



Ann Cleeves

THE No.1 *SUNDAY TIMES* BESTSELLER

WRITTEN IN BLOOD



Welcome to Durham Book Festival's Big Read 2020. When we started planning this year's book festival at the end of 2019, little did we know what challenges lay around the corner – as COVID-19 took hold around the world, everyone's lives and future plans changed.

For the first time, this year's Durham Book Festival will be presented online, but we wanted to bring Durham residents the Big Read as we would normally. We were delighted that Pan Macmillan have sponsored the production of *Written in Blood*, a specially commissioned short story set in Durham, from best-selling author, Ann Cleeves. We believe that now, more than ever, books can play an important role in providing joy and escapism, in helping us connect and make sense of this changing world.

Durham County Council's library service will be distributing 4000 copies of *Written in Blood* to libraries, businesses, prisons and community groups all over Durham. We hope it will entertain you and inspire you to read more of Ann Cleeves' gripping crime novels, many of which are set here in the North East of England. We'll be sharing an e-book version of the story via durhambookfestival.com and the library service, so that we can reach even more readers in County Durham and beyond.

Please visit durhambookfestival.com this October to discover the Durham Book Festival 2020 programme online. Content will be offered free of charge and we hope you'll find something to interest and inspire you.

Rebecca Wilkie, Senior Programme Manager, Durham Book Festival & New Writing North

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

durhambookfestival.com

Dear Reader

I knew I would love living in the North East from the moment my family and I moved in and a neighbour appeared into the chaos with a tray of tea and a packet of biscuits. By the time she'd gone, I knew the histories of everyone who lived in the street and the name of a woman who might type my manuscripts – this was in the mid-eighties, pre-digital, when my typing speed was glacial.

Vera Stanhope grew out of the Northumberland hills where she was born. She's big and strong and she's not scared of being alone. Her father might have been the second son of landed gentry, but he'd always been the black sheep of the family and there was never any money to spare when she was growing up.

Vera is a great cop because she straddles the communities of her region. She can speak to them all – to the people in the big country houses, to the struggling hill farmers and to the kids from fractured families in the former pit villages – but she doesn't really belong anywhere. She's good at her job because she's like the neighbour who blew into our lives that first Northumberland day: kind, unpretentious and curious.

In *Written in Blood*, Vera is a little out of her comfort zone. Joanna, who farms the small-holding next to her cottage, is an author. She's running a crime-writing workshop as part of the Durham Book Festival and Vera has been invited to give advice on police procedure. As the aspiring writers begin to read their work, it becomes clear to her that fact and fiction have become blurred and soon she is sucked in to another investigation.

I was delighted when New Writing North commissioned this brand new story to be shared with readers in what has very definitely become my patch. It was fun to combine all my obsessions: writing, reading and murder and I hope that you enjoy it as much as I enjoyed writing it.

All best

Ann Cleeves

Written in Blood

VERA HAD STOPPED READING FICTION. The stories often touched her too closely and made her emotional. As a senior detective she faced the horrors that came her way with a clear-eyed compassion, but reading the books at home in her house in the hills sometimes made her weep, even when she suspected they were trashy: sentimental and over-written.

She *did* read Joanna's novels though. Joanna was her neighbour, an ageing hippy with a public-school voice and a passion for good red wine and her Scouse partner, Jack. 'My delicious bit of rough,' she sometimes called him, but only with joy and a sense of surprise. It was as if she still couldn't believe she was good enough for him. The couple scratched a living from a small farm, and Joanna had taken to writing crime fiction to escape her past, or to explore what she made of it. Recently, the woman had become sufficiently successful to supplement her meagre income from their smallholding with advances and royalties, and she'd occasionally turn up on Vera's doorstep with a notebook, a bottle and a list of questions about police procedure.

'I've come to pick your brains,' she'd say with a wide smile.

Now, Vera found herself at the Durham Book Festival, at a day-long workshop for aspiring crime writers led by Joanna; the whole group there to pick her brains. She hadn't felt able to refuse when Joanna had asked her to take part a few days before. She owed her neighbours big-time. For piles of logs suddenly appearing, neatly stacked by the kitchen door; for the track cleared of snow in the worst of the winter; for laughter and good company. So here she was in a small room in the town hall on a foul October day. Outside, it was blowing a hoolie, and the noise of the rain on the window made it seem as if they were cut off from the rest of the city, cast adrift.

The six writers sat, looking earnest and intense, in a semi-circle around her, pens poised, waiting for her words of wisdom. Vera thought she could tell them anything and they'd write it down. For a moment she was tempted to make up some outrageous story, just to see how much they'd swallow, but Joanna was her friend, one of her only friends outside the job, and Vera had promised to behave.

