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# DCI RYAN'S NORTH EAST



## DURHAM BOOK FESTIVAL'S 2022 BIG READ

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Welcome to Durham Book Festival's 2022 Big Read. We're delighted to share this exclusive short story from best-selling author LJ Ross with you, as we connect communities across County Durham through reading this autumn.

LJ Ross's crime books have sold over 7 million copies worldwide and are rooted in the landscape and culture of the North East of England. So, it's no surprise that *The Mystery of the Vanishing Mayor* has such an instantly recognisable and uniquely Durham setting. If you've not read LJ Ross's books before, we hope this story will inspire you to read more of them and explore some of their beautiful locations from Durham Town Hall to Holy Island.

Thank you to LJ Ross for gifting this story to the people of Durham. Durham County Council's library

service will be distributing 3000 free copies of *The Mystery of the Vanishing Mayor* to libraries, businesses, prisons and community groups all over Durham. We'll also be sharing an e-book version of the story via [durhambookfestival.com](http://durhambookfestival.com) and the library service, so we can reach even more readers.

This year's Durham Book Festival will bring Millennium Place to life with events at the Gala Theatre and Clayport Library, where you'll see best-selling writers, homegrown talent and leading thinkers discussing their work, alongside new films and commissions and the announcement of the Gordon Burn Prize. Please visit [durhambookfestival.com](http://durhambookfestival.com) to discover more about Durham Book Festival 2022. We hope to see you there this October.

Rebecca Wilkie, Festival Director

*Durham Book Festival is a Durham County Council Festival produced by New Writing North with support from Durham University and Arts Council England.*

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# THE MYSTERY OF THE VANISHING MAYOR

A DCI RYAN SHORT STORY



# THE MYSTERY OF THE VANISHING MAYOR

A DCI RYAN SHORT STORY

LJ ROSS



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## PROLOGUE

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*Town Hall, Durham*

1753

“George!”

The Rt. Honourable Sir George Bowes almost jumped out of his sagging, milky-white skin at the sound of his wife’s voice echoing in the corridor outside.

“George Bowes! I know you’re in there!”

‘There’ happened to be the Mayor’s Chamber of Durham Town Hall, where George was the city’s present and most illustrious incumbent—certainly in his own mind.

“Did ye’ lock the door, sir?”

“Well, of course, I did—” he muttered, but cast a nervous eye towards it and wondered if the lock would be strong enough to withstand his wife’s wrath.

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The young woman with whom he'd been enjoying a very pleasant two and a half minutes smoothed her long skirts back into a semblance of order and held out her hand, expectantly.

"I'd better be on m' way now," she said, pointedly.

"George!"

The door handle began to rattle, and he raised a shaking finger to his lips.

"You'll get your money," he whispered urgently, as he tugged his breeches back up his spindly legs. "But she can't find you here...in fact, she can't find *either* of us here."

His second wife, Mary, was heiress to an enormous coal fortune and, in marrying her, he'd secured the wealth and prosperity of his namesakes for generations to come. Unfortunately, she'd proven to be a jealous woman, and her father a puritanical man.

It was a disastrous combination.

"It'll cost extra for the wasted time," the woman warned him, as the handle continued to rattle ominously outside. "I've got regulars who're expectin' me—"

"Yes, yes," he hissed. "For God's sake, be quiet while I think—"

"You could say I's the char lady," she suggested, and George cast an eloquent eye over her brazen attire and yellow wig that was, he suspected, riddled with lice.

“A noble idea, to be sure, but I fear my wife is a woman of more than average wit,” he drawled. “The situation calls for more drastic measures.”

“Sir?”

Outside, they heard the muffled sound of a small crowd gathering, and George surmised that the caretaker had been sent for, to procure a spare key to the outer door.

“This way,” he said, and grabbed the woman’s hand.

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A couple of minutes later, the outer door burst open to reveal the impressive figure of Lady Mary Bowes silhouetted in the doorway, with three or four others gathered at her back, a veritable lynch mob ready to strike.

“George, this is the final—”

The words died on her lips, and anger curdled to instant confusion.

*The room was empty.*

With a sharp sigh, Mary marched inside the chamber, expecting to find her husband cowering in a corner with a chambermaid—after all, it would hardly be the first time.

“I know you’re in here,” she muttered. “You were *seen*.”

She turned a full circle, but there was still no sign of the man she’d married. It was unbecoming of a lady in

her position to...well, even to *be* in that position, but, since she found herself there nonetheless, Mary decided that she might as well round off the day's humiliation by asking someone to check beneath the long, polished table that stood in the centre of the room and which her husband had recently installed to play host to the various men of note who ran the city of Durham.

