

A Necessary



Killing

based on a true story

by
Hilary Lloyd



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If he hadn't stopped at the wood to drop me off he wouldn't have died. If he hadn't shot that grin he always gave me when we parted, even for a minute, he wouldn't have left me. Anger courses through me when I remember how many times he'd warned me about the tractor, how it slipped out of first gear if the revs weren't right, so why did I smile just when he was starting off up the slope, just when he should have been holding the bloody lever? But how could I not smile at the only man who ever loved me, the one who gave me barely a year of the warmth and fun and love I didn't know existed in all that wasted life before I met him?

And I knew in that moment what would happen to him. A bellow of rage at his lack of concentration roared from me and I heard my boots pounding towards him, saw my arms straining to reach him even though I knew they couldn't. But I got near enough to see his smile set in stone and terror cram his eyes when the gear crunched into neutral and the tractor began to slither backwards down the hill. Only then did he turn away from me to pump the brake and wrestle with the steering wheel.

Tearing after him, blinded by the shower of mud and grass spinning from the locked wheels, I knew where he was heading, straight for the uneven rank of gnarled and knotted trees rearing from an ancient hedgerow like a veteran firing squad.

The tractor gave up before Ben, its front wheels lifting with a menacing groan. Flinging him out of the cab, it rolled over onto him then skidded down the rest of the slope and into a tree with a sound that ripped my stomach from its moorings and fuelled my howl of protest. The screaming engine died and a front wheel spun with a cu-

rious click as I reached the wreckage, found it concentrated in the heart of the hedge. I couldn't find Ben, not even after I'd ransacked the mountain of steel and rubber and glass. All I managed to do was smear his shroud with the blood pouring from my hands.

Chapter One

That twisted scene is all I see in this room that used to feel like home but is filled with black stick men and women who rustle with whispers. They don't tell me what I'm going to do now. They don't even talk to me. Most find it hard to look at me. They turn away, their mouths quivering, but maybe that's good for I don't recognise half of them and the ones I do know have changed.

Even Fiona doesn't tell me what I'm going to do now. She's staring at me, tears leaping off her chin, and though the house is too hot she's wearing a thick black coat that devours her tears.

'Oh, Julie,' is all she says.

'I must check the sheep,' I mutter, longing to escape this whirligig of people with their heads down into a wind that isn't blowing, huddled up inside themselves as though they haven't noticed the sun's shining outside.

Heads spin round as though I've said I'm off to the moon.

'I'll go,' Jamie whispers.

What does he know about sheep?

'No, let me,' says Mike, already halfway to the door.

'They're my sheep,' I growl, fleeing outside. Without looking back, I know they're all crowded in the doorway, watching.

The sun sits warm on my face as I stride across the yard. Down on the road, cars spin past in a kaleidoscope of muted colour but their sound is different. I stop to lis-

ten to their muffled progress and think of galloping horses with their hooves wrapped in sacking. Why is everyone being so quiet? They're like that in the house, creeping everywhere, placing cups on saucers as though they were precious china and not plain old earthenware.

Someone's come up behind me, breathing so hard it's shifting the hairs on the back of my head. Spinning round I see Phil. His mouth opens and a voice reverberates in my ears but I can't make out the words. Then he hugs me, something he's never done before, and when he pulls away I see tears plunging from his chin too.

I turn and run for the shed where the sheep are the same as they always were. Maybe they'll tell me what to do.

Death is love's first cousin. Ben's death has turned my insides into the same grinding pit I had when I dared hope he'd want the rusty old battleaxe of me. I have the same difficulty breathing now as I had when he first carried me onto his farm, and the same void that apes hunger but has my stomach heaving at the sight of food.

But it's peaceful in the shed, in the crowded warmth of my pregnant flock. The ewes are murmuring, like everyone in the house, but I know what they're saying. The one nearest to me is talking to her lamb, nudging it to make it stand and feed, and one in the next pen has maternal rumbles rising from deep in her throat when she looks down at her sleeping offspring. The ewes not in pens whicker to each other and to me. They're telling me they feel safe, even with me near.