There were three middle-aged women and one young lass. Two men. One was a husband, grey and insubstantial. He shook Vera's hand and introduced himself as Raymond. He seemed out of place here, anxious and overdressed for the occasion. She thought he'd been dragged along to the festival by his wife. The other man was small and jolly with a canary-yellow waistcoat and a Scottish accent. For the first hour, Vera found it hard to tell the older women apart; they were all uniformly arty, pleasant, inoffensive. It was only as she started to answer their questions that she began to distinguish them. The girl – because that was how Vera thought of the youngest woman – was silent until it came to a discussion about blood

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spatter. Then she became suddenly animated, demanding details.

‘So, you can tell what happened just from a few spots of blood?’ The lass was very pale: white face contrasting with hair too black to be natural. Vera thought there was something of the vampire about her. Perhaps it was her obsession with blood.

‘Well, we can make a good guess,’ Vera said. ‘It’s all about *what if?* A bit like you when you’re planning a story. We have to decide what holds together and what doesn’t quite work. We develop the most likely scenario.’

During the break, Vera discovered that the lass’s name was Maria Bell and she was the daughter of the anxious man and the tallest, smartest older woman. She was a student at the city’s university, but still living at home. Her parents were strangely protective and Vera thought the girl might be ill. Cancer perhaps. Or she could have been in an accident. She held herself as if she was suffering chronic pain, though the trauma could have been psychological, not physical. Vera had met victims with the same haunted look, the same wariness.

She could have left after her session and headed north across the Tyne and back to work, but, over coffee, Vera found herself grow more curious about the group. She’d always been nebbly. Always on the outside looking in. It was something about losing her mother when she was a youngster and having a father who had no interest in his only daughter. No close friends, wary herself, because despite Hector’s neglect, she’d felt the need to protect him. Neither of them had wanted the interference of a social worker. She’d been the scruffy kid at school, the one who could do with a bath and a clean shirt. She’d developed the skill of listening to adult conversations without

appearing to eavesdrop. She couldn't quite grasp what was playing-out here in the overheated room with the condensation running down the inside of the windows, the rain on the outside, but it felt almost like a performance. Nobody was quite natural. They wanted to tell a story and it seemed that she was the intended audience.

She wanted to ask Joanna for more information about the group, but the writer seemed to be performing to them too, playing the famous author, surrounded by aspiring writers who envied her success. It was only when it was time for the workshop to continue that Vera realized she recognized one of the other participants, the gent in the canary waistcoat. As the others returned to their seats, he was handing out business cards. She took one. It read: ALEXANDER MARKHAM, LITERARY AGENT. Joanna had a literary agent – a grand, imposing woman, who sold her books abroad, sorted out contracts and occasionally took her for a boozy lunch in London. Vera struggled to see this man in that role.

'Alexander! I didn't recognize you.' When Vera had last seen him, he'd been running a stall in the market next door to the town hall, selling odd bits of Victorian jewellery and bric-a-brac, and looking a lot less dapper. She'd been seconded to Durham Police then as a young detective. There'd always been rumours that Markham fenced stolen goods, but he'd never been caught. 'You've gone up in the world, I see. You were always "Sandy" in the old days. I never knew you were so cultured. What made you turn to literature in your old age?'

He winked and turned away so the others couldn't hear him, then nodded over his shoulder towards the group. 'They all have dreams of success,' he said. 'It does no harm to encourage them. And a lot of the women are lonely. I provide a service.'

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He saw her reaction and looked shocked. 'Not like that! I listen to them. Take them seriously when nobody else does.'

'You write yourself, do you?'

'I do!' He sounded indignant. 'I joined a group. The U3A.'

'Have you ever found a publisher for your clients?'

'Well.' He paused. 'Maybe not a publisher you'd have heard of. But most of them just want to see their name in print. There are folk who can help them do that now and I introduce them. Self-publishing isn't a vanity project any more, you know. Some big names started out that way. And I look at their work, polish it a little, give them encouragement, help them to enter literary competitions.'

'For a fee,' Vera said.

'Well,' he repeated, with the hint of another wink, 'a man has to live.'

'Anyone here you already represent?'

He nodded towards Maria. 'That young lass has ambitions, a story to tell.' A pause. 'She might make me a fortune yet.' Another pause. 'You probably saw her story in the papers. Poor soul, she's never got over it.'

Vera searched her memory, but nothing emerged. She was about to ask Markham for details when Joanna called the group to order. The writer perched on a table at the front of the room and had their full attention immediately. Vera thought her friend could be a senior investigating officer giving instructions to a team of detectives, but instead of assigning individuals actions for the day, Joanna set the group a writing exercise.

