

# BERWICK

A DCI RYAN MYSTERY

LJ ROSS

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Penguin  
Random House  
UK

First published 2026  
001

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Cover artwork and map by Andrew Davidson  
Cover layout by Riverside Publishing Solutions Limited

Set in 11.5/16pt Minion Pro  
Typeset by Riverside Publishing Solutions Limited

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorised representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,  
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-529-97894-0 (hardback)  
ISBN: 978-1-529-97895-7 (trade paperback)



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# CHAPTER 1

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*Newcastle-upon-Tyne*

*Christmas Eve*

Of all the things Linette Winterbottom hoped for when she awakened on that crisp, wintry morning, dying a violent death certainly hadn't been one of them. Indeed, the prospect hadn't featured at any point during her fifty-one years, though she'd always known in some far-off, abstract sort of way that death comes to us all, eventually. Still, she might have hoped to die peacefully in her sleep, rather than drowning in her own blood.

*C'est la vie.*

Or rather, *c'est la mort.*

Until the moment her lifeblood seeped from her body onto the threadbare rug in her living room, Lin's day had been going rather well. That is, if she discounted a shaky start in the form of her elderly neighbour, Gertie, with whom she shared a love-hate relationship as well as a thin partition wall separating their respective flats. The old battle-axe presented herself at Lin's front door shortly after seven o'clock to say that she'd purchased Lin's latest book, *Island Mystery*,

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very much against her better judgment. She proceeded to hand down her verdict on the story in the manner of a crusty, care-worn judge presiding at the Old Bailey, and Lin barely had time to scrub the sleep from her eyes before the cantankerous old coot rounded things off by telling her that it was a bloody good thing she'd managed to pull something decent out of the bag, for a change.

*With neighbours like hers, Lin thought, who needed terrorists?*

She'd forced her mouth into the semblance of a smile, skin stretching tightly over her teeth until the muscles in her jaw ached with the effort. She stood there in faded Christmas pyjamas while Gertie rolled on, all the while imagining ways in which the woman might suffocate on the folds of her wrinkled neck, or trip over her orthopaedic shoes and take an unfortunate tumble down the stairs. The thought alone was enough to elicit a genuine smile, and Lin had waved her neighbour off with a cheerful promise never to write another 'bad' book again.

After that, things had improved somewhat with a rare visit to the hairdresser, who'd spruced up Lin's mop of grey frizz as best she could—though, as the nineteen-year-old natural brunette had been at *pains* to point out, she couldn't work miracles.

*Gertie might have had a point, Lin thought, when she'd complained about the 'youth of today' having no respect for their elders and betters.*

Once she'd recovered from the pique, there followed an early lunch at an upmarket restaurant in town with another impossibly young woman named Saffron, who introduced herself as the public relations assistant assigned by Lin's publishers to 'manage' her, now that one of her books was actually selling enough to warrant such investment. Consequently, she was subjected to all manner of exceedingly helpful suggestions about how to *connect* with readers, how to write *engaging* newsletters and, best of all, how to grow her following on a new social media platform they called 'Tip-Top' or 'Tik-Tok' or some such

nonsense. Lin had nodded, smiled, and polished off a healthy plate of eggs benedict, lamenting the Good Old Days when all she had to do was write stories and cultivate some sort of mystique.

As she'd mulled over the artful, exciting ways in which she might create a new persona for herself, Lin slopped a dollop of eggy sauce down her smart navy blouse—one of the few she owned. With no time to make a change, the remainder of brunch was spent mopping up the damage, including hovering beneath a drying machine in the Ladies' toilet, all the while trying not to notice the pained, pitying expression on the face of the young woman beside her, who was no doubt wondering how she'd ended up drawing the short straw babysitting a woman without basic hand-eye coordination.