With a huff, she lifted her chin and summoned the gaunt-faced young man who'd been in possession of the master key.

"Do me the courtesy of...ah, see that my husband has not betook himself a fall, or a faint, and ended up on the floor, would you?"

Nobody was fooled, but society had its little protocols, even in moments such as these.

The caretaker rushed forward and bent double. "Nobody there, m' lady," he confirmed.

Mary held back a word she'd learned from her maid, who was, of course, from France.

*She'd always admired the French.*

"Quentin," she said, imperiously, and an older man responsible—in the very loosest sense—for keeping an accurate record of town finances, stepped forward.

"My lady?"

"I was given to understand my husband had retired to this chamber. Is that not correct?"

“Why, yes, m’ lady. The mayor entered his chamber not half an hour, hence.”

“Was he alone?”

This put Quentin in a difficult position, for more reasons than one.

“Ah, I couldn’t say,” he replied, fixing his gaze on a spot just over her left shoulder.

He was himself one of Bella’s aforementioned ‘regulars’ and, if word got about that he’d been the one to rat out one of her most prestigious clients, there was no telling how she’d punish him.

*Which was another line of thought, entirely.*

He cleared his throat. “The mayor must have left—perhaps by carriage, my lady, to hasten his return to you...”

“Don’t talk rot,” she snapped. “The door was locked from the inside, Quentin—and the key’s still in the lock. Even a simpleton could understand that it’s *impossible* for a man to leave a room and lock the door behind him from the inside. The key remained, so it was necessary for this young man to force the hinge, was it not?”

“Well...yes, that is true.”

“Quite,” she snapped. “So, tell me, if you will. How has Sir George taken flight through a locked door?”

“Perhaps the window?” one of the other administrators ventured.

Mary set aside the sheer degradation of giving credence to the possibility, and moved across to one of a series of sash windows, each of which was closed owing to the foulness of the air in the street outside. For the sake of surety, she tried to open them, but each was bolted—again, from the inside.

Where anger had turned to confusion, now a modicum of concern began to wheedle its way into her heart.

She turned around again, studying the room. The chamber was designed to hold forty or so, and was dominated by the large conference table. It was panelled in rich-smelling wood, recently installed, and topped by a series of elegant oil paintings, some yet to be hung.

In short, there was only one way in and one way out.

“Quentin,” she said, working hard to keep the tremor from her voice. “Send word back to Gibside Hall...I must know if their master has returned.”

“At once, my lady—”

“And Quentin? Speak a *word* of this beyond these walls and, by God, you shall suffer for it. Make no mistake.”

“You may be assured of my discretion,” he said, with admirable humility.

But, as the room dispersed, each occupant scurrying off to put out a discreet hue-and-cry for their mayor, Mary Bowes remained in the silent chamber, smelled the

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remnants of a cheap but unmistakable perfume, saw the burned embers of candles hastily extinguished, and felt her husband's presence as clearly as if he'd been standing beside her.

“George?” she whispered.

But there was no reply.

# CHAPTER 1

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*Market Place, Durham*

*Present Day*

“Howay, man! I’m clammin’!”

This bald statement came from Detective Sergeant Frank Phillips, whose mind, when not preoccupied with the detection of crimes, was otherwise engaged with detecting the source of his next meal.

“It’s been less than an hour since you inhaled that sausage roll,” his friend reminded him.

Detective Chief Inspector Maxwell Finley-Ryan, known simply as ‘Ryan’ to all who mattered, eyed his sergeant with long sufferance.

“You know you’ve signed us both up for that bloody half marathon,” he added. “How you expect to last until the finish line, at the rate you’re going, is beyond me...”

“I’m carb-loading,” Phillips replied, with dignity. “It’s a well-known strategy amongst *athletes* such as myself.”

Ryan raised a single eyebrow, looked down at the man’s paunch, then back into his button-brown eyes.

“I don’t recall seeing Usain Bolt knocking back bacon stotties and scotch eggs before a race,” he said. “But, in any event, we haven’t got time to indulge your addiction to sugar, meat and pastry, Frank, let alone all three at once. I’ve got two hours left to finish this ‘to do’ list before we meet Anna for lunch, or she’ll have my guts for garters.”

“You should be sittin’ out in the sunshine on your afternoon off,” Phillips said, casting a theatrical hand to encompass the blue skies and broad sunshine reigning over the picturesque city of Durham. “We could gan’ for a wander down the river, or grab ourselves a swift half at the pub...”