'Create a crime scene. Don't forget it's the small details that bring a book to life. Take note of what Vera said. It's all about *what if?*; your crime scene has its own story to tell. But objects

can inform the characters you've developed, too. You've got an hour.'

There was a moment of silence within the room, then the sound of notebooks being retrieved from bags and the scratching of pens. Vera wished her team of detectives was as biddable. She and Joanna retreated to a couple of battered leather armchairs at the back of the room. The chairs' high backs provided a barrier so they couldn't be seen from the rest of the room and the sound of the storm outside made it possible for them to talk softly without being overheard.

'What's the story with Maria?' Vera asked. 'Sandy Markham says she's famous.'

'Sandy Markham's a rogue.'

'You know him?' Vera was distracted for a moment.

Joanna nodded. 'He turns up like a rash at every event I do, pretending that we're best mates, trying to sign up all the wannabe writers in the audience.' A pause. 'He's a charmer, a wheeler dealer, he tells people what they want to hear.' Another hesitation. 'He has no real contacts in publishing. He sets them up for disappointment.'

'And Maria?'

'Before my books started selling, I ran a Workers' Education class in the city and she came along. She was still at school then. Very young. Very keen. She's a good writer.'

'But something happened? Something to turn her into some kind of celebrity?' Vera couldn't help sneering. It didn't take much to turn a person into a celebrity these days.

'It was her first term at university,' Joanna said. 'Her parents, Raymond and Barbara, had bought a little flat for her in the city. Maria is an only child and they dote on her. It's only natural that they're overprotective now, but I think they must

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always have spoilt her, smothered her a bit. Raymond has his own business – several businesses – and they seem to be minted. She shared the flat with another student, a second year, someone she'd been to school with. Liz Morton. That name must ring a bell? It was almost exactly a year ago.'

And of course it did. The bell was clanging in Vera's head now as if she had the worst hangover in the world, banging out the details. The story had been all over the local press for weeks. Liz Morton had been just the person for such attention. A bonny lass, blonde, kind, bright. She'd spent her spare time volunteering in an old folks' home. Apparently, she'd liked to party hard too, but that had only been hinted at. Even the tabloids avoided speaking ill of a dead girl if she had been the subject of a violent attack in her own home.

'Was Maria there when the attack took place?'

Joanna shook her head. 'No, but she was the person who found Liz.'

'She'd have been a suspect then.' Vera was talking almost to herself. 'They'd have handled her carefully, but all the same . . . ?' She looked up. 'No wonder the lass looks traumatized.'

'And no wonder her parents want to look out for her.' Joanna paused. 'Especially when there are vultures like Sandy Markham around. He came along to one of my gigs and swooped in, promising her a book deal, a chance to tell her own side of the story. Because as you say, there was some remaining suspicion on her, though Maria never came close to being charged; they also never found the killer.'

'And she agreed to write her story?'

'The young seem to like the idea of celebrity, don't you think? Even if they've been through an experience like that. Maria was a bit of a misfit when she first came to my workshop.'

Not just because she was the youngest person there. She was socially awkward. Too desperate to please. Perhaps she quite likes the idea of being the centre of attention now.'

'But she must miss her flatmate; she'll be grieving for her if only a year has passed.'

'You would think so,' Joanna said, 'but I'm not sure how close she and Liz were. Like I say, Raymond and Barbara are minted and very cheap rent would have been part of the deal.'

Vera swivelled in her chair so she could see the writers again. Maria was frowning, hunched over her notebook, concentrating hard. 'Are you saying her parents bribed Liz to be their daughter's friend?' She wondered what it would be like to have parents who cared so much they would interfere to such an extent. *Stifling*. She'd rather have Hector's neglect.

Joanna shrugged, before answering Vera's question. 'I wouldn't have put it past them. It was rumoured Liz was more like a minder than a friend.' Another pause. 'Maria has always seemed to struggle in the real world.'

What are you doing here? Vera looked at Raymond and Barbara Bell as the question slid into her mind, sly and insistent. *Why rake over the details of such violence?*

Had Maria insisted on attending the workshop and the parents had agreed to accompany her because they could deny her nothing? And because now, even though their daughter was an adult, *they* were her minders?

At lunchtime Vera slipped out into the rain. If she'd stayed in that room any longer, she'd have gone mad. The atmosphere was so strained and tense. She'd listened to Maria read out her crime scene before leaving the hall. It was well done, but

then if it was told from experience, it would be branded into her brain. She'd written it in the first person, clearly describing walking in and finding Liz Morton dead, though in her story the victim had remained anonymous. The blood spatter on the wall. The bloody footwear marks leading to the hall.

