

CHAPTER ONE

The books were burning.

Pages crackled and bindings split. The fire snarled and spat like a wild creature freed from captivity to feast on calfskin, linen and cloth. Paper blackened and curled, the words disappeared. Poetry and prose, devoured by the flames.

Smoke stung George Saffell's eyes. Salt tears filled them, blurring his vision, dribbling down his cheeks. His head throbbed where the club had smashed into it; he'd drifted in and out of consciousness, barely aware of the serrated blade of the knife gliding along his throat, nicking the skin as a warning, before gloved hands tied him up and pushed him onto the floor.

His assailant had said nothing. Even the soft murmur of satisfaction might have been Saffell's mind playing tricks. Now he was alone, but bound so tightly that he was as helpless as a babe. He couldn't move his arms or legs, couldn't even wipe his face. Couldn't do anything but watch the beast gorge on its prey.

Shelves stretched along both sides of this room, and rose from the floor to the sloping roof. He called this the library, with tongue in cheek, since whoever heard of a boathouse with a library? Saffell always liked to be different. Prided himself on it, liked to say that Sinatra's 'My Way' might have been written for him. It was his little joke. People said he lacked humour, but that was unfair.

He was never lonely, not with his books for company. Books never complained, never asked awkward questions. Here he was free to savour the sweetness of possession.

Words of reproach echoed in his head.

You care about your books more than you care about me.

He'd protested, but even to his ears the denial sounded hollow. She was right, they both understood the truth.

De Quincey, Coleridge, Martineau, for twenty years he'd hunted down their books and thousands more. Twenty years spent searching and haggling, sorting and hoarding. He loved to touch a dusty volume, run his finger down its spine and test the boards for bumps. How intoxicating to hold a warm book to his nose and inhale that musty perfume, hear the soft rustle of pages fanning. His skin tingled at the scratchy texture of brittle paper when he brushed it with his palms or fingertips.

He thrilled to the chase, and gloried in victory, and yet the prize was never quite enough. The shape of the words laid out on the page had a sensual charm that meant more to him than what they said. He'd read a mere fraction of his purchases. One in ten, perhaps one in twenty?

So little time, and soon it would run out for ever. Somehow, he'd become the hunted, not the hunter.

Someone meant him to die along with his treasures.

He felt blood matting his thin hair, leaking onto his scalp. The stench of petrol burnt his sinuses, filled his throat with bile. He tasted the fumes, felt himself sucking their poison deep into his gut. Yet he couldn't bring himself to shut his eyes and surrender to the dark. The fire cast a spell upon him, he was hypnotised by the horror, he found it impossible to wrench his gaze from his books as they shrivelled and died.

Rope chewed into his thin wrists, gnawed at the bones of his ankles. He hadn't been gagged; there was no need. If he shouted himself hoarse, nobody would hear. Outside the waves lapped against the jetty; on so many nights their murmuring soothed him to sleep. He kept the window ajar even on the coldest days, and if he jerked awake, he might hear the hoot of owls, the flap of bats' wings, the scurrying of water rats. But not this evening, with all sound lost in the fire's roar. On the lake were no boats, on the shore no lights. This stretch of Ullswater was deserted in winter. He'd chosen this spot for tranquillity: a haven where he got away from it all. Now he and the fire were alone with the night.

Wood cracked and snapped like rifle shots. Glass windowpanes shattered. The shelves started to give way. A timber beam crashed onto the floor. The beast had conquered his boathouse. Soon the roof would be gone.

The shelves were crumbling, and his books were blackened beyond recognition. He felt moisture between his legs, a warm and wet trickling down his thighs. The smoke made him cough, his throat filled with phlegm, he began to choke. Flames lunged towards him, devouring the Turkish

kilim stretched between the leather chairs. The beast was deranged, and bent on destruction.

Heat scorched his lips. Within moments, it would singe his hair and dry those tears. And then the fire would become him, he would become the fire.

He dreaded pain, he must keep his gaze glued to the books, empty his mind of everything but the destruction of his life's work.

No good. His brain betrayed him, and he succumbed to dread. Dread like a knife that drove between his ribs, through his flesh and ripped into soft tissue beneath. Opening him, eviscerating him.