Ryan shook his head, however much he was tempted.

“You and I both know that I’ve been putting this off for weeks,” he said, slapping a hand against a scrap of paper he clutched in the other. “I’m on shift at the weekend, so I need to get these errands done. Next up, a present for...” He paused to check his list. “I don’t know anyone called ‘Herbie,’” he mumbled. “I would remember someone called ‘Herbie.’”

“Your neighbour,” Phillips said, with a fatherly look. “And a very nice bloke he is, too.”

Ryan rolled his eyes. “Apparently, it’s his birthday soon, and I need to pick out a book he’d be interested in. How the heck am I supposed to choose a book for a man I barely know?”

Phillips sucked in a breath, then puffed it out again. “Whey, this is what we’ll do,” he said, putting a comforting hand on his friend’s considerably taller shoulder. “We’ll gan’ to the bookshop up here on Saddler Street. There’s a lovely lass there by the name of Fiona, who’s got me out of many a present-buyin’ scrape or two. She’ll point you in the right direction, mark my words, lad.”

Feeling lighter already, Ryan nodded gratefully, and they began walking across the square towards the winding, cobbled street that wound its way up to Palace Green, where the cathedral stood towering above the city and its people.

They hadn’t taken more than a few steps when a blood-curdling scream rang out into the square, echoing around the walls of the surrounding buildings, sending pigeons flapping high up into the morning air.

All thoughts of books and bacon butties vanished.

“Where—?” Phillips wondered aloud, scanning the crowds of morning shoppers and families who had

come to a standstill, equally as surprised as they by the unexpected interruption.

Ryan followed the sound upward, to a window on the first floor of the nearby town hall.

“There,” he said, and began running towards the entrance.

## CHAPTER 2

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Inside, they found a commotion.

“Please, everybody, just stay calm—”

A young woman held up both hands to stave off enquiries from the general public, who’d been milling around the foyer and, upon hearing the scream, had begun chattering like magpies.

Ryan barged through them, and produced his warrant card for inspection.

“DCI Ryan and DS Phillips, Northumbria CID,” he explained to the woman, who happened to be called ‘Annie’. “We heard the scream from outside—can we be of help?”

They might have been outside their ordinary jurisdiction, but Annie was grateful for all the help she could get and nodded eagerly.

“It’s the Mayor’s Chamber,” she told them, keeping her voice low. “Several staff are up there, already.

The door is locked or jammed, and we're concerned for the mayor—”

“Which way?” Ryan demanded.

She gave them directions and he turned, taking the stairs two at a time, while Phillips trailed valiantly behind him.

Upstairs, they followed the sound of voices raised in panic.

“Police,” Ryan explained, and held out his card once more. “What happened here?”

The crowd was a motley crew of uniformed council staff and painter-decorators, of some kind, if their overalls were anything to go by. They stood outside a handsome, oak-panelled door, which looked almost as old as the building itself.

One man, whose head was entirely bald and shone beneath the corridor lights, stepped forward.

“We heard a scream coming from the Mayor’s Chamber,” he explained. “The door’s locked from the inside, I think, because my key isn’t working—”

He produced an ornate brass key, which he held in the palm of his hand.

“We’re worried the mayor has suffered a heart attack or something...”

“Has an ambulance been called?” Phillips asked.

The man nodded. “Emergency services are on the way,” he said. “I didn’t know what else to do, in the circumstances.”

“Excuse me,” Ryan said, and they parted to allow him to step forward and inspect the door—which he did with a thorough eye, trying the handle this way and that, before ramming his shoulder against the panelling with brute strength.

“You—you can’t do that!” another man blustered, and they watched his cheeks turn a slow shade of puce at the outrage of it all. “That’s a—a *historic* door!”

He planted his rotund body between Ryan and the wooden panels.

“And there might be a person behind it in need of urgent help,” Ryan reminded him, in hard tones. “So, please, *stand aside*.”

There must have been a tone to his voice which conveyed his general intolerance of fools, for the man hurriedly shifted away again.

With not another moment to lose, Ryan stepped back, then planted his boot against the door with sufficient force to splinter the wood. He repeated the action, while the council officials wrung their hands and thought of the Freedom of Information requests that were bound to follow, until the battered wood finally gave way and swung open on its antique hinges.

## CHAPTER 3

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As it turned out, the Mayor of Durham was past any kind of help.