Being a consummate professional, Saffron said nothing of the mishap, and they made their way to a nearby bookshop where Lin was due to give a talk and sign books for readers. For the first time in years, a healthy crowd had gathered to get their mitts on a copy of *Island Mystery*, the latest thriller from the woman they knew as Lin Oldman—'Winterbottom' being too humdrum a surname to inspire 'thrills and chills', and 'Lynette' being too *female* a forename to inspire widespread purchasing from male readers of a certain generation, or so her literary agent had told her when she'd begun her career, thirty years before. Mind you, the back-stabbing Judas had dropped her from his books as soon as her sales had begun to dwindle and she'd developed what publishing teams liked to call 'bad track'. Lin had argued...no, she'd *begged* them to give her another chance to hit those bestseller charts, but all to no avail. Since then, she'd bounced from one publisher to the next, desperate to stay in print at any cost, until accepting peanuts in exchange for a mediocre story had become the norm.

It kept the wolf from the door.

*Until, it didn't.*

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That's when she'd started running courses, passing on her wisdom to wannabe writers who fancied a chance at the Big Time. But none of them had her talent, Lin was sure of that. She'd always known she was special.

*Hadn't everybody said so?*

She remembered being a young twenty-something, taking a first-class train to London and a fancy private transfer to her new publisher's gleaming office, the proverbial red carpet having been rolled out for her arrival. Men and women in bold colours and smart suits waxed lyrical about how she'd be the next Barbara Taylor Bradford, with her name in lights. They told her she was gifted, and, for her sins, Lin believed them. Decades had passed since those heady days and she'd scraped a living here and there, putting on a show for the occasional few who turned out for a library talk or to learn about 'the craft of writing'. Throughout those long, lean years, the only thing that sustained her was the sure and certain knowledge that she was above the rest.

She had to believe it.

Then, one day, Fate stepped in to lend a hand.

It gifted her a manuscript. Unpublished, unpolished, but *good*, so very good. It didn't matter that it wasn't hers. Lin had taken it, claiming it as a pirate did to buried treasure, clutching it in her sweaty palms without regret or remorse.

After all, why should its true author succeed, where she had failed?

It wasn't *fair*.

That young woman had already won the lottery of life, as far as she was concerned. Anna Taylor-Ryan had looks, brains, a happy marriage and—it pained Lin to admit—a certain way with words. *Naturally*, she assured herself, the original manuscript would *never* have made it past any reputable agent's desk, so roughshod was the prose...but, with her own additions here and there, her own *elevated* style, she'd been able to make a silk purse from a sow's ear. That purse would take her all the way to the bank and back to the top of

the charts, where she belonged. In fact, the more she thought about it, the more Lin realised that she was *meant* to find that manuscript. By the time she'd tinkered with it here and there, the story was more hers than anybody else's, anyway.

Linette thought this as she smiled and signed copies of the book, admiring the gilt-edged hardbacks with a *purr* of appreciation.

*Yes, she thought. She was back where she belonged, and nobody was going to take this moment from her.*

They'd have to kill her, first.

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While Lin spoke expansively about her latest novel to a group of enthralled fans, Doctor Anna Taylor-Ryan battled the early afternoon crowd milling around the Christmas markets in the centre of Newcastle. The scent of caramelised nuts and mulled wine filled the air, spilling from large, steaming cauldrons inside quaint, chalet-style stalls. People walked arm in arm, bundled up against the wind that swept up from the river and through the old Georgian and Victorian streets of Grainger Town, its stone facades decorated with strings of twinkling white lights. Anna paused to rub her shoulder, which ached beneath the smart red coat she wore. The skin was still sore and bandaged, and could've used some anti-inflammatories, but she was reluctant to take pain medication—not in her condition. Unconsciously, a protective hand strayed to her stomach, still flat beneath the layers of clothing she wore.

*Would Emma have a little sister to look forward to, or a brother?*

Smiling at the prospect, she made her way towards Fenwick's, the stately old department store at the head of the street. Thinking of the family she and Ryan were building together, her thoughts inevitably strayed back to a time when she'd felt entirely alone in the world, and the only person she'd been able to rely upon was herself. Her father

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hadn't exactly been a model parent, not least in his treatment of her mother, before she died. Andy Taylor had been a handsome man with an ugly temperament; one given to taking the quickest, easiest route, no matter whom he trampled on the way. He was handy with his fists, which was a polite way of saying that he could be an angry, violent man, and the few times he'd shown a kind word or deed had not been enough to outweigh that fundamental flaw. To top it off, in the years following his death, Anna learned that her father had also been one of the leaders of a secretive cult known as 'The Circle', whose exploits included murder and corruption, all in the name of self-advancement. Its members claimed to act on behalf of a shadowy 'Master' and practised a dogma that was nothing more than a stolen mix of Paganism and Satanism, cobbled together to lend their murderous tribe a patina of legitimacy. It was no wonder she'd spent years avoiding long-term relationships, and had never considered herself 'maternal'. She hadn't wanted to risk loving someone, only to be hurt all over again when they let her down.

