the causeway and rested his tall frame against the wooden sill. Eyes the same colour as the overcast sky watched the tide roll smoothly back towards the sea and he knew that, in another hour or so, the causeway road would be open from the island to the mainland. Lights flickered on the other side of the channel and provided small consolation that he was not the only soul awake at that hour. Another five minutes, he told himself, and he would go for that run he'd been putting off for weeks.

“Yeah, right.” He muttered, watching a couple of two-man fishing boats heading back towards the harbour.

As a kestrel swooped low on the rocky beach outside his window, his thoughts turned to work.

You're not at work, came the sly reminder that his services would not be required by the Northumbria Police Constabulary in the immediate future. His lip curled and he dragged a hand through disordered, coal black hair.

"Arseholes," was all he said, but he was more angry with himself. The department had suggested that he take a leave of absence for at least three months. As if they knew what was best for him.

As if they had given him a choice.

He rested his forehead against the cold glass of the window. Taking time away from the job could be the best thing he'd ever done. Only problem was, he had too much time on his hands. The quiet had a way of opening the door to memories best forgotten.

Heavy-lidded eyes drooped wearily then flew open again at the sound of a sharp bang. He had a brief moment to think that it could have been the sound of the brutal hangover rattling around his head, then the sound came again, more insistent this time. He pushed himself away from the window towards the door.

The banging grew louder.

"Yes – I'm coming!" The smooth accent became more clipped when he raised his voice. A leftover from his days spent in a boarding school where the Queen's English wasn't just expected, it was demanded, along with appropriate dress and manners. A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth as he caught his reflection in the hallway mirror.

Not exactly abiding by house rules, there, Ryan, he thought, noting the rumpled wool jumper and faded jeans, the stubble on his jaw.

Maxwell Charles Finley-Ryan. He preferred just 'Ryan'. Life was complicated enough without adding a series of ridiculous names into the mix.

He fiddled with the locks and eventually the door swung open. He struggled to place the woman who stood shivering in front of him. Mid-fifties, trim, with short, ash blonde hair styled in a bob which was currently weather blown and damp. Her hands clutched at the lapels of her anorak and shook slightly. A dark brown Labrador whimpered at her heels.

Dawn? Jeanette? He thought he had seen her working in one of the craft shops in the village.

"Ah..." he tried to remember the basic social graces but she cut across him, the words tumbling out of numb lips.

"I found her up at the Priory. You have to come with me."

Ryan lifted a brow, but instinct was setting in. Her pupils were like pinpricks. Her hands shook and her breathing was unsteady.

"OK, look...Liz," he remembered with a flash of insight that she had sold him a flowery scented candle he'd sent to his mother. "Come inside, out of the cold."

"No, no, you have to come *now*." Her body shuddered as he tried to take her arms in a gentle grip.

"I'm going to help you, but first you need to come inside and sit down."

He led her through the little passageway to the sitting room with its cosy fireplace and worn leather sofa. He wished he had lit a fire. He had another moment's regret that he hadn't cleaned up the remnants of last night's bottle and a half of red wine, but by the look on the woman's face she wasn't aware of her surroundings. The dog sloped in after them, unwilling to leave her.

"Now," he eased her onto the sofa. "What's happened? Have you hurt yourself?"

"No, not me!" her face was anguished. "It's Lucy - she's lying up there in the Priory."

He watched as fat tears began to run down her cheeks and a sick feeling rolled in his gut.

"What happened to Lucy?" His voice was flat.

"I don't know, but she's dead." Her voice was hollow and hitched with deep, ragged breaths. "I used to babysit her when she was little. Her mother...oh God, Helen, how will I tell her?" Her eyes

closed and when they opened again they were dark with grief. “She was just a baby. She was still just a baby.” She began to weep, deep, heart-wrenching sobs which shuddered through her small frame.

Ryan’s chest constricted. It seemed that, no matter what the department ordered, death followed him wherever he went.

“Are you sure?”

She managed a sharp nod. “She was gone.”

He believed her.