The remains of the man who'd been Andrew Morgan lay in a heap of flesh and bone at the far side of the old chamber, his head cracked against the edge of a fireplace hearth. Blood trickled from the wound to land in steady *plops* against the cold marble, where it began to congeal in the unseasonable heat of the day.

The two detectives stood a few metres away from the body, and sighed in unison.

"This was supposed to be my day off," Ryan said, eventually.

"Mine n'all," Phillips muttered, and folded his arms across his burly chest. "Want us to have a word with the local team so we can hurry things up and hand it o'er?"

When Ryan didn't respond straight away, Phillips gave him the beady eye.

“Now, just hold your horses,” he said, in a suspicious tone. “You know fine well, this isn’t our patch. It’s one for Durham CID to deal with—”

“Except, we’re here now, aren’t we?” Ryan pointed out, with a tigerish smile. “Might as well do our duty, until they come along, eh?”

“I was afraid you were goin’ to say that,” Phillips muttered, and cancelled any remaining hope of an early lunch. “An’, I s’pose you’ll be wantin’ muggins here to start gettin’ the preliminary statements in?”

“That’s why we make such an excellent team,” Ryan crooned. “You read my mind.”

Phillips snorted. “Aye, an’ it’s just as well you can’t read mine.”

With that, he wandered off to begin protecting the crime scene, which included herding the crowd of rubberneckers back into the corridor whereupon he corralled them in a nearby meeting room, for the time being.

While Phillips dealt with people management, Ryan remained standing over Morgan’s body, scrutinising its position from a safe distance, before turning to take in the immediate vicinity. Firstly, and most notably, the mayor appeared to have been alone in his chamber—which was an impressive conference space possessed of all the decadence and refinement of a bygone era,

as well as a lingering scent of linseed oil or some other lemony wood polish. The carpet was thick and blood-red, which was an unfortunate coincidence—or, possibly, a fortunate one, depending on whether you were the soul tasked to clean it. There were three separate tables in the room, arranged much in the same way as a banquet or small wedding breakfast, with a ‘top’ table at the head of the room, near where the mayor had been found, and two long tables arranged lengthways in front of it, to accommodate all the council members required to attend meetings with the late Andrew Morgan.

“That’s them dealt with,” Phillips called out, from the doorway. “I clocked a squad car pullin’ up outside, so that’ll be the local fuzz on their way up, now.”

At that moment, they also heard the strain of an ambulance siren as it made its way through the city centre.

“What does this look like to you, Frank?” Ryan joined his sergeant in the doorway, unwilling to trample around the room, despite his inclination to snoop for clues.

Phillips scratched the stubble on his chin. “Well, lookin’ at the clip of ’im, I’d say the poor bloke stumbled backwards and cracked his nut against the edge of the hearth. Nasty accident, eh?”

Ryan wasn't so sure. "There was nobody else in here with him," he argued. "How did he manage to stumble backwards with enough force to crack his own skull?" He shook his head. "It doesn't make sense."

Phillips waited a beat, then gave a short laugh. "Well, y'nah the one about the old vanishing mayor," he said.

At Ryan's blank expression, he proceeded to tell the tale of old George Bowes, who'd vanished into thin air one day. Several eyewitnesses claimed to have seen him enter the chamber, but never leave.

"This is ringing a bell, now," Ryan said. "I'm sure Anna's mentioned something about a network of secret tunnels running between the old North Gate jail, the castle, the cathedral and this chamber, here. The theory is that George managed to access the tunnel and hide himself—and a certain notorious lady of the night—away from his wife, who'd taken him by surprise one day by coming into the office to try and catch him out."

Speaking of wives, Ryan's was an eminent local historian based out of Durham University, with sufficient enthusiasm for the subject to allow her to take an eager interest in facts and legends not directly related to her specialism, which was pagan history and folklore in the North East of England. Added to which, Anna had been a longstanding resident of Durham, and knew far more about its fascinating history than he ever would.

“Aye, that old tale,” Phillips smiled. “They say the tunnel runs behind that panel, over there, and it’ll take you all the way down into the bowels of the old jail. Nobody’s ever found it, mind you.”

“You’re quite sure about that?” Ryan said, while his eyes strayed back to the far side of the room. “It’d be awfully handy, if someone wanted to slip away.”

Phillips was sceptical. “That wood looks like it hasn’t been touched in two hundred years,” he said, with a shake of his head. “And, besides, who’d want to kill the bloke?”

Ryan gave him a mild look, and Phillips held up his hands.

“Alreet, alreet,” he relented. “Maybe there’s one or two who wouldn’t mind givin’ local officials a quick slap around the chops, if they thought nobody was watchin’, but there’s few who’d be moved to murder.”