I want to feel safe again. I want all those people to go home and leave me to tend my sheep. Until they go, I'll make a nest of clean straw and hold my aching stomach and try and work out what I'm going to do without Ben.

'Julie?' Fiona has pushed the door open and the sheep

are running for the far end. Those in pens stop dreaming and crooning. Their guards are up, their heads down ready to attack anyone who threatens their lambs. Fiona's eyes fill with sorrow for frightening them.

I walk away from her down to the far end to grab a ewe, any ewe, and manhandle it into an empty pen, give it fresh hay and a bucket of water. Fiona is fooled. She doesn't come to watch. She knows that when I pen a sheep it means it's starting labour and doesn't want strangers peering at it.

'I'll go,' she says and creeps out and I feel a wisp of regret for rejecting her but there isn't enough left of me for anyone else.

But she stays on the farm until the end. Later, peering between the slats of the shed, I see her in the yard thanking everyone for coming. Guilt stirs through what's left of me and I manage to stagger outside and fumble through a few words.

Carol and Jim each take one of my hands. 'You've only got to phone,' Carol says. Jim points at their farm on the other side of the road then mutters something and I know he's trying to tell me their thoughts are as close as their home.

I must make an effort. I must tell them that I appreciate their concern, but I'm so afraid that if I let go of my pain even for a moment, Ben will leave me completely. I open my mouth but nothing comes out. Carole manages a smile before they link arms and walk away, heads down. Their closeness is a new pain.

Sarah next. She touches my hand and nods before she takes Jack's arm. Don't they know their coupledness is a kick in my guts? Instantly, I'm contrite. Ben's death is a shock to them too – all these neighbours must have seen him grow up, take over from his father and care for his

mother through the long years of her decline.

Sorry, I mouth after them.

Mike next. He's shifting his balance from one foot to the other but when he speaks, the words march out. 'I'll be along in the morning to give you a hand.' With that, he walks through the gate and across the lane into his own yard and I watch him out of sight.

But when they've all gone, Jamie with a bewildered and frightened gaze at me and Fiona with a promise to come back once she's seen to the children, I walk into my kitchen and stare at what they've done, at the newly washed cups and saucers and the wiped surfaces, the chairs pushed back under the table, even the fire stoked and guarded. That there isn't even a speck of ash on the hearth or a crumb of sandwich or cake anywhere shows me how sterile my home is without Ben.

What do I do now?

I go back outside and see the daylight too being wiped from the valley by the busy fingers of night but it is later in the small hours, between two of my checks on the ewes, when I at last acknowledge my neighbours' kindness. It unleashes tears of remorse and grief and anguish that begin to fill the aching void Ben left behind.

Chapter Two

It's another of those glittering dawns. Sitting on my bed, watching the sun heave itself above the hill opposite in a ridiculous blaze of orange, I hate its energy, the way it sets the frosty fields alight, the way the bloody thing just keeps on rising day after day.

A bout of shivering forces me into my clothes – jeans and sweater over the T-shirt I've worn day and night for God knows how long, but it's too cold to strip off or brave a freezing bathroom and anyway, what's the point of clean clothes or a clean body when an hour with the sheep will have me stinking anew? I pull on thick woolen socks and turn to stare at the bed, at the hump down the centre that should be Ben but is only a line of pillows, a poor imitation I can't sleep without.

I've clung to my bed every morning for weeks, and though staying there is like prodding a bruise to see how much it hurts, I can't stop, can't let go of my obsession with pain.

Come on, Julie, move. Get out there – they need you.

I turn away from my pit of misery and tramp downstairs.

Outside, the February sun is making diamonds of the frost on the yard and its dazzling light pierces my darkest corners. I hear Ben's voice saying dawns like these are a reward for being up half the night, a feast for tired eyes, and I head for the sheep with a bit more lift in my boots.