“Wait here,” he murmured, then moved quickly to the telephone in the hallway, looked up the number of the local coastguard and put the call through. There was no police force stationed on the island.

“Alex?” the phone answered after a couple of rings and he knew the coastguard would have been up for an hour already on his present shift.

“Yeah?” The voice with its musical Northern lilt was friendly. “Got an emergency?”

“I need you to secure an area up at the Priory. No access to the general public, to anybody other than me at this point.”

“What? Look, you can’t - ”

“There’s a girl lying dead up there.”

There was a humming silence at the end of the line before Alex’s voice came through again in hushed tones.

“Are you sure?”

Ryan thought of the woman in the room beyond. There was always hope that Liz had been wrong.

“Get hold of the local doctor and tell him to meet us at the entrance to the Priory. We’ll find out for sure.” He couldn’t let the whole neighbourhood start helping themselves to a glimpse of the crime scene. “Nobody goes past the entrance, in or out, without my knowledge. Bring tape to cordon off the area and something to put over your feet and clothes – overalls if you have them.”

Ryan paused to open the front door, sniffed at the air. “Bring some tarpaulin or plastic sheets too, it looks like rain. I’ll meet you up there as soon as I can. Contact the police on the mainland. Ask the control room to refer it to Gregson and tell them to get a team over here.”

Alex let out a long breath before answering. “My father’s the doctor on the island, so I’ll get in touch with him now. It’s going to be another hour before the road will be clear for the police to cross, though. Ah, Ryan, are you going to...” he cleared his throat awkwardly. “Look, I’ve never done anything like this before.” The coastguard on Lindisfarne held a special dispensation to act as an initial response team in case of emergencies, but so far that had involved breaking up a couple of half-hearted pub brawls and a squabble between two tourists about who had backed into the other’s SUV. Murder definitely broke new ground.

“I’ll walk you through it. Five minutes, Alex, ten max.”

He replaced the receiver and moved back into the sitting room, pausing in the doorway for a moment. Liz sat huddled, seeming older and more fragile than before. Her face was pale, her eyes too dark and her hands still shaking.

“Liz,” he said gently and watched her body jerk. “Is there somebody I can call? Can I get you something, a glass of water maybe?”

“I need Sean.” She recited the number.

He called her husband and explained the situation. The immediate concern in the other man’s voice told Ryan that he would not have to wait long before there was another knock on the door. It was good that she had somebody.

Ryan spent a few minutes taking down a brief statement, snatches of information from Liz before she broke down completely. Her husband arrived soon after and as Ryan watched them leave, he thought about how Liz’s first instinct had been to run to him rather than to the husband she loved. Mouth grim, he grabbed his phone and the field kit he kept in the hallway cupboard.

It seemed like his three months' sabbatical was up.

* * *

Ryan vaulted over the visitor's gate at the entrance to the Priory, his long legs eating up the ground, shoes covered in plastic. He noticed the lack of deterrent to the public, which would need to be remedied immediately. Evidently, the coastguards had been slow to arrive. He pulled out a roll of police tape and didn't question the cynicism which had driven him to pack it when he moved to Lindisfarne. He rolled out the tape across the entrance and along the fence.

"Have to do for now," he grumbled.

He cast his eye around the vicinity. The place was secluded, the village accounting for ninety percent of the structures on the island, with only a few scattered holiday homes by the beach or on the outskirts. Turning, he could see the edge of the village to his left and the harbour which spread out towards the fort with the coastguard hut at its base to his right. No cars parked suggestively nearby, no people except for the girl who awaited him.

His eyes tracked as he walked carefully across the mossy grass which grew between the walls. He snapped pictures as he went – forensics would get it all, but you never knew what you might miss the first time around. No obvious footpath or footprints other than the well-worn path which led around the perimeter of the site, but he trod carefully to the side in any event. Without any obvious indication of where he would find the body, Ryan followed Liz's description and steeled himself, scenting that he was near as he wound through the high, arched walls and was met with an unmistakably sweet scent.