“Maybe it wasn’t intentional,” Ryan mused.

“Maybe it’s none of our bleedin’ business,” Phillips retorted. “Speakin’ o’ which, here’s the local team arrivin’ now. Let’s leave them to it, and be on our way.”

“You can go ahead, Frank—I’ll meet you later. I’m going to stick around and see if I can help.”

“Are you tryin’ to make me feel guilty?”

Ryan grinned. “Is it working?”

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Phillips let out a frustrated grunt, then gave a reluctant smile. “Aye, it is,” he admitted. “You’re a crafty git, Ryan. Makes me proud to see it.”

“I learned from the best,” Ryan said, and left it at that.

## CHAPTER 4

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In the absence of a Senior Investigating Officer from Durham CID, whose job it was to determine whether Andrew Morgan's death had been suspicious in any way, Ryan and Phillips were invited to take charge of the investigation by the two first responders, who spied the body of Mayor Morgan and turned distinctly green around the gills. Ryan accepted the interim position and ushered them both outside, to guard the scene and regain control of their stomachs.

Next on Ryan's agenda was to call in the scenes of crimes officers—commonly known as CSIs—while Phillips went about the unenviable business of tracking down the late mayor's wife, who happened to be away for the week with their two young children visiting family in London. Once the scene had been cordoned off and one of the pasty-faced constables armed with a logbook and strict instructions not to allow entry to anyone

without their prior consent, Ryan and Phillips took themselves off to the smaller meeting room, where four people were gathered: two council staff (whom Phillips had christened privately, ‘baldie’ and ‘blustery’) and two tradespeople, one male and one female, both dressed in splattered white overalls.

“Thank you for your patience,” Ryan said, and invited them to re-take their seats.

They spent a few minutes taking down basic particulars, including names and addresses, then proceeded to invite each witness in turn to accompany them into an ante room to give a preliminary statement.

First up, they interviewed Jen Parfitt, whose overalls rustled as she made her way across to a chair they procured for her. She was a slim woman of forty or so, whose dyed blonde hair had been scraped back into a high ponytail which, until recently, had been encased inside a white cap.

“Ms Parfitt? Could you tell us why you’re here at the town hall?” Ryan began, choosing an easy question to get the ball rolling.

“I’m a contractor for Norwood’s,” she said, and gave them a look which seemed to suggest they should know of the firm.

“That’s a...er, painting and decorating company, is it?” Phillips guessed.

She seemed offended. “It’s a *lot* more than that,” she told them, a bit sharply. “Norwood’s has been one of the premier restoration companies in the North for nearly a hundred years. They took me on as an apprentice, back when I was eighteen, and I’ve been with them, ever since.”

“What kind of restoration are you doing here?” Ryan asked her, steering things gently back to the point.

“Oh, all sorts,” she said, breezily. “It’s been a six-month project, and long overdue, if the state of the wood and plasterwork is anything to go by. The building is listed along with various individual elements like the cornicing, the panelling in the Mayor’s Chamber and whatnot. I tend to focus more on the plaster side of things—mouldings, and all that. I clean up the original or take moulds to remove and replace broken or damaged parts that can’t be spot repaired.”

“That sounds like very intricate work,” Ryan said, honestly. “You must be quite an expert.”

Mistaking his remark for flattery, she smiled coquettishly. “Thank you,” she said.

“If you do the plaster side, who polishes up the wood, or whatever needs doin’ to it?” Phillips asked, breaking through the mist of feminine longing that tended to follow his friend around like a bad smell. He supposed Ryan couldn’t help being devastatingly handsome,

but it narf grated on the nerves, sometimes—the *hungry* nerves, come to that.

*A sausage sarnie would've made all the difference...*

“Oh, Tim takes care of the woodwork, or Mikey,” she answered, dragging her eyes away from the tall, dark-haired drink of water with obvious reluctance, and turning towards his considerably shorter, more cuddly, counterpart.

“And who're Tim and Mikey, when they're at home?” Phillips wondered.

“Oh, sorry. Mikey's the one next door—Mikey Watson. He's been working on some of the old doors, mostly, stripping them back before they can be repainted or varnished, depending on what's decided. Tim Norwood is the owner, after he inherited the business from his dad about...ooh, five years ago, it must be. He's more of the go-to for woodwork.”

Ryan looked up at that. “Where's Tim, now?”