Dread of agony to come. He was, after all, a bookish man, a self-proclaimed coward with a terror of pain. The only certainty was that he was about to die. No last-minute rescue. He had no hope of salvation, no faith that it might be an easy death.

A flame licked the bare soles of his feet, then bit into his flesh. Saffell shrieked and begged for a quick end. But it was too late to pray to a God in whom he had never believed. Even though now he understood that the Devil was real, and knew that the beast took the form, not of man, but of fire.

Cruel, sadistic fire.

It took its time and, cruellest of all, he never knew who had done this to him, and his books.

Or why.

CHAPTER TWO

‘New Year’s Eve.’ Marc Amos swivelled on the kitchen stool, a dreamy look in his eyes. ‘New house, new start.’

New start?

Hannah Scarlett gave him a cagey smile as she spooned coffee into a paper filter. She wouldn’t pour cold water anywhere other than into the glass jug. Things were looking up: they’d survived Christmas without a single row. Seven claustrophobic days cheek by jowl with Marc’s family was perfect relationship therapy for the two of them, if for nobody else. Thank God she didn’t have to live with his garrulous sister, let alone his humbug-guzzling mother, or his rugby-mad brother-in-law and his rowdy nephews and nieces. Much more of their taste in holiday television and she’d no longer be investigating murders, but committing them.

The tears and fist fights of four unruly children aged from nine to nineteen had stifled her maternal instincts for the foreseeable future. Perhaps that was Marc’s plan when he’d persuaded her to agree to a family get-together. The constant

din in Gayle and Billy's overcrowded semi in Manchester made this rambling old house on the outskirts of Ambleside seem like a sanctuary. They'd moved in three months ago and, with so much work to be done on renovations, she'd rather have stayed at home for the holiday. Families fascinated her, but Marc's was the exception that proved the rule. She didn't dislike Gayle and Billy, or old Mrs Amos, let alone the kids; she just had nothing in common with them, except for Marc. Now they'd escaped, she didn't intend to breach the peace.

Say something bland, Hannah.

'Let's hope it's a good one.'

He dropped a colour magazine onto the breakfast bar, as if in surprise. Meek acquiescence never came naturally to her. The magazine fell open at a double-page spread of horoscopes for the year ahead. She never bothered checking her stars, although her best friend Terri swore by them, and yet her eye was seduced against its will to the forecasts for Cancer. Marc jumped off the stool and peered over her shoulder.

"Your relationships are everything – as will become clear shortly, when planetary activity brings important issues to the surface. How you deal with them will affect not just your life, but other people's too. Make sure you get it right." He chortled. 'Better watch your step!'

Hannah winced. Astarte the Astrologer was in a sententious mood. 'It is possible to be too possessive. It is possible to care too much. You must learn to let go.'

'The woman knows what she's talking about,' Marc grinned. 'Look at mine. "You are not afraid of hard work, but you don't always receive the rewards you deserve." Spot on, I couldn't put it better myself. It can't be an accident.'

There must be something in this stuff after all.'

'You reckon?'

His sign was Virgo. Expansive Jupiter was urging him to devote more time to romance, while obsessive Pluto would bring greater intensity to his love affairs. But it was up to him to decide how far he wanted to go, and how deeply he wanted to commit.

Terri had once chastised him for his failure to propose to Hannah. She'd pointed out in her inimitable fashion that cohabiting allowed a man to drink the milk without buying the cow. But as he retorted, who wants to marry a cow? Besides, Terri had no room to talk after divorcing three husbands. Although Gayle and Billy had stuck together, they weren't the best advertisement for the joys of married life. They'd tied the knot at nineteen, and jogged along in the same old rut ever since. Gayle talked non-stop, Billy never pretended to listen. Perhaps he found it relaxing to have the endless tide of words wash over him. For Hannah, the nadir came during the sales, when Gayle nagged her into joining the plague of locusts that descended on the Trafford Centre and stripped the bargain counters clean. The shopping mall was only half an hour away, but the car journey there and back lasted a lifetime. Billy was right: there was no need to answer. An occasional murmur, an amiable throat-clearing, were all the encouragement Gayle asked for when in full flow. She and Billy were twelve years older than Hannah and Marc. Was this how couples ended up after so long together? Was that what children did to you? Hannah wondered if she would ever find out.