There's an animal warmth in the shed and the welcome of a hundred ewes looking up when I enter that thaws my bones. Some put themselves between me and their lambs, others nudge forward with rumbling bleats

and though I know it's cupboard love, I feel needed. I begin to move through them, checking for signs of labour and find one pawing the ground in the far corner.

'This way, sunshine,' I say, steering her into an empty pen. Head down, mutinous, she stamps a foreleg in her demand to deliver her lambs in a remote corner of a field, not herded flank by muzzle with the rest of the flock.

Two orphan lambs gaze at her from the next pen, ears at half-mast, barely a week old and still shaky but filling out nicely. Then I remember Fiona's promise to collect them this morning and a flash of pleasure displaces the hard grief of dawn.

But I always feel better working outside so why do I why ruin everything by going to bed? Surely all I have to do is work myself silly all day and catnap in my fireside chair all night. But at four every morning, an aching longing forces me up to bed to hug a line of cold pillows and complete a daily cycle I can't seem to break.

Fiona tells me not to try. Just let it all happen, she says, and hang on. But though I trust her wisdom, how does she know what it's like? She still has her husband. She didn't search for his broken remains after a tractor bent on suicide took him along for the ride. And she's had years with Jamie. I only had one with Ben.

I march out of the shed, load a bale of hay and sacks of feed into the trailer and kick-start the quad bike into life with something like anger, then cross my front field to fill the troughs and watch the ewes fight to get their noses in first. Their lambs dance round them in hooligan gangs and I'm smiling.

I look over the hundred and fifty ewes turned out from the lambing shed since the middle of January and congratulate myself for the way I've taken over from

Ben. Work's kept me going, kept me alive, and I know that by the time my younger ewes are back from wintering on Jack and Sarah's land at the end of the month, I'll have learned enough to lamb them with ease. All I need is energy. This clod of a body won't do what it used to.

The throaty cough of a leaking exhaust system drowns the sound of the bike as I chug back home. Squinting left, I see Fiona's red car cruising up the lane. I wave and press the throttle to race back to the yard, eager to see her even though it's only a week since her last visit. I get there first and escort her battered Marina to a standstill.

'Hello, you lot,' I say, peering in.

Fiona climbs out followed by two young children.

'And why aren't you at school?'

The oldest child bristles. 'Cos it's half term, silly.'

Fiona frowns. 'Ellie, that's rude.'

'Sorry, Mum.'

I smile at the girl. 'It's true, I am silly sometimes – like when I forget to buy chocolate biscuits.'

Danny clutches at Fiona's skirt. 'But I like chocolate biscuits. We'd better go and buy some now.'

I reach for him and spin him round until he laughs.

'Only teasing,' I say, 'the tin's full up and waiting for you.'

I put him down and hug the willowy Fiona, careful with my bovine frame so she doesn't snap in two, then lead them towards the shed. I know they can't wait to see their new charges.

Half an hour later, Ellie's bursting with importance, the proud owner of two cade lambs and desperate to take them home. I put her in the pen with the lambs and let her find out how strong and greedy bottle-fed orphans can be. Fiona and I stood back to watch the lambs pump the bot-

bles so furiously they lost their hold and sucked Ellie's knees in blind hunger. Danny chose to watch through the bars of the pen but I have no doubt he'll be joining in the minute they get them home.

But I don't want them to go home yet. I need time with Fiona, need to see her on the other side of my hearth, the curtains of her hair framing her face and her grey eyes fixed on mine, listening to my every word and saying little. I take them to the house and encourage the children to go up to the back bedroom where Ben's mother stored all his toys and books for more than forty years, in case they came in useful. Ellie and Dan love them, the old-fashioned illustrations, the chipped tractor and trailer, plastic sheep and faded plywood farm.