She shrugged. “He was in, this morning, but Tim often has to come on and off jobs to go and price up new business,” she said. “He's got a few different jobs on, at the moment, so he's probably off checking up on them, or giving a quote elsewhere, as I say.”

Ryan smiled for the first time since stepping foot inside the town hall. “Do you have a number for him, please?”

She shrugged again. “Sure, no problem,” she said, and reeled it off for them.

Ryan turned to Frank, and spoke in an undertone. “Would you mind carrying on here, Frank? I want to make a quick phone call.”

Phillips nodded. “Got a whiff of somethin’, have you?” he asked.

Ryan gave another tight smile. “Maybe,” he said. “Just maybe.”

## CHAPTER 5

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In the hallway outside, Ryan put a call through to Tim Norwood, which went straight to voicemail.

With a thoughtful air, he pocketed his mobile phone and left their witnesses in the capable hands of his sergeant while he returned to the Mayor's Chamber, where the CSIs had, by now, begun the business of sweeping the room and the body for minute clues that could help them to determine what had befallen the unfortunate mayor—no pun intended.

“Tom?”

Tom Faulkner was the Senior CSI attached to Northumbria CID but, as a freelance consultant, he often worked for neighbouring command units. Ryan had worked with him for years, even called the man a friend, so there was nobody else he'd have rather seen bustling around the room covered head-to-toe in a polypropylene suit.

Faulkner looked up from where he'd been taking comprehensive photographs of the body, and made his way back to the doorway.

"Ryan, good to see you," he said, and the corners of his eyes crinkled in a smile that was otherwise hidden behind an industrial face mask. "Might've known you'd be here—it's like you have a radar for wrongdoing."

Ryan gave a short laugh. "What d'you reckon happened here?"

"Well, we've got a long way to go before we've finished going over the place," Faulkner said. "Having said that, the man cracked his skull right open and probably suffered a fatal haemorrhage. Hard to see how he could've done it without being pushed, but I understand there was nobody else in here and the door was locked from the inside?"

Ryan nodded.

"Well," Faulkner muttered, and raised a gloved hand to scratch the hair beneath his hairnet. "I've swabbed the man's hands, beneath his nails...all the usual things to see if there are any signs of assault. There aren't any defensive marks that I can see, but I'd leave that to the pathologist to be sure, of course."

Ryan looked back across to where Andrew Morgan still lay, until permission could be given for his removal to the mortuary.

“The windows only open so far as the safety bolts, is that correct?” he asked, although he already knew the answer from his inspection earlier.

Faulkner nodded. “Nobody could fit through there,” he said. “The sash only lifts about ten or fifteen centimetres.”

*As he thought.*

“Do me a favour, would you, Tom?” Ryan asked.

“What’s that?”

“Check over the panelling, there by the fireplace,” he said. “Does any of it open, or look as though it’s been tampered with?”

If he was surprised at the request, Faulkner said nothing of it, and made his way over to the section Ryan indicated. He spent a few moments inspecting the beading, the edging, pushing and pressing this way and that, before returning to where Ryan remained standing in the doorway.

“Seems solid to me,” he said. “I know the panelling has been renovated, recently, because we found an outstanding bill for the works lying on the desk amongst some other papers.”

Ryan surprised him by smiling. “Was this bill from Norwood’s, by any chance?”

Faulkner nodded slowly, recognising the look in his friend’s eye. “Mean something to you?”

Ryan's eyes slid back over to the panelling on the far wall. "I think it meant something to Tim Norwood," he said, in a low voice. "Any chance we can open up that panelling?"

Faulkner snorted. "Not in a million years," he told him, succinctly. "Not without express written approval from the council, the chief constable...any number of bigwigs. It's protected, so you'd have to make a good case for doing it. Do you have a good case?"

Just then, there came the sound of approaching voices, and a woman Ryan recognised as one of his counterparts at Durham CID approached alongside a couple of constables, carrying the harried air of one who was overworked and underappreciated.

"Ryan," DCI Thorne said, with a friendly smile. "Thanks for babysitting the scene for me, I was caught up on another job, but I'll take over now."

Ryan was torn. He knew Thorne to be an able officer who would likely do a good job at working the scene. On the other hand, Phillips was right; he'd caught the scent of his quarry and wanted to see it through.

"Fancy an extra pair of hands?" he offered, with a winning smile. "On the complete understanding that this is *your* case to lead."

Thorne tried to look annoyed, but failed miserably. The fact was, she knew Ryan to be a fair man to work

with, and he carried an exemplary reputation with his staff.

He wasn't hard to look at, either, and she wasn't hypocrite enough to deny it.