'Go on, break it to me gently. What are your New Year's resolutions?'

He asked the same question every year; a ritual as predictable as the chimes of Big Ben. Yet the shifting of the calendar from December to January meant nothing to her. It was simply an excuse for people to obey a civic duty to get pissed and pretend they were having a good time. In her early days as a police constable, she'd too often seen boisterous high spirits turn into something crude and ugly ever to be misty-eyed about New Year revelries. But she'd hate to sound churlish, or give him an excuse for moodiness. So, she switched on the coffee machine and feigned deep thought.

'I need to lose a few pounds.'

An hour ago, she'd tried on a pair of figure-hugging velvet trousers that might be suitable for this wretched New Year party they'd been invited to. They came from a pricey boutique in Kendal, an impulse buy tinged with the guilty pleasure of self-indulgence. Six months on, the boutique had gone out of business and the trousers felt too tight for comfort. As she battled to zip them up, she had a nightmare vision of their splitting apart the moment she bent to pick up a drink. The year ahead promised more guilt, less pleasure.

'You look slinky enough to me.' He screwed his features into a comical leer and made a grab for her. 'Come here. The stargazer's right, it's time for me to receive the rewards I deserve.'

She skipped out of reach. Any moment now, he'd ask whether she was wearing the lingerie he'd bought for a special Christmas treat. The outfit was a man's idea of sexy, black and minimalist, and not designed to suit anyone who wasn't borderline anorexic. The label said it was made in

Macau and the garments felt stiff and scratchy against her bare skin. She tried not to shudder when he asked her to model for him, and vowed silently never to wear it again, unless and until she owed him big time.

‘Tonight. Provided we make a quick escape from Stuart Wagg’s party before you’re drunk and incapable. Deal?’

‘You bet.’

Until she’d met Marc, she’d assumed that second-hand booksellers had straggly grey hair and smelt of mildew. But he was slim and fair and gorgeous, for all the hints of below-the-surface discontent.

He’d asked her to drive them to the party, so he could have a few drinks. Their host, a rich lawyer famed for conspicuous consumption, was sure to be generous with champagne and mulled wine. Ten to one, Marc would overindulge, snore all the way home, and need to be put to bed as soon as they were back.

‘We’ve got to stay to see the New Year in,’ he protested. ‘I already compromised and told Stuart we won’t arrive until half ten. He’s spent a fortune on fireworks, it would be rude not to watch his money go up in smoke.’

‘You should have persuaded him to buy a first edition from you instead. After the quotes from the builders, we need all the cash we can lay our hands on.’

The breakfast kitchen of Undercrag looked out to the heather-splashed lower slopes of the fells. The view was worthy of a picture postcard, with an acre of grassland cropped by deer on the roam, and spreading oaks whose leaves would shade the grounds in summer. But the window frames were rotten. The first priority had been to fix the roof; they’d spent their first weeks here skipping around

strategically positioned buckets. Like the rest of the house, the kitchen cried out for a makeover. The wall tiles were a bilious shade of orange, the units drab and beige. The water pipes rattled and clanked, the floor was uneven and the dishwasher had sprung a leak. At least they kept warm, thanks to the Aga, but whenever they ventured into another room, it felt like walking inside an igloo. They'd need to stretch their overdraft beyond the limit before the place truly became a home.

'Stuart is an important customer. Especially since George Saffell died.'

George Saffell, yes. She'd met him once, a couple of years ago. A tall man in his fifties, he had the reserved courtesy she associated with a bygone age. Yet a streak of selfishness lay beneath the superficial charm. He'd made his money as an estate agent, flogging second homes and timeshares, and pricing properties at a level that drove away kids born and bred in Cumbria, who didn't have a prayer of raising a hefty deposit. After selling his business to take early retirement, he'd devoted much of the proceeds to expanding his collection of rare books. He'd come round to their home to pick up a copy of *A Guide Through the District of the Lakes in the North of England*, by William Wordsworth. Marc had picked it up for a song from a junk shop in Penrith; he had a dealer's eye for something special, a diamond glinting in a pile of dross. And this was all the more special since Wordsworth had inscribed the flyleaf in his neat hand and presented the book to the Earl of Lonsdale. Saffell hadn't haggled over the price and the profit paid for their holiday in Tuscany that summer. She supposed the book had perished in the fire that killed

Saffell. To imagine his lonely and terrible end made her guts churn.