Out in the square, Vera sheltered just inside the covered market and phoned a former colleague who now worked for Durham Police. He told her the Morton case wasn't closed, but it wasn't going anywhere fast.

The Bells had kept the flat where Liz had died as an investment and there were other students living in it now, but Vera wanted to see it for herself. That *what if?* question again. That need to stick her nose into other people's business, solve the crime. The press had linked Liz's murder to national stories about campus sexual assaults by entitled young men. The university had been defensive, pointing out that in Liz's case no sexual assault had taken place, that there'd been no threatening messages on her phone or computer.

The Bells' flat was in a terrace close to the top of a hill, not very far from the railway station. Vera was walking against the wind and arrived wet and breathless, the bottom of her legs splashed with mud. This felt like a ridiculous waste of time. She could have escaped the overheated room where the writers were telling stories of murder by just going into the market for coffee and a bun, but her feet had taken her here.

The path to the front door was slippery with wet leaves. Once it would have been a family home; now it had been separated into three flats. The one owned by the Bells was on the ground floor. There was a light on inside. She was lucky, the weather had kept the inhabitants at home. They wouldn't be the only students skipping lectures today.

She'd already rung the buzzer for the Bells' flat when she looked at the name next to the second-floor-flat bell. *Markham*. That must be Sandy. It would be too much of a coincidence otherwise. Vera supposed he would have been investigated at the time of the murder if he'd been living here then, though it seemed he hadn't admitted to Joanna that he'd been involved in the case from the start.

What were they doing in Joanna's writing workshop, all these people connected to one student's murder? What were they trying to tell her?

The door opened. A thin young woman in a huge sweater over black leggings stood there. 'Yes?' Geordie voice and friendly smile. Vera introduced herself.

'Any chance of looking at your flat? You do know what happened here?'

'Oh aye, we know but it's heaps better than anything else we'd be able to afford, and we're too skint to be superstitious. The landlord decorated it all once your lot had finished.'

'We?'

'My boyfriend and me.'

'Is he in?'

'Nah. He's a scientist. It's all lectures and lab time. I'm English Lit. More relaxed.' She showed Vera into a living room at the front of the house. It had a big bay window, comfortable furniture.

Vera nodded to the sofa. 'Is this all new? Since the other lasses' day?'

'A lot of it. Well new to us! Mostly Freecycle. That photo was still here when we came.' She nodded to the picture of a grand house, surrounded by parkland. It hung over the mantelpiece. 'We rather like it and use it to impress visitors.'

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As if either of our families could afford a gaff like that!’ She gave a little laugh. ‘And they left a couple of chairs in the bedroom.’

The house in the painting had the air of a stately home, an institution, not a place for families at all. If the Bells lived there, they were, as Joanna had said, minted.

This room was where the attack had taken place. Maria would have let herself in, switched on the hall light, seen the bloody footprints, then her friend’s body through the open door. Had she screamed? Had Sandy Markham heard and come running? Had he seen a business opportunity even then?

‘Do you know that chap upstairs?’ Vera kept her voice light and even.

‘Sandy, yeah. He’s OK. Never complains about the noise. In fact, he likes to be invited to parties. A bit of a character. I think he’s reliving his youth.’

Vera nodded, but said nothing as she left. Outside, the storm was as wild as ever, but she was glad she’d made the effort and at least it was downhill to the city centre.

Back in the town hall, nothing seemed to have changed. The remainders of lunch lingered on a table at the back of the room. Vera helped herself to three curling egg sandwiches and a pork pie, then added a brownie and a muffin. The tea was stewed so she took coffee from the flask. The writers looked up but nobody dared ask where she’d been.

Vera sat in a corner behind the group, took out her phone and emailed Holly. *I need everything you can dig out on the Morton case. And a chap called Alexander Markham. He might have a record. And the Bell family. Maria Bell was Liz Morton’s flatmate and she found the body.*

Barbara Bell was reading out her crime scene now. Vera set aside her phone to listen. The woman looked so unlike Maria – fair, stylish, well-dressed – that Vera thought perhaps she was Raymond’s second wife, not Maria’s natural mother. She wondered again what the family was doing here. Was it for Maria? Did they see this as some kind of group therapy? Were they facing their fear by turning it into a story? Did the parents even want to be there?

Barbara’s story was very different from Maria’s, more chilling for its lack of drama. It was told from the perspective of a frail, elderly woman trapped in a wheelchair while an intruder came into her house. There was no physical violence here, no blood at the scene, only the evidence that Vera had described in her talk to the group: a footprint, with a small pile of soil released from one of the treads, a thread of fibre for the woman to discover and fear. Joanna praised Barbara’s writing and the characterization, the way the tension was maintained. ‘It was wonderful how you managed to get inside the head of the elderly woman.’