"Well, go on, then, if you haven't anywhere better to be," she said.

Ryan checked his watch, and pulled a face.

"I'm supposed to meet my wife for lunch in forty-five minutes," he admitted. "Let's see what we can get done in that time, shall we?"

Thorne cocked her head, and gave him a quizzical look.

"What on earth do you expect to achieve in that time?" she asked. "It'd be some kind of record—"

"It's amazing what you can do when you've got a lunch date to keep," he said simply, and then lowered his voice considerably. "Now, do you know if there's a nightclub nearby—maybe the student's union?"

Thorne looked at him as though he'd grown two heads. "What?" she burst out. "It's hardly the time to be thinking of putting your dancing shoes on, Ryan."

"Trust me," he said, and she shook her head at her own folly before rattling off the address.

A moment later, he was off.

## CHAPTER 6

---

*“FIRE!”*

The alarm in the town hall blared out into the streets of Durham, piercing the eardrums of those within its walls and sending council staff from all floors fleeing out of the building into Market Square.

Phillips’ booming voice could be heard ushering their witnesses out of the meeting room and down the hall, while Ryan made sure to do the same in the Mayor’s Chamber, calling to the CSIs and ancillary police staff to abandon their task and hurry outside to safety.

Inside the Mayor’s Chamber, heavy smoke billowed, pumping into the fireplace cavity and towards the panelled walls.

“Oh, my God, it’s reached the panelling!” Thorne cried out, with requisite panic. “Quick! We have to move the body!”

But, after a few minutes of concerted shouting, coughing and spluttering, she turned to Ryan with a frustrated shrug.

“Nothing’s happening,” she said, mouthing the words above the sound of the alarm. “Your brilliant idea may not be so brilliant, after all.”

Ryan said nothing, keeping his eyes trained on the far wall. “Give it a minute,” he said.

Phillips re-joined them, and tried to see over their shoulders. “Any sign?” he asked, but the alarm was too loud for him to be heard, and he contented himself with standing on tiptoe.

Several more minutes passed by, and Ryan began to doubt himself.

“Look, it was worth a shot—” Thorne began.

Ryan raised a finger towards the far wall, and they turned to look.

Through the haze of smoke generated by a machine borrowed hastily from the student’s union, they saw one of the panels beside the fireplace seem to contract and shift and, then, it came off entirely as a man coated in dust and grime burst forth, coughing and spluttering, his eyes wide with fear as he looked around him, expecting to find a raging fire.

Ryan stepped forward, a genial smile plastered on his face.

“Mr Norwood, I presume?”

“I guess Norwood had no idea the tunnel is more of a myth,” Anna said, as they seated themselves at a cosy table in Vennels Café, shortly afterwards. “It only ever led into the narrow lane outside—or, should I say, ‘vennel’, because that’s where the name of this café comes from.”

They placed an order, and settled back to enjoy the sunshine from the little square terrace outside.

“He’d been working on those panels for weeks,” Ryan told her. “He must have found the cavity and imagined he could hide there until the coast was clear, then sneak out. Unfortunately, without some sort of proof, I couldn’t start ripping it open.”

“What on Earth possessed him?” she wondered.

“He was probably hungry,” Phillips muttered, and watched a tray of sandwiches and cakes go by with a look of abject longing.

Ryan shook his head. “Norwood’s company was due to complete works on the town hall in two stages,” he explained, having heard it from the man himself. “The council was kicking up a fuss about paying for the first stage, which was completed a while ago, and which Norwood needed for cash flow in his business. Lots of people haven’t been paying in a timely fashion, so he

was beginning to feel desperate. Anyway, he went to the mayor, expecting to appeal to his sense of decency. Let's say they didn't see eye-to-eye. He ended up shoving Morgan a bit harder than he intended, the man stumbled backward and fell. When Norwood saw what had happened, he panicked."

"Everyone knows the old story about the vanishing mayor," Anna said, and took a sip of her tea. "It must have given him the inspiration to take a leaf out of old George Bowes' book."

"Well, at least he won't end up the same way ol' George did," Ryan said, and pulled an expressive face. "Another thing Norwood told us was that he nearly fell down a hole in the darkness, and it gave him another real fright. If there's some truth to the tale about there being tunnels connected to the jail, it might be an oubliette from the old days—"

"Aye, before the PACE guidelines were brought in," Phillips said, and frowned darkly.