Years ago, her former boss Ben Kind had teased her that she had too much imagination to be a detective, but for once he was wrong. Imagination was an asset, maybe even essential. If you could not picture what people endured, how could you figure out what drove them to crime?

As for Saffell, the civilised small talk hadn't masked his greed. She recalled the naked hunger for possession, the moment he took the little muslin book in his hand. His eyes gorged on it, he was salivating. He ran his fingers down the spine with the delicacy of a lover caressing tender flesh.

While her thoughts wandered, Marc was fretting about Stuart Wagg.

'The bad news is, I heard a rumour he has a new woman in his life.'

'That's bad news?'

'Think about it. Someone to squander his cash on when he ought to be investing in rare books as a hedge against a downturn in his pension fund.'

'Does anybody really do that? Treat books simply as an investment?'

'Not as often as I'd like. Though given that the economy is a train wreck, they could do a lot worse. Did I ever tell you that a signed first edition of *Casino Royale* would have been a better investment over the past twenty-five years than a five-bedroom house in the poshest part of Kendal?'

'Only half a dozen times.'

'Sorry to bore you.' His mock-sheepish grin still charmed her, though now she realised that he deployed it too often.

‘Never mind, we’ll have a great time tonight.’

‘If you’re still sober by the time we get back.’

The coffee was ready, and as she filled their mugs, her mind drifted back to the wardrobe challenge. Leather trousers were a safe bet. They were the colour of chocolate fudge cake – if she daren’t eat it, at least she could wear something that reminded her of it. That halter-neck top with copper sequins, maybe, plus the brown boots for tramping outside to watch the firework display.

‘What is it with you and New Year’s Eve?’ He couldn’t let it go. ‘I mean, it’s an occasion to celebrate. Turn of the year. A time of hope and expectation.’

She stifled a yawn. Mustn’t sour his mood with her scepticism. Come to think of it, perhaps that should be her New Year’s resolution. Whether she could keep it was a different matter.

Make an effort. ‘Yeah, you’re right.’

‘Tell you what, the forecast is dry for the afternoon.’

‘Mmmm.’ She had as much confidence in weather forecasters as in Astarte the Astrologer.

‘C’mon. Why don’t we go out for a walk before it gets dark?’

‘Up towards the Serpent Pool?’

His face lit up, reminding her why she fancied him.

‘Perfect.’

The sky was bruised. Livid patches of yellow, with deep purple streaks. Hannah stood on the back doorstep outside Undercrag, staring up to the heavens as Marc strode off. The colours reminded her of the cheeks of a victim of domestic violence.

That was one of the downsides of being a police officer. There was no escaping the brutality that human beings meted out to each other. It was so easy for a deep pessimism to seep into your mind, staining your most innocent thoughts.

Marc turned and waved to her. It wouldn't take long for good humour to segue into impatience. 'Are you coming?' 'Sorry,' she mouthed. 'I'll catch you up.'

Undercrag was the last of five houses – two of them converted into holiday cottages – scattered along a long and winding single-track road called Lowbarrow Lane. Until the 1930s, the buildings had housed the wards, offices and laundry of a cottage hospital set in five acres of level grounds at the foot of the fell, ideal for recuperating invalids to take the air. After the war, someone had run a school here, and when that failed, the estate was split up and turned into private homes. Hannah and Marc lived barely two miles from Ambleside, but the village was invisible, and the stony turning space at the end of Lowbarrow Lane seemed like the back of beyond.

He waited for her by a cattle grid, keeping a wary eye on a woman coming in the other direction, accompanied by an exuberant Labrador; dogs always brought him out in a cold sweat. When she caught up, she took his gloved hand in hers. Further on, the lane became a muddy track that ran past a solitary farmhouse, a barn and a stone sheepfold. Past a superfluous sign which said UNFIT FOR CARS, the track forked at a bridge over the beck. After several rainstorms, the stream was in a hurry to get downhill and the water level was the highest she'd seen. A bridleway ran beside the bank, while the route over the bridge led to the lower reaches of the fell. The climb to the Serpent Pool wasn't

strenuous – just as well after a surfeit of Gayle’s home-made mince pies.