Vera looked at Barbara Bell with interest but said nothing. Ideas were forming, coalescing in her head, but she wasn’t quite ready to speak, to tell a tale of her own.

‘Raymond,’ Joanna said. ‘Would you like to read your piece?’

‘It’s not very good.’ There was the trace of a stammer. ‘Really, I’d rather not.’

‘Go on! Everyone else has read theirs.’ Joanna’s voice was encouraging, but made it impossible for him to refuse.

Raymond Bell got to his feet just as Vera’s phone buzzed. A message from Holly. She began to read the information her constable had gathered.

When she turned her attention back to the group, Raymond

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had nearly finished speaking. His words seemed to her lacklustre, his rhythm clunky. At one point the tenses were muddled. The crime scene was a city street, the details taken from numerous TV dramas rather than real life. His only reason for being here at the group, it seemed now, was to watch over his strange daughter with her taste for the Gothic. It was clear he had no passion for fiction.

The session was winding up. For its participants, there would be tea and cake, a chance to ask Joanna questions about her technique, her route to publication, but soon after they'd be sent out into the storm and back to their everyday lives. At the back of the room, Vera replied to Holly's message, then raised her hand.

'If I could have a few words with you before you go . . . ?'

'Of course.' Joanna was expansive. Perhaps she too could see an end to the day and was looking forward to getting home to Jack. She'd invited Vera for dinner. They'd share a meal and gossip about these people who'd briefly floated into their world.

Vera walked to the front of the room. Kindly, she sent the two women who had nothing to do with the Morton murder on their way. 'Don't fret,' she said, smiling as if this was some kind of joke. 'You'll read all about it in the newspapers. You can say you were here.' Because it was clear that they too were curious and would enjoy their five minutes of fame.

When the door closed behind them, Vera starting speaking. 'This is my take on a crime scene. My story.' She looked out at the group. Maria was sitting between her parents, looking very slight and child-like in comparison with them. Sandy Markham was to one side.

'My starting point is Maria's piece. She described the flat

in the city which she shared with Liz Morton.' Vera turned to Markham. 'You didn't tell us that you were the Bells' neighbour, Sandy. That was an oversight. Did you think I'd not check?' She gave a little smile and continued without waiting for an answer. 'Maria implies in her work that she unlocked the front door and walked in to find Liz dead on the floor of the living room. Is that how it happened, pet? Are you quite sure?'

Raymond stiffened, grew even more grey, more tense. 'This is quite out of order. You can't bully my daughter.'

'No question of bullying.' Vera smiled. 'This is a workshop. We're just telling tales. Making stuff up.'

'I actually went in through the kitchen door from the back garden,' Maria said. 'It was unlocked. I didn't see the bloody footprints until later.'

'And Liz was lying dead?'

There was a brief hesitation. 'Not then.'

'Why don't you explain? Edit your story, just as Joanna has taught you. Let's get to the heart of the matter.'

'Liz started shouting.'

'Maria.' Again, the girl's father intervened. He was fierce now. The knuckles gripping the arm of his chair were white as bone.

Maria turned to him. 'You were there Dad. You know what happened. We can't live like this. None of us can. It's time for the truth. That's why I wanted us to come here.'

Raymond Bell stood up. Vera saw now that any anxiety had turned into rage. The entitled man thought he'd been betrayed by the people who owed him. He spat out the words, not caring, it seemed, that now he was betraying himself.

'Liz was a bitch,' he said. 'She was happy to take my money, all the gifts and the glamour. But she was prepared to give nothing back in return.'

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Vera said nothing. The room was quiet for a moment, then Maria continued as if there'd been no outburst from her father and he fell back into his seat. 'My father killed Liz Morton. He'd been obsessed with her since she started working at Manor Park, one of the care homes he owns with my mother.' Maria looked up, with her eyes fixed firmly on Vera. 'She was paid to work there, she didn't volunteer. The media preferred to see her as an angel. It made better copy. Dad persuaded Liz to share the flat with me. It gave him an excuse to see her.'

Vera nodded. 'You left the painting of Manor Park behind in the flat. It looked more like some sort of institution than a family home. A very grand institution.' She turned to Barbara. 'And of course, you'd be able to get inside the head of a frail elderly woman if you work with older people every day.'

'We have an apartment there,' Maria said. 'They brought me back to Manor Park after Liz died. My father told me I was imagining things when I said I heard his voice at the flat. He threatened me with a psychiatrist. By the time I went into the living room, he'd gone. Out through the front door and into the street. But I heard their argument. And I saw the blood.'