Ryan chuckled. "In any case, I'd say your archaeologist friends might find some interesting skeletons rattling around that cavity, if they care to have a look," he told his wife. "Those fine panels were installed the same year George Bowes disappeared, when he was making some widespread improvements to the chamber. He would have known about that

tunnel cavity, but maybe he wouldn't have known about its hidden dangers."

Just then, a tray arrived, laden with goodies.

"That's more like it," Phillips said, perking up considerably. "You don't keep muscles like these eatin' lettuce leaves, y'nah."

With that, he reached for a ham and pease pudding stottie, took a healthy bite, and reflected that the world wasn't such a bad place, after all.

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

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I was invited to write a short story as Durham Book Festival's annual 'Big Read', to be distributed in the first instance to libraries, prisons, food banks and various other venues around the North East for readers to enjoy. I was delighted to be a part of the initiative and, calling upon some of my old research files into Durham's extensive history and geography, began to imagine *The Mystery of the Vanishing Mayor*. The tale is inspired by a widespread belief in the existence of secret tunnels connecting the old 'North Gate' jail (a fearsome place, in its hey-day), the Mayor's Chamber, the castle, the cathedral and beyond to Finchale Priory, presumably to allow illustrious personages of the city to escape baying mobs, the Scots, or many a thing...

Unfortunately, responses to freedom of information requests made of the city's council seem to deny the existence of these tunnels, but, as a writer of fiction, I prefer to imagine there could be old passageways

where nefarious persons might once have hidden, and perhaps even an old oubliette where unfortunate souls might be thrown and forgotten—spine-chilling!

I should say, that the characters in this short story are, of course, entirely fictitious. George Bowes was a famous MP and mayor of the city in the eighteenth century, and he did indeed have a wife, Mary, as well as being responsible for installing the panelling inside the Mayor's Chamber during the year I've imagined his disappearance. In reality, he did not disappear at all, and his real life was no doubt vastly different to the one I've imagined, or has been suggested in other historical retelling. The passage of time leaves many things open to interpretation, but I hope I've conveyed a sense of fun in the short story I've written.

For those readers who haven't visited Durham, I urge you to do so, for it's a wonderful place with a rich and impressive history. The cathedral is, of course, a beacon against the landscape while the buildings and cobbled streets that surround it are filled with little shops and restaurants, university buildings, museums and other cultural landmarks which are all worthy of visit, if you can drag yourself away from the riverbank, which makes for a beautiful wander on a fine day.

LJ ROSS

JULY 2022

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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LJ Ross is an international bestselling author, best known for creating atmospheric mystery and thriller novels, including the DCI Ryan series of Northumbrian murder mysteries which have sold over seven million copies worldwide.

Her debut, *Holy Island*, was released in January 2015 and reached number one in the UK and Australian charts. Since then, she has released more than twenty further novels, all of which have been top three global bestsellers and almost all of which have been UK #1 bestsellers. Louise has garnered an army of loyal readers through her storytelling and, thanks to them, many of her books reached the coveted #1 spot whilst only available to pre-order ahead of release.

Louise was born in Northumberland, England. She studied undergraduate and postgraduate Law at King's College, University of London and then abroad in

Paris and Florence. She spent much of her working life in London, where she was a lawyer for a number of years until taking the decision to change career and pursue her dream to write. Now, she writes full time and lives with her family in Northumberland. She enjoys reading all manner of books, travelling and spending time with family and friends.

If you enjoyed this story, please consider leaving a review online.

Keep reading for a short extract from the first DCI Ryan mystery – *Holy Island*.



# HOLY ISLAND

A DCI RYAN MYSTERY

LJ ROSS





## PROLOGUE

---

*December 20<sup>th</sup>*

Winter was an unforgiving time on Holy Island. Harsh winds from the North Sea whipped through the cobbled streets between 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 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 over her, the face invisible against the 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

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*December 21<sup>st</sup>*

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 weaved 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 didn't 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 woollen 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-blond 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.

"Okay, 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 said, easing 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?"

"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 was 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, sniffing 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 over 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 handset 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?”

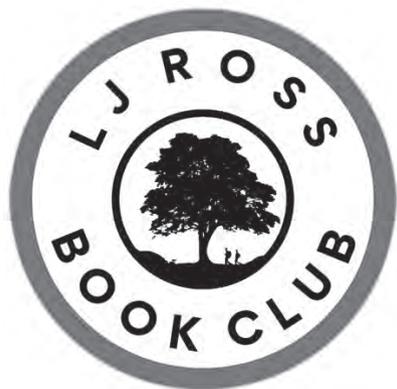
“I need Sean.” She recited the number.

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...

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