The path wound up through gorse and a small copse of mountain ash, alder, silver birch, and wild cherries, past a ruined hut and a small stone cairn. It had been too mild for any chance of a white Christmas, except up on the tops, but all the rain had left the ground sleek and slippery. Their boots slithered through the mud and Hannah edged forward with a septuagenarian’s caution. On a damp day in the Lakes, even a short walk could be dangerous.

‘Better not go any further,’ she gasped, ten minutes later.

As she heaved herself over the iron ladder stile, her joints creaked. Time to renew her membership at that bloody gym. How did Marc manage to look so lean after wolfing down his sister’s cooking? She could only put it down to nervous energy. He was seldom still for ten seconds at a time; his liteness of movement had attracted her from the day they first met. Though sometimes she puzzled over what made him so restless.

Nudging his woolly hat out of his eyes, he grinned.

‘Maybe we ought to go too far one day, you and me.’

She got her breath back.

‘In your dreams.’

His playful manner harked back to their early years together. They needed more time alone, just the two of them, with no distractions. Too often she came home late, and when she wasn’t at work, Marc would be checking stock or exhibiting at a fair in some distant market town. Once upon a time, she’d thought a child would bind them together, but since her accidental pregnancy and subsequent

miscarriage, he'd made it clear that fatherhood wasn't on his agenda in the near future. *No rush, we have plenty of time.* But she wasn't sure that the time would ever be right for him.

As for New Year's resolutions, she'd been less than frank. At last she'd reached a decision about Daniel Kind. He was the son of Ben, her former boss. Daniel was an Oxford historian who had moved up to the Lakes after the glittering prizes lost their sheen. She liked him a lot, too much for comfort. In rare flights of fancy, it seemed that whenever she talked with him, it was as if, through a door left ajar, she caught a glimpse of an unfamiliar room, flooded with dazzling light. Tempting to explore, but she was too cautious to venture through the door, lest it slam shut behind her, trapping in the unknown.

She needed to brush Daniel Kind out of her mind, sweep away the daydreams like so much discarded Christmas wrapping paper. The historian must become history.

It shouldn't be such a wrench; they hadn't seen each other since the spring. He'd set off from Liverpool for America, supposedly on a short-term assignment giving talks on a cruise ship. She'd wondered if he would ever come back, even though he assured her he'd fallen in love with the Lakes and didn't want to leave. He'd split up from Miranda, the journalist he'd shared a cottage with in Brackdale. While he'd been away, they'd exchanged a couple of emails, nothing more. It was Hannah's fault. She hadn't replied to his last message because she'd been working round the clock on a case.

She must stop wasting her time. Daniel had probably found someone to take Miranda's place. Anyway, it would

never work between the two of them. How could she ever cope with the guilt of dumping Marc? Enough wishful thinking. She ought to cherish what she had.

The scenery became wild. Rock, dead bracken, and leafless trees formed a winter tapestry. As they climbed, the wind grew stronger. She'd wrapped up well, with plenty of layers, but even with her jacket hood up and fastened, the cold stung every inch of exposed flesh. Wisps of mist shrouded the upper slopes of the fells. In the distance, she heard a plaintive mewing. A melancholy sound, as if an unseen buzzard mourned the passage of the old year.

Hannah shivered as they reached a low, spiky juniper with yellow-green needles. Hanging a juniper bush outside your door was supposed to ward off evil spirits, but if she didn't believe in horoscopes, why heed old wives' tales? Their new home would be a lucky place. Marc was right: moving into Undercrag was their chance for a fresh start.

'Shall we turn back?' she asked.

He lengthened his stride. Pushing hard to keep up, she saw him shake his head.

'Five minutes and we'll be there.'

He never changed direction before reaching his destination; it wasn't in his nature. Years ago, in a hire car in Malta, they'd spent two hours driving in ever-decreasing circles because he refused to consult a passer-by about the best route to Mdina. By the time they arrived, it was so late that they had five minutes in the Silent City before they needed to race back to the hotel for dinner. Better not remind him if she didn't want to spoil the afternoon.

'Let's keep an eye on the mist.'

‘We’re not high enough to run into trouble. This isn’t exactly Blencathra, is it?’