That was before she met Ryan.

*Maxwell Finley-Ryan*, she amended, with another smile at the idea of him ever being known as 'Max'. Perhaps when he was younger, but certainly not as the man she'd come to know and love. To all who mattered, he was simply 'Ryan', a person of his own making.

Theirs hadn't been a tentative, slow-burn relationship. Oh, no. It had been an instant supernova in which two minds and hearts sought out their perfect match and came together in explosive style. Against every realistic probability, they'd found their own particular needle in an enormous haystack containing billions of others and life had never been the same again. In an unnervingly short amount of time, Anna found she *could* imagine holding a baby in her arms, because she knew that the man who would be its father was one worth having. As the child of a lesser specimen, she wouldn't have settled for less.

With these thoughts circling her mind, Anna found that she'd walked as far as Waterstones, the largest of several bookshops in the city. Later, with the benefit of hindsight, she'd think that it would have been better to stay away and avoid seeing the evidence of her work having been plagiarised so flagrantly, but she hadn't known Lin Oldman was giving a talk at that very moment. Nor had she expected to see an enormous display of the book she'd named *The Island*, gracing the front window of the shop, with a new name that proclaimed it as somebody else's story. *Island Mystery* was a bestseller already, and its reviews had been spectacular. Tears blurred her eyes as she looked at the rows of books, with their beautiful, gilt-edged jackets and iconic silhouette of her childhood home. Beside them was a framed photograph of the author, but, instead of looking at an image of herself in moody black and white, Anna stared into the smug-faced expression of a middle-aged woman who thought she had triumphed.

Anger coursed through her veins, the anger of a woman whose heart had poured onto the pages of that book and whose story was uniquely hers to tell. Like so many times in her life, another person had stolen something sacred and precious, this time a piece of her identity.

Anna dashed away a tear, and fumbled in her bag for a pack of tissues.

The lawyer she and Ryan had spoken to had been kind, but realistic. It was possible to fight the publisher, he'd said, and to sue them for all they were worth, but it would be a long, expensive and emotionally draining battle. With a new baby on the way, a three-year-old ready to take on the world, and a loving partner who'd support her no matter what she decided, Anna knew it would be a selfish act to demand her day in court.

It wasn't worth the heartache.

*Not at any cost.*

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Anna was about to turn away when the doors opened beside her, letting out a wash of applause from the audience seated within. She edged forward to look through the glass, scanning the backs of their heads until she came to a face she recognised.

*Lin Oldman.*

Only then did she notice the sign on the door advertising, ‘AN AUDIENCE WITH LIN OLDMAN—BOOK AND MINCE PIE INCLUDED!’

Before her mind had an opportunity to dissuade her, she stepped inside.

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“I think we have time for some questions from the audience.”

The bookseller in charge of running Lin’s event turned to face the crowd and waited for hands to raise before selecting whoever was quickest off the mark.

“The gentleman in the second row, in the tweed jacket—”

“Thanks,” he said, and a roving microphone was thrust in front of him. “I—ah—well, I have to say, I loved reading *Island Mystery*. I hope you won’t mind me telling you, it felt like you were back to your best—”

Lin kept her smile in place, while the bookseller cast her a wary glance. Over the years, she’d come to know the author seated on the small podium beside her, and her ego was practically the stuff of legend.

“Thank you,” Oldman said. “How kind of you to say so.”

“I wanted to ask a question about that cult you were writing about...you know, the ‘Syndicate,’” he continued. “Was that based on anything real, or was it all from your imagination?”

Lin swallowed, finding her throat as dry as the Sahara. “Well,” she said, and reached for the water jug to buy herself some time.