It wasn't the first time he had seen death. His system jumped but didn't revolt as it wanted to. A girl who had once been lovely was draped across a wide stone slab. Her legs were parted and only long experience allowed him to keep looking without feeling hideously voyeuristic. The animals had started to do their work, he noticed dully, but it led him to estimate that she had been dead only a few hours. Her body looked rigid but not as wooden as some he had seen. Rigor mortis might have set in, but only fairly recently if he was any judge. He snapped pictures from all angles and then panned out to take in the full scene.

He lowered his camera and frowned. The girl looked like she had been *arranged*. She lay there naked, palms both upwards, outstretched. Blood from the gash he could see matting the hair at her temple had been used to mark her forehead and palms, to sweep lines along her torso from chest to navel. Her hair seemed to have been combed out to frame her face. He sniffed the air. Amid the ripe scent of the beginnings of decay, there was definitely something else. Something herbal, which made him think inappropriately of curry. He filed the thought away and looked again. She hadn't died from the bump on her head, he thought. Treading carefully, leaving a wide berth around the body, he could see the mottled bruises on her slim throat and the signs of burst blood vessels under the skin on her face. Somebody with big hands had choked the life out of her.

Her clothes were missing.

"Careful, weren't you?" Ryan murmured.

Eyes tracking, always tracking, he moved back to the entrance to guard the scene until the coastguards arrived.

"Taking their sweet time," he said, checking his watch. *Nearly six-fifteen.*

It would be another forty minutes until police could get across to the island; calling out a helicopter from the RAF base on the mainland would take the same amount of time, as would trying to get a boat across.

There was a call he needed to make and he couldn't put it off any longer.

He slipped out his phone, keyed in the number and unconsciously squared his shoulders.

"Gregson." The familiar bark of the Detective Chief Superintendent, CID commander for Northumberland area, came down the line.

"It's Ryan, sir."

There was an infinitesimal pause.

“Good to hear from you. Is this a social call? If so, it’s an unsociable hour. ”

Ryan ignored the question since he happened to know that Arthur Gregson arrived promptly at his desk at six sharp every morning, come rain or shine. Despite his rank, Gregson was still the first to arrive and the last to leave. He didn’t appear to have been informed of the latest news, so Ryan came to the point.

“Sir, you’re aware I’ve been spending some time on Lindisfarne. An incident was reported to me approximately fifteen minutes ago by one of the islanders, a local woman who was the first on the scene. In the absence of an attending officer, I took a preliminary statement from the witness and duly contacted the coastguard in the absence of a standing police presence on the island. I have advised them to contact the local authorities, referring the matter to your office.”

“Incident?” Gregson was never a man to waste words.

“Yes, sir. I felt it prudent to attend the scene at the Priory ruins and will instruct the coastguards to cordon off any other access points at the earliest opportunity. First observation indicates the suspicious death of a local girl, approximately twenty years old.” He thought of the body lying a few feet behind where he stood and spoke more firmly. “It looks like a homicide, with ritualistic overtones.”

There was a barely audible sigh at the end of the line. “It sounds like you’ve done your duty, Ryan. I’ll send Phillips or MacKenzie.”

“Sir, requesting permission to return to duty and lead the investigation.”

“Absolutely not.”

Ryan gritted his teeth. It was no more than he had expected.

“I feel there has been a sufficient period of recovery since I was last on active duty,” he couldn’t bring himself to speak of it. When he continued, he made sure his voice was even.

“Respectfully, I would remind you that I have been an active member of the local community,” he didn’t blink at the lie but thought of all the hours spent lying in bed, staring out of windows. “I am acquainted with the island and its inhabitants. I am uniquely placed to interview and investigate.”

At his desk at command headquarters, Arthur Gregson sat back in his wide leather desk chair – a present from his wife to ward off constant backache – and tapped broad, workmanlike fingers against the standard issue beech desk he kept neat as a pin. Ryan was one of the best he had. Until recently, he had been energetic, diligent and Gregson knew there was a razor sharp mind underneath that pretty exterior the girls seemed to love. Ryan had climbed the ladder quickly. A fancy education had helped get his foot in the door but it was no substitute for experience and he had to admit that Ryan had knuckled down and gone the rest of the way himself. Two years ago, he’d personally handed Ryan his promotion to Detective Chief Inspector.

