



MARTIN
EDWARDS
THE SERPENT
POOL

'A WONDERFULLY ABSORBING READ' PETER ROBINSON

The Serpent Pool

MARTIN EDWARDS

*Dedicated to
Eileen Dewhurst*

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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 war 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, and 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 room 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 twenty 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. She never 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 the 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 smudges 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. To be true, 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 fell. 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 that superficial charm. He'd made his money as an estate agent, flogging second homes and timeshare and pricing properties at a level that drove away kids born and bred in Cumbria, who didn't have the 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 daredn'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 was 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 main route over the bridge led to the lower reaches of the fell. The climb to the Serpent Pool wasn’t so strenuous – just as well after a surfeit of Gayle’s homemade 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 restlessness 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 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 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 mewling. 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

hire car in Malta, they'd spent two hours driving in ever-decreasing circles because he refused to consult a passerby about the best route to Mdina. By the time they arrived, it was so late that they had only five minutes in the Silent City before they needed to race back to the hotel for dinner. Better not to 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 not the 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.

CHAPTER THREE

Back in the kitchen of Undercrag, they were shedding their outdoor gear when the phone rang. Marc grabbed the receiver, saying it might be a customer from Japan chasing a signed Edgar Wallace, but after a brief exchange of words, he thrust it at Hannah.

‘Fern Larter, for you.’

Hannah took the phone into her study. It was as draughty as a barn, but she loved its solitude and stillness. Or, at least, the absence of people. Even in winter, the countryside teemed with life. Squirrels fought on the grass beneath her window, occasionally a roe deer came up to press a baffle face to the panes. Easy to persuade herself that the nearest village was twenty miles distant, instead of a stroll away.

Once, Undercrag had accommodated hospital offices at ground level, while live-in staff slept upstairs. Hannah and Marc had only afforded the mortgage thanks to a downward blip in the market coupled with a legacy from Marc’s aunt, who succumbed to a stroke a fortnight short of her eightieth birthday. Although there were only the two of them, the habitable space seemed to have vanished within weeks of their moving in. Marc annexed the reception room next to the lounge as his office. Three bedrooms were crammed floor-to-ceiling with books. Stock, he called it. She blamed bibliomania, not the business.

‘Happy New Year, Fern.’

‘And to you. Hey, I resolved to treat myself after Christmas. My in-laws are all bloody vegans, it’s been a nightmare. I hate dieting, most of all when it’s a moral obligation. Fancy getting together for bacon butty before work one morning?’

‘Love to.’

‘Excellent, who cares about blood pressure? I’m pig-sick of the ACC’s healthy-eating initiative. I refuse to spend the rest of my life worrying about clogged arteries.’

Fern, a fellow DCI, had lent a solid shoulder to cry on when Hannah’s career hit a rocky patch. Lauren Self, the assistant chief constable, had shunted her into cold case work, but Hannah preferred to investigate the crimes of today. Fern argued that a cold case cop had more latitude to involve herself directly in proper detective work than anyone of similar rank in the whole Cumbria Constabulary. Especially in an age when management was all about form-filling, targets, and league tables. The higher you climbed up the greasy pole, the further you were from what made you love the job in the first place.

‘Where and when?’

‘That snack bar on Beast Banks? Seven-thirty on Thursday?’

‘You can bring me up to date with the Saffell case.’

A fractional pause.

‘Actually, I’ll come clean. I do have a teeny ulterior motive.’

‘This isn’t just about boosting your cholesterol levels?’

‘We’re getting nowhere fast. Thought I might pick your brains.’

‘Told you last time we spoke. I only met Saffell the once.’

‘Even so.’ Fern coughed. ‘Anyway, the business stuff will only take five minutes. Then we can catch up properly.’

Hannah hung up and wandered back into the kitchen. She smelt burning as Marc lifted two crumpets out of the toaster.

‘What did Fern want?’

When police work intruded on their private time, he treated it as a personal affront. Similar principles didn’t apply with books and his customers.

‘To fix up a meeting, that’s all.’

He tossed a crumpet for each of them onto a plate and took a clean knife out of the dishwasher. ‘When are you seeing her?’

‘Thursday, once I’ve settled in my new sidekick.’

He cut his crumpet in half with a neat stroke of the blade. He had a surgeon’s dexterity, she thought. His hands were slim; she’d always liked them, and what he did with them, when he was in the right frame of mind.

‘You’ll miss Nick Lowther.’

Even Inspector Lestrade would have detected the note of satisfaction. Hannah gritted her teeth. Nick had been her detective sergeant on the Cold Case Review Team and they’d worked together for years. Marc had long been wary of their friendship, and his unvoiced, but unmistakable, suspicion that they were more than friends had infuriated her. She’d never given him cause to doubt her fidelity.

None of that mattered now. Six months ago, Nick had met someone, and a fortnight before Christmas they had emigrated to Canada together. Marc was right. Nick’s departure had left a gap in Hannah’s life and she wasn’t sure how to fill it.

‘Uh-huh.’ She took the margarine out of the fridge and spread it over the crumpet.

‘Your new sergeant, what’s he like?’

‘Time will tell,’ she muttered. Unfair to make her mind up too soon, but one thing was for sure. Greg Wharf was no Nick Lowther.

‘It will work out fine.’

It should have been a kind remark, but he’d seldom been kind about Nick in the past and she couldn’t resist the urge to retaliate.

‘Will Cassie be at the party?’

He chewed hard for half a minute before speaking.

‘Cassie?’

‘You know.’ Of course he knew, he’d mentioned her a dozen times since she’d started work at the shop last autumn. Hannah had called in once, during the run-up to Christmas, to soothe the itch of curiosity. The girl was in her mid-twenties, fair and slim. During their short exchange of seasonal pleasantries, she gave the impression she wouldn’t say boo to a goose. But her figure was gorgeous and her eyes big and blue. She’d given Marc a jokey Christmas card, signed in an extravagant hand and adorned with half a dozen kisses. At least he’d made no secret of it, displaying it on the mantelpiece in the sitting room. Hannah hoped he wouldn’t be tempted to make a fool of himself. ‘Cassie Weston. Your