“You know all fiction tends to have a basis in reality, but, in this case, it came from the depths of my imagination.”

“Really? I thought it might have been something to do with that ‘Circle’ case up on Holy Island, a few years back—”

*Persistent bugger*, Lin thought. “Well, naturally, writers do take inspiration from real life—”

“Seemed pretty close to the mark, if you ask me,” he interrupted. “Did you have to do much in the way of research?”

“I—” Lin began to say, while a bead of sweat ran down the length of her spine.

“Yes, I’d be very interested to know how you came up with that story.”

A new voice carried across the room, clear as a bell and laden with meaning. Heads swivelled and Lin scanned the crowd until her eyes locked with the hard, unforgiving stare of the woman whose work she had stolen.

*Anna Taylor-Ryan.*

Lin’s heart thudded against her chest, and a layer of sweat beaded her skin. Then, she reminded herself that *she* was the name in the room; it was *she* the readers had come to see, not some *nobody* who’d never make it past the starting blocks.

She tilted her chin, managing to affect an air of regal condescension. “Inspiration can strike anywhere—”

“At a creative writing session, perhaps?”

The bookseller looked between them, picking up on a tension that was palpable. “Well, I think that’s about all we have time for,” she began to say.

“You haven’t answered my question,” Anna snapped, and took a step forward. “I asked whether you found your inspiration at a creative writing session. In fact, I wonder whether that inspiration was laid out for you, neatly, in a manuscript somebody else had written.”

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Lin turned an ugly shade of puce. “If you’re suggesting what I *think* you’re suggesting, I would advise you to retract that statement immediately, unless you want to receive a writ for slander—”

“You stole my story!” Anna burst out, and nobody was more surprised than she. “You took my manuscript, made a few token changes, and sent it to your publisher with your own name on the front. You should be ashamed!”

There was a stunned silence, while the audience waited to see what would happen next.

Lin composed herself and then stood up, very slowly. “That is a very *serious*, not to mention entirely *spurious* allegation,” she said, in the manner of one explaining something to a slow child. “I don’t know who you are,” she lied. “But, in the course of my long career, I’ve met individuals like you before. People who convince themselves they’ve come up with something original, when they haven’t. You have my sympathies, because I’m sure it’s disappointing to find out your idea wasn’t original after all, but, *really*, there’s no excuse for barging in here like this, especially at Christmastime.”

There were a few twitters around the room, a couple of tuts and headshakes. Seeing them, Anna’s eyes burned with unshed tears, anger vying with humiliation.

“You’re—you’re *lying*,” she said, tremulously. “I can prove it!”

“I think we’ve all heard quite enough,” the bookseller said, and made a desperate signal to another bookseller to move along the dark-haired woman with a murderous expression in her eye. “I think it’s time for you to leave.”

“I’m going,” Anna said, but turned to lance Oldman with one final Parthian shot. “You’ve written your last chapter in this business. You’ll never write another word, I’ll make sure of it.”

Something in her tone caused the smile to slip from Lin’s face.

*Was that a threat?*

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Anna turned and stalked back out into the gathering darkness, feeling a welcome rush of cool air against her overheated skin.

There was an awkward silence in the wake of her departure.

“There’s always one, isn’t there?” Lin joked, eliciting a few laughs. “Now, who’s ready for a mince pie?”

But later, as she penned her last signature for the day, she thought of the look on Anna’s face as she’d turned to leave.

*...written your last chapter...*

*...you’ll never write another word...*

If looks could kill, she’d be dead already.

## CHAPTER 2

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*Later that day*

Thrusting all thoughts of publishing disputes to the back of her mind, Anna squared her shoulders and prepared to face down another foe, one far more stubborn and intractable than the last.

*Her daughter.*

All Emma had to do was eat some of the broccoli on her plate. A single floret of the green stuff would do, but she was having none of it. Anna had tried asking politely, then she'd tried disguising the offending vegetable in some pasta sauce, only to have it weeded out again. She'd tried distraction, then humour and cajolery, all to no avail, but at least she had one last trick up her sleeve—one known to every parent in the land as a last resort to inveigle even the toughest of toddlers.