Six months ago, Ryan had been in an impossible position and the personal cost had been high. The question was whether he was ready to get back on the horse. Gregson quickly considered the department’s psychological report, the protocol and the paperwork.

“Have you been seeing that counsellor the department recommended? Had a check-up at the GP recently?”

The pause was just long enough to give Gregson his answer.

“I -”

“Christ, Ryan.”

Ryan tried hard to swallow his pride, thinking again of the girl lying dead beside him. “I can address both of those matters.”

In a tailored suit the same colour as his dress uniform, with a mop of steel grey hair, Gregson was an imposing man who could play politics and give speeches with the best of them. Still, he wasn’t so comfortable at the desk that he’d forgotten the time he’d spent on the beat, the

years he had put in working CID before he took the helm. He was a cautious, meticulous man but he wasn't afraid to go with his gut.

"See that you do." Another pause. "I confirm the termination of your sabbatical period, subject to you contacting your GP, who will provide a written confirmation of your physical health. It would put my mind at ease if you were to find a counsellor."

"The report listed that as a recommendation, rather than a requirement, sir."

Gregson acknowledged the truth in that and tried not to worry about it.

"Return to duty, effective immediately." He hesitated, but took the risk anyway. "You're the SIO on this. Choose your own team."

Relief was palpable but Ryan's voice stayed level. "Thank you. I'll take Phillips for starters. I'll need a CSI team, couple of officers for sentry and house-to-house," he glanced around him and thought of the size of the area, the elements involved. "No real preference on the CSI, but Faulkner's good."

"I'll get onto Phillips myself and tell him to scare up forensics."

"I'd appreciate it if we could hold off on the media for as long as possible. I haven't had an opportunity to inform next of kin yet."

"Get a preliminary statement out by this afternoon otherwise these things have a habit of leaking on their own. I want regular progress reports. Don't disappoint me."

"Understood."

"Oh, and Ryan? Welcome back."

Ryan slipped the phone back into his pocket as he heard the sound of approaching feet, lowered voices. Part of him braced and adrenaline kicked in his system before he relaxed again. The customary red jackets of the coastguard station officer and his deputy rounded the corner. He nodded to both men, assessing. He recognised Alex, the senior, as a regular feature around the village. He was a little over six feet, around thirty years old, blonde and athletic with friendly features which made him popular with the ladies. He looked more like a surfer than a coastguard; Ryan had seen him jogging past his cottage in the early evenings and had almost worked up the motivation to head out and join him.

Pete, the deputy, had a young face. In fact, he looked like his voice had only recently broken but he'd worked up a bit of a goatee to try to offset it. He was around the same height as his superior, but thinner, his limbs longer. He had messy light brown hair at odds with the rigidly sculpted beard, which told Ryan that he'd recently dragged himself out of bed.

Both men looked nervous.

"What the hell took you so long?"

"Ryan," Alex nodded to him, took off dark sunglasses and propped them in his abundant blonde hair while he extended a hand. "Sorry for the delay. We had some trouble chasing up plastic sheeting this time of the morning."

Ryan took the man's hand briefly, ignored the sarcasm and nodded to the silent Pete.

Ryan stood back, eyed them both and wished for a professional crime team but knew he had to make do with what he had.

"First thing I need you to do is cover your shoes and clothes. Did you bring overalls?"

"Ah -"

Ryan swore inwardly and rummaged in his rucksack. "Here," he barked, shoving a couple of plastic bin bags towards them and waited while they tied the plastic around their boots and the bottom of their jeans. "Make do with this for now. I need you to haul up some plastic sheeting to protect the scene. It looks like rain to me."

Alex lifted dubious eyes to the sky, which was papered blue and washed with pale sunshine, but said nothing.

"Come on."