'And you, Sandy?' Vera turned to Markham. 'Did you hear Raymond and Liz shouting? Is that how you fit into all this?'

Markham didn't answer directly. 'Raymond drives a Jag,' he said. 'I'd seen it parked in the street when I knew Maria wasn't there. And Liz and I were friends. I enjoy the company of young people. She was discreet enough about their affair, but I knew she had a . . .' He paused, struggling to find the right word ' . . . sugar daddy. Someone who paid her bills and her university fees. I put two and two together. I knew

she was finding the relationship . . .’ He hesitated again. Vera thought he could be a writer after all, considering the care he took in putting the story together. ‘. . . oppressive. *Maybe it’s better to be poor after all. But keep a bit of self-respect.* That was what she said.’

There was another silence. The wind was less strong, whimpering not howling.

‘Of course, I knew what Raymond was like.’ It was Barbara’s turn to speak. ‘He’s had a number of young *companions* since we married, but none who obsessed him like Liz Morton.’

‘You knew he’d killed her?’

‘I didn’t *know*. He can be very plausible. When Liz was found, he told me that Maria had a vivid imagination and saw the Gothic in everything. He said we needed to care for her. He even led me to believe that she could be the killer. I couldn’t take the risk of going to the police.’

‘So, Maria suggested that you come to the group, but she didn’t tell you and Raymond that I would be here.’ Vera smiled again.

‘That was my little secret,’ Maria said. She paused. ‘Joanna said you were a curious woman.’ Her voice was fierce now. ‘Perceptive. I wanted the truth to come out.’

‘So, you were in on it, too.’ Vera glared at Joanna, but there was no edge to the words.

‘Maria confided in me,’ Joanna said. ‘She was young when she first came to my writers group and we’ve become very close.’

There was a tap at the door and Holly Jackman came in with two Durham police officers. Vera let them lead Raymond away. The fight had gone out of him; he was a pathetic little man now he had nobody to bully. Vera decided she didn’t need to go with them. Let Hol take the credit for the arrest. She

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turned to Maria. ‘Take care, pet.’ And then to Barbara. ‘Look after her.’ They’d have questions to answer and statements to make – this had been a strange way to bring a man to justice – but that could wait.

Now it was time to go back to the hills with Joanna, to drink good red wine, eat the lamb Jack had been slow roasting all afternoon, and share with him the stories of the day. The satisfaction of solving a murder was always worth celebrating.

Out Now
The Darkest Evening

The ninth novel in the Vera Stanhope series

Driving home during a swirling blizzard, Vera Stanhope's only thought is to get there quickly.

But the snow is so heavy, she becomes disoriented and loses her way. Ploughing on, she sees a car slewed off the road ahead of her. With the driver's door open, Vera assumes the driver has sought shelter but when she inspects the car she is shocked to find a young toddler strapped in the back seat.

Afraid they will freeze, Vera takes the child and drives on, arriving at Brockburn, a run-down stately home she immediately recognizes as the house her father Hector grew up in.

Inside Brockburn a party is in full swing, with music and laughter to herald the coming Christmas. But outside in the snow, a young woman lies dead and Vera knows immediately she has a new case. Could this woman be the child's mother, and if so, what happened to her?

A classic country house mystery with a contemporary twist, Ann Cleeves returns with a brilliant Vera novel to savour.

Turn the page to read the first chapters

Chapter One

LORNA LIFTED THOMAS FROM HIS HIGH chair and held him for a moment on her knee. She still couldn't quite believe he was real. In the darkest days of her illness, she'd been warned that a child of her own might never be possible. Now here he was, more than a year old, walking a few steps, the centre and the love of her life. She tickled his tummy to make him giggle and held him tight. She would fight for him, with all the weapons she had. She'd fought the illness and come back stronger, done that by herself, and this was far more important.

Outside, the light had almost gone, and in the street light's beam she saw flakes of snow. In a house further along the street, there was a tree in the window, artificial, strung with gaudy baubles. Soon, it would be midwinter, the longest night of the year. There was a temptation to stay where she was, to turn up the heating and decorate the room for Christmas. She'd bought sticky coloured paper to make old-fashioned paper chains, silver foil to turn into stars. Perhaps she'd invite her parents to come for wine and mince pies. It was the time of year for reconciliation.

She knew, though, that any sense of celebration would have to wait. Still with the boy on her knee, she pulled on his snow suit and his little red wellies, then set him on the floor while she found her own outdoor clothes. She took a set of keys from a hook on the kitchen shelf, looked around the room, distracted for a moment by thoughts of decoration, the presents she still had to buy for her son, then she stepped out into the cold.