*Bribery.*

“If you eat some of your broccoli, Emma, you can have sticky toffee pudding for dessert. How about that?”

“I don't *like* broccoli!” Emma declared, crossing her little arms over her chest in a move so adorably mutinous, her mother was forced to hide a smile.

“You liked it last week,” Anna reminded her. “In fact, you told me

the broccoli looked like little trees on your plate, and eating them made you feel like a giant.”

“Well, *now*, I don’t like it,” Emma said, neatly circumventing any references to a time in the recent past when her tastes might have been less discerning. “And I don’t *want* to be a giant, anymore. I want to be a detective, like Daddy.”

There came a soft chuckle from across the room, where Ryan’s mother was seated in a cosy spot beside the fire.

“Emma reminds me so much of her father, when he was that age,” she said, with fondness. “Fiercely independent and stubborn as a mule. I think it comes from my side of the family,” she added, as a self-deprecating nod to her own wilful nature.

Eve Ryan set down the newspaper she’d been scanning, took off her reading glasses and propped them atop her head before moving to join her daughter-in-law and granddaughter at the kitchen table. Rascal, the golden Labrador who was now more of a gangly teenager than a puppy, raised his head from where it had been resting against her slippers and loped after her.

“He loves you,” Anna said, and reached out a hand to ruffle the dog’s ears.

“We keep each other company,” Eve admitted, before fixing her granddaughter with a beady eye. “Now, young lady, what’s this I hear about you not eating your vegetables? How do you expect to be able to grow big and strong?”

The doorbell rang, and Anna excused herself to go and see who it could be. Ryan wasn’t a man in the habit of forgetting his keys and, besides, he wasn’t due home for hours yet. She supposed it was probably a delivery courier, or perhaps one of their new neighbours coming over to introduce themselves.

It turned out to be neither.

“Mrs Taylor-Ryan?”

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Anna looked between the stern faces of two plain-clothed detectives. She didn't recognise either of them from Ryan's cohort of colleagues at the Northumbria Police Constabulary, but she'd have pegged them as fuzz from a mile away; there was a look in their eyes that was unique to those in their profession, which she'd come to recognise after living with one of their number for the past ten years.

"That's right," she said slowly. "Are you looking for Ryan? He isn't home yet—"

"We're not here to see your husband, ma'am. We're from Durham CID," the older of the two replied, and reached for her identification. "It's you we'd like to speak to, if we may."

Anna's brow furrowed as she read the names 'Detective Sergeant Lauren Bell' and 'Detective Constable Kieron Vale' on their warrant cards.

"You're a long way from home," she remarked. "Has something happened at the university?"

Anna continued to teach History to undergraduates and doctoral candidates at Durham University a few days per week, and it was her only remaining connection to the area. She'd once lived in a little stone cottage on the banks of the river, but that was a long time ago.

They didn't answer her question.

"Do you mind if we come in?"

"Um..." Anna couldn't think of any decent excuse to leave them standing outside in the cold, so she gestured them inside. "Yes, of course. Would you like a cup of tea?"

They declined politely, and she led them through to the living room.

"What's all this about?" she asked, and a creeping feeling of dread began to spread over her skin, prickling the fine hairs on the back of her neck. She folded her arms across her chest, unconsciously adopting a defensive stance.

To her surprise, DS Bell recited the standard police caution.

“Do you understand?”

“I—I don’t—I mean, yes, I understand,” Anna stammered. “I’m sorry, I’m a bit confused. Why are you here? Have I done something wrong?”

“We’d like to ask you some questions regarding your relationship with the writer known as Lin Oldman.”

Anna’s stomach performed a slow somersault. “Look,” she said, taking the bull by the horns. “If this is about what happened earlier today—”

“That depends,” the sergeant replied, mildly. “What happened earlier today?”

“Well, you know, at the bookshop,” Anna said, with a touch of embarrassment. “I suppose I *was* a bit rude, interrupting her talk like that, but I don’t think there was any need for her to complain to the police...”

She broke off, unnerved at the sight of the younger detective taking notes.

“You admit there was an altercation at Waterstones bookshop in Newcastle upon Tyne, earlier today?” DS Bell queried.