I almost run downstairs when they're settled. There's so much to say and I'm as greedy as a lamb for Fiona's company. I wouldn't have got through the last weeks without it. She's absorbed all my wild thoughts and desperate feelings then, in so few words, put them in order, arranged them into a lifeline I can cling to until her next visit.

She smiles her Mona Lisa smile as I sink into my chair.

'So how's everything at home?' I ask, my needs inexplicably gone.

'Fine. The barn's ready for the lambs.'

'Have you started on the veg garden yet?' Just talking feels wonderful. 'And what about the wood – all that coppicing and stuff?'

She smiles again. 'Jamie's finished the winter work. We've got tons of thinnings to saw up for firewood and he's building an open-sided shed to store it all in.'

'And school?'

'Just the same – I've got some good kids. They're

working on this year's play with stars in their eyes!' She leans forward. 'Your eyes look tired.'

I shrug and study my ingrained hands. 'I was up until four with a problem ewe.' When I look up at her again, it all comes out, the loneliness, pain, anger and bewilderment, and how my emotions leap from one extreme to the other for no real reason and without the slightest warning.

'And I hate going to bed,' I lurch on, 'so I sleep down here between checks on the sheep then...' I'm fighting to keep my voice steady. 'Then something makes me go to bed and I can't bear it there but nor can I bear to leave it.' It ends in a tidal wave. I tell her of my seesaw moods, driving myself into exhaustion and sinking so low I don't even remember which way is up. 'Work saves me,' I finish, 'but I ruin everything by going to bed. It seems to undo all the progress I've made during the day.'

'But you're still going, Julie,' she says, 'and keeping the farm alive.'

Alive. Why isn't Ben alive? Why can't I have him to help me lamb the sheep and laugh about the thrown-together food of lambing time. And why can't I lie down with him at the end of the day, safe and needed in his arms? A sour image of Fiona in Jamie's arms seeps into my mind.

I wonder if she knows what I'm thinking. She mustn't. 'I like working with the sheep,' I stutter, 'but... I want the old me back, the one that coped with everything life chucked at me, the one before I met Ben.'

Her face is impassive. She knows I didn't mean that, but she tells me I must ease up on work and get out more, drive over to see them, eat with them, inspect Jamie's wood, give them the pleasure of my company if only for an hour between checks on the ewes.

The pleasure of my company? What do they want

with second-hand misery?

‘You’re good company,’ she says, as if reading my thoughts. ‘The children think you’re smashing – the way you know everything there is to know about animals, and all those stories you’ve told them about when you worked for a vet.’ She pauses. ‘Lambing isn’t enough for you, Julie, especially at the moment. You need other people. Come over and see us – have lunch with us. Please?’

Doesn’t she know how hard it is to go out, even to the village shop for milk and chocolate biscuits? Just being alive takes all my energy and...I catch a distinct whiff of sheep and realise it’s me, stinking, unwashed. Fiona hasn’t recoiled from me yet but...

‘OK.’ And suddenly I’m planning out the rest of the week – light the boiler to heat the water for a bath, find some clean clothes, bung the rest in the washer, change the bed. Yes, change the bed.

‘Friday,’ I say, needing time, a few days to sort out my mind as well as my body, ‘when your lambs have settled in and Ellie knows what she’s doing.’

They leave soon after and I lean on the gate and watch them crawl down the lane and turn left towards the village. I lose them then but the warmth of their company stays with me. Thanks, Fiona, I telegraph to the red beetle of her car as it emerges from the village to crawl up the hill opposite. Thanks for pointing me in the right direction.

I turn away at a movement to my right and see Mike Corley pushing four sheep and six new lambs out from his yard into his front field. The ewes tread carefully, heads on swivels as their lambs leap into a new green world.

I wave and, hundreds of yards away, Mike waves back. It never ceases to amaze me how farmers manage

to drive tractors, round up hundreds of sheep or bury their attention in a drainage ditch and still notice everything going on in the valley. I wonder if I'll learn to do the same now I'm a proper farmer managing eighty acres on my own.