Sure, but each year people strayed into difficulty without realising they were at risk. You had to treat the fells with respect. No point in saying that to Marc, though. Born and bred at Skelwith Bridge, he had the innate sense of superiority of someone whose family had lived there since Wordsworth was in short trousers. Hannah had grown up in Lancaster and Morecambe – almost the opposite end of the country as far as a native of the Lakes was concerned. She couldn’t claim deep familiarity with the local peaks; he liked to say she scarcely knew her Ill Bell from her Great Gable.

‘The moment we reach the Serpent Pool, we go straight back, all right?’

‘It’s a deal.’

As they strode on, she looked up and spotted the outline of an eccentric grey building perched a hundred feet above them. Twenty feet high, it resembled a narrow ship’s funnel, but made out of stone and topped with battlements. In the middle of nowhere, it had no purpose other than as a place to gaze up at and down from.

The Serpent Tower dated back to Victorian times, a folly constructed by a wealthy landowner. Now the plateau was owned by the Cumbria Culture Company, who allowed poets to read their work and folk singers to perform there, although there wasn’t enough space for an audience of any size. According to the guidebooks, the Serpent Tower didn’t have any connection with serpents, apart from having the outlines of two intertwined snakes carved above the door. The name came from its vantage point overlooking the Serpent Pool, but for the moment they couldn’t see the water.

They'd once walked up to the Tower together, and the views of the Langdale Pikes snatched your breath away. But it required a scramble up a steep gradient to reach the folly, and this was no afternoon for sightseeing. They'd not seen another soul since passing the last farm buildings. If they became stranded as the mist descended, and had to call out the mountain rescue so close to home, she'd never live it down at Divisional HQ.

Quickening her pace, she followed him along the edge of a shallow gully strewn with loose, lichen-covered stones the size of tennis balls. Lakeland guides scorned this walk as suitable for grandmothers, but her calf muscles were already aching.

'Almost there,' Marc said.

She caught him up and put her arm around his, thrusting her head down as they passed through a cluster of bare oak trees, breathing hard as she matched his rhythmic stride. Soon they were in the open.

In front of them lay a grassy platform above the farmland that reached as far as the rocky passageway leading to the ridge and the Serpent Tower. The area was featureless but for a small, irregularly shaped stretch of water. It took a fanciful turn of mind to compare it to the sinuous contours of a serpent, but the people who gave names to places in the Lakes never lacked imagination.

They halted close to the water's edge.

This was their destination. This was the Serpent Pool.

And here, six years ago, Bethany Friend's body had been found.

According to the file back in Hannah's office, the Serpent Pool was never more than two feet deep. She'd read that file from cover to cover and committed the salient points to memory. There had only been eighteen inches of water on the day Bethany Friend's bound body was discovered by a group of fell-walkers. She was lying face down in the water.

She and Marc stood together on the soft ground, lost in thought.

'You'd never think a woman could drown in something so shallow,' Marc muttered.

Hannah swung round and stared at him.

'You know about Bethany Friend?'

The dark patch of water seemed to hypnotise him, as though if he stared at it for long enough, the solution to some eternal mystery would sneak into his brain.

'Uh-huh.'

'How did you hear about her?'

His gaze didn't waver. 'How did you?'

'It's my job to know these things.'

'You never mentioned Bethany when we were buying the house.'

'I read the file before I finished for the holiday.'

He breathed out. 'Please don't tell me you're treating it as a cold case?'

'It's an unexplained death.'

'She committed suicide, didn't she?'

'The coroner recorded an open verdict.'

'That isn't so unusual.'

'No, but since we moved here...'

'You took an interest just because we live close to where she died?'

‘Uh-huh.’ Not the whole truth, but she wasn’t ready to tell him the whole truth. ‘It’s a strange case, so much was left unexplained. That’s why it caught my interest.’

He stared at her. They’d known each other long enough for him to guess she was holding back on him. But he was holding back too, she was certain of it. That was why he didn’t push his luck.

Her feet were freezing and she stamped them. ‘Come on, we’d best get back before the mist closes in.’

He followed as she moved towards the trees, but they walked in silence. She wanted him to tell her how he knew about Bethany Friend. But he wasn’t in the mood for talking, and she couldn’t bring herself to ask him again.