“I’d hardly call it an altercation,” Anna demurred. “I interrupted Lin Oldman’s talk to ask about the provenance of her most recent novel, knowing full well she couldn’t answer because she stole the story from me.”

They seemed not to hear the last part of her statement, and proceeded along their dogged line of enquiry.

“Did you threaten Ms Oldman, verbally, in front of a large audience?” Bell persisted.

*Threaten?* Anna thought.

“I would never—” she began, and then remembered her furious parting words, something along the lines of *Island Mystery* being the last words Oldman would ever write.

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She closed her eyes briefly, then opened them again.

“I was angry with Ms Oldman because she plagiarised my book,” she explained, as calmly as she could. “Seeing the woman waxing lyrical about the inspiration for her novel was a bit rich for my blood, so I called her out about it, that’s all.”

“Did you seek out Ms Oldman, in order to threaten her?”

“Of course not!”

“Mummy?”

They all turned at the sound of a small voice entering the room.

“*Emma*,” her mother said, and hurried over to draw her close. “Where’s your grandma?”

“I’m here,” Eve said, entering the room belatedly with a tea towel in hand. Her older, wiser eyes took in the situation immediately, as well as the worry marring Anna’s expression. “What can I do?”

Before Anna could formulate a response, DS Bell interjected.

“I presume you’re the little girl’s grandmother?”

Eve nodded, and slid protective arms around both of her girls.

“I am,” she said, in the same clipped, well-rounded tones she’d gifted her son. “Is there a problem?”

“It would be helpful if you would agree to look after her, at least until her father returns home,” Bell said.

“What?” Anna said, and took an instinctive step forward. “*Why?*”

“I’m not leaving my mummy!” Emma said, and clamped her arms around Anna’s leg in the manner of one who would Not Be Moved.

The sergeant fixed Anna with an impassive stare, which conveyed a clear message: they could do this the easy way, or the hard way, and the choice was hers.

“Come on, sweetheart,” she said, and crouched down to look into her daughter’s face. “Everything’s going to be okay, these are just some

of Daddy's friends from the police station. They need me to go along with them and answer some questions."

She hoped that was all.

Anna pressed a kiss to Emma's cheek and exchanged a glance with Eve, who nodded and leaned in to bestow a brief, hard hug.

"I'll call Ryan," she whispered.

"Thank you," Anna said, and held onto Ryan's mother for a few more seconds before drawing away. "Tell him there's nothing to worry about; my conscience is clear."

Eve nodded, and cupped a warm hand around Anna's cheek. "Chin up, sweetheart," she said softly. "You've faced worse demons."

The demons in their present nightmare had the decency to wait until Eve had removed her granddaughter from the living room, well out of earshot, before striking their next blow.

"Anna Taylor-Ryan, I am arresting you on suspicion of the murder of Linette Winterbottom, also known as Lin Oldman," Bell said. "You do not have to say anything—"

Anna heard the words as if from a great distance, while black spots began to dance in front of her eyes.

Murder?

"Wait a minute—"

"—but anything you do say may be taken down and used in evidence against you—"

"—wait—you said Lin Oldman was—*murdered*?"

Anna looked between the two officers, eyes pleading with them to listen.

"I didn't kill anyone," she said. "I swear it."

"Let's talk about it down at the station."

They instructed her to retrieve a coat, which Anna did, walking dazedly from the living room to the porch where their coats hung in

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cheerful disarray. She saw her daughter's pink duffel coat, decorated in a pattern of gawdy white unicorns, next to her husband's woollen overcoat that he tended to wear off-duty. It carried a lingering scent of his aftershave, *Cairo* by Penhaligon's, and she reached for it instead of her own, wrapping the generous material around her as a kind of comfort blanket for herself and the baby she carried.

"I'm ready," she said softly.

When they stepped outside, there was no glimmer of stars to soothe her spirit, nor the gentle lap of waves against the shoreline where they liked to walk the dog each morning. Instead, the sea was a turbulent roar, crashing against the dunes with all the ferocity of an angry god, while the clouds loomed darkly overhead, foreshadowing all that was to come.