Chapter Two

IT WAS DARK AND FREEZING and Vera was starting to panic. Halfway home, she'd known the journey was a mistake. She should have listened to the team and spent the night in Kimmerston, waiting for the storm to blow over, but she'd thought she knew better. She'd mocked her colleagues for their anxiety, told them that extreme weather was unusual this early in the winter, even in rural Northumberland. And when was the weather forecast ever accurate?

She'd left the police station in a light dusting of snow, a gusty wind blowing it away from the street and into tiny drifts at the kerbs and in shop doorways. Now, on the higher ground, there was a blizzard and the flakes were so big and so thick that she had to lean forward and peer through the windscreen in an attempt to see her way. There were no lights, and even with four-wheel drive she was anxious that she'd come off the narrow road. She'd seen no other traffic since leaving the last village and felt completely alone, disorientated. She drove this route most days, had told her sergeant Joe Ashworth she could

do it blindfolded, but now she was lost and felt bewildered and scared.

She came to a crossroads and changed gear, preparing to stop, so she wouldn't have to use the brakes and cause a skid. There was a finger sign but the village names were covered with snow. She had a moment of real fear then, a complete lack of recognition. In her headlights she saw trees on one side of the road, a thick plantation of spruce. She must have missed a turn earlier. She left the engine running but climbed out to clear the signpost. In one direction was Sawley Bridge and in the other Kirkhill. Kirkhill would bring her closer to home, so she turned right. The road started to rise and her wheels spun. The snow was so deep here that she worried she would get stuck, but there was one set of tyre tracks for her to follow now. Some other foolish soul had been here not long before her and must have made it through.

She seemed to reach the top of a low hill and, in the distance, saw a light below her, almost hidden by the blizzard. The outskirts of Kirkhill village, perhaps. There was a pub in Kirkhill, and she had a feeling that it did food and had rooms. There were worse places to spend a night. The team need never know she'd made an arse of herself. Already she was starting to relax; she could feel the fire warming her bones and taste the first pint of beer. But when she turned the next bend, she almost drove into a car that had slewed off the road and come to a stop just before hitting a five-bar gate. The vehicle was white, almost camouflaged in the snow. The foolish soul hadn't made it through after all. Vera pulled slowly past the car and came to a stop. The driver's door was open and it was possible that someone had fallen out. She found a torch in the dashboard and climbed down from the

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Land Rover. The wind eased for a while and everything was very quiet and still.

Any footprints had been covered by the blown snow, but it seemed that the driver had been able to walk away from the crash. There was no sign of a casualty nearby and, now she was close to it, Vera could see that the car was unharmed. She was about to return to the Land Rover and continue her drive, when she heard a noise. A cry. She shone her torch into the back of the car and saw a toddler, strapped into a seat. The child was wrapped up in a red snow suit and wore small red wellies. It was impossible for her to guess gender or age. Vera's experience of small children was limited.

'Hello!' She was aiming at jolly, friendly, but the child started to whimper. 'What's your name?'

The child stopped crying and stared impassively.

'Where's your mam, pet?'

Nothing. Vera pulled her mobile phone from her pocket. There was no signal. Not unusual here in the hills. She supposed the driver had walked away to see if she could get better reception to call for help. Vera had already decided that the car had been driven by a woman. A small woman. The seat was pulled right forward towards the steering wheel. She must have left the child, knowing she wouldn't get very far carrying it. Even if the toddler, staring at Vera from the seat in the back of the car, was old enough to walk, the snow was so deep that it would be impossible for the child to move through it. The red boots were so small that they were more fashion statement than practical bad-weather footwear.

But Vera was troubled. Wouldn't a mother have shut the door, to keep out the bitter wind? She felt the prospect of a fire and beer disappearing. She lifted out the child's car seat and strapped

it beside her in the Land Rover, struggling to slot the seat belt to hold it firmly in place. It seemed a complicated sort of set-up. Parenthood must be a challenging business these days.

Vera jotted down the white car's number plate on the back of a receipt she happened to have in her bag, then scabbled for a clean scrap of paper. She wrote a note and left it inside the white car's dash. 'I've got your baby. It's safe.' With her phone number. Then she thought again and put her work business card beside it. The last thing she needed was an accusation of kidnap.

She drove on, even more slowly than she had before, hoping to catch a glimpse in her headlights of a struggling woman. She'd thought she'd come across her sooner than this. Vera swore under her breath. This was going to take longer than she'd expected. At least the child beside her was quiet, asleep and breathing gently.