On my own. The old familiar ache sneaks through me but I put it aside and head for the shed reciting my formula for survival, the one that works when I'm not in bed – food, sleep and company.

'Phil? It's Julie. I've got a problem – triplets, I think. She's too bad to bring in.'

'OK – about an hour do?'

'Fine. How's things?'

'Busy – see you.'

I put the phone down and go back to the shed, not that there's anything I can do for the ewe but it's better to be occupied, add more straw to the deep litter, fill the water buckets in the pens, anything but watch the poor thing writhing fit to bust with a bellyful of knotted lambs. I hate it when I can't help them, when I can't make use of thirty years as a veterinary nurse and perform a Caesarean, or just put the poor thing out of its misery.

I hear the car at last and rush out to see my former boss unfolding his lean frame. His old rubber waterproofs squeak as he walks round to the back of the car.

'I shouldn't tell you what to do,' I say after greeting him, 'but I've set up for a Caesar.'

He yanks a yellow plastic crate out of the boot. 'Wish all my clients set up for me. I've just spent the last hour chasing ponies round a paddock because the owner couldn't be bothered to get the lame one in.' Grumbling like a distant jet, he follows me into the shed. 'Ever thought of coming back to the practice? We could set the

animal world to rights with you keeping stupid owners in order. Shouldn't say that, I suppose, but I'm tired, knackered through and through.' He parks the crate by the pen and stares at the bale I've put there. 'God, Julie, I miss you.'

'Come off it, Phil – you've got a good team of nurses,' I say, dropping easily into the familiar banter, 'and I should know, I trained them.'

'Yes, but they can't read my mind like you do.' He rumbles on while soaping his hands in a bucket but I ignore his way of coping with the tension of a busy day and hoist the ewe onto the straw bale of its operating table.

The ewe and one of its lambs survive. We leave them to recover and head for the house where I plug in the kettle. 'Thanks for coming so soon.' Picking out the two cleanest mugs from the stack in the sink, I rinse them and make tea. 'Three sugars as usual?'

'Shouldn't, I know,' he says from the fireside, 'but it's been one of those days. Everyone's in a panic.'

'Why?'

'Don't tell me you haven't heard the news – are you so wrapped up in this farming lark that you haven't got time for a bit of telly?'

I give him a mug of tea and sit down with mine. 'What's the point? It's all doom and gloom. Anyway, lambing takes most of my time and I'm still learning. When I'm not in the shed, I'm napping.' Or stumbling through despair, aching for Ben, desperate for something in life to feel normal.

He cradles his mug and studies me and I know he's seeing the pain carved round my eyes and mouth. I try to avoid mirrors, scared by what I saw in one recently, my sturdy body somehow crumpled, its face gaunt, eyes out of focus, my hair spiking up as though in horror.

‘Bloody not fair,’ he says. ‘You deserved better, especially after all those years working for a miserable old basket like me.’

The years I worked for him struggle to come into focus but my mind won’t let them – it zooms instead to the summer before last when Ben walked into Phil’s practice with an ancient dog in his rusty arms. The dog died but we lived. We grew from its pain and distress.

Remembering, my stomach caves in. ‘I’m OK, Phil,’ I lie.

‘It’s a bloody shame.’

I have to get him off the subject, for my own sake. ‘So what’s this news?’

‘You’re bloody brilliant.’

I can’t help laughing. ‘And that’s why everyone’s in a panic?’

He scowls. ‘I meant you’re bloody brilliant for keeping the farm going, lamb all those sheep...’

‘Ah, but I’ve had so much help. You’ve no idea how good they are round here – being a good neighbour is a farmer’s first commandment. I think it’s etched in tablets of stone.’

He sighs. ‘And you’re all going to need it. Foot and mouth disease is back and spreading fast. If it’s anything like the sixties’ epidemic, all hell’s about to break loose.’