The snow thinned and then stopped. The clouds broke and a slight crescent moon appeared. Vera drove round a bend in the road and suddenly she knew exactly where she was. There was a long wall covered with frozen ivy, two pillars marking the entrance to a drive which once must have been very grand, a sign with a coat of arms, faded and covered with snow. But Vera knew what was there. One word: Brockburn. The coat of arms would belong to the Stanhope family.

The light she'd seen from the hill must have come from here. At the entrance she paused and the memories came tumbling in. She'd been dragged here a few times by her father, Hector, when he'd been on his uppers and demanding that the family recognize that he too had a claim to a place in the sun. Each year they'd gatecrashed the gathering before the New Year's Day hunt. Hector would be in his element, chatting

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to the local farmers who remembered him as a boy. The black sheep returned to the fold, to drink whisky out of a small plastic glass, while the hounds grew restive and the glistening horses paced outside the big house. Proving that he too honoured tradition.

The family had been unfailingly polite. That branch of the clan used politeness as a weapon of mass destruction. But Hector had always come away humiliated and angry. Vera, who'd never felt any obligation to be loyal to her father, had understood the family's point of view. Hector would be rude and demanding, usually halfway drunk on the most recent visits. She'd been hugely embarrassed and they'd been kind to her.

On the last visit Vera had been a teenager, perhaps fifteen years old, already a little overweight, awkward, defensive. She couldn't remember now why she'd been there. Hector had no qualms about leaving her home alone, even as a young child. Perhaps he'd been more nervous about the encounters than she'd realized and had seen her as some kind of shield, or perhaps he'd thought the family would be more sympathetic if they saw he had a daughter to support. It had been a summer afternoon, the sun full and warm, flooding the place with light. They'd sat on the terrace drinking tea, eating thin sandwiches that disappeared in two bites. There'd been meringues. Even now Vera could remember the meringues – all at once crisp and chewy, the intense sweetness contrasting with the soft, bland double cream – more clearly than she could recall the other people who sat at the table. The background sound had been the call of wood pigeons and the faint strains of Bach, coming from a radio in the house.

Sitting with them had been three generations of women: Elizabeth, white-haired and wiry, wife of Hector's elder brother

Sebastian; Harriet, the very glamorous wife of Hector's nephew Crispin; and her daughter Juliet, a toddler with blonde curls and a knowing stare. If the men were in the house, they'd kept well away. There'd been a conversation, which must have been about money, but which was so hedged around with euphemism that Vera hadn't been able to work out what was being said. Besides, she'd been focused on the meringues, wondering if it would be rude to take the one which remained on the plate. As always, Hector had left empty-handed and bitter, swearing revenge all the way home.

Now Sebastian and Elizabeth were long dead. Even Hector's nephew Crispin had passed on. Vera had seen the notice in the local paper but hadn't gone to the funeral; she'd known it would be a showy affair and anyway, she wouldn't have been welcome. Only the two women, Harriet and her daughter Juliet, were left, and by now Juliet would be an adult, approaching middle-age.

The baby in the car seat stirred and Vera was brought back to the present. The heating in the Land Rover had never been very effective and she was starting to feel cold. She turned into the drive. The snow was churned by tyre tracks; she hoped that didn't mean her smart relatives had left the house. She felt strangely anxious about seeing them again, but they would have a phone and the child's mother might have made her way here. It was the closest form of habitation to the abandoned car. Besides, Vera thought, if she could face murderers and rapists, she wasn't going to be intimidated by a few weak-chinned minor aristos.

There were more cars than she'd expected parked on the long drive. Some were covered with snow, so had been there for a while, others had clear windscreens. It seemed the

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Stanhopes had guests. Vera looked at the sleeping baby, lifted out the car seat and made her way to the house.

The sight was like something from a fairy tale. Magical. The flurry of snow had passed and there was moonlight, and a sky flecked with stars. A large cedar stood close to grand stone steps, which were lit from below. The tree had been decorated with hundreds of fairy lights, all white, all twinkling. The ground-floor curtains had been left open and Vera saw a huge Christmas tree, decorated completely in silver. A handful of people, most of them young or very well-preserved middle-aged and all grandly dressed, glasses in their hands, were gathered around an open fire. She checked her watch. Only seven o'clock. Too early in the evening for a party surely? A gathering before dinner perhaps. The house was big enough to accommodate all the guests and this branch of the family might be wealthy enough for lavish entertaining. She wouldn't know. Some of them had turned out for Hector's funeral but, since then, there'd been no contact. She paused for a moment, Cinderella looking in: the fifteen-year-old girl again, excluded. Suddenly aware of a different, more glamorous life which would never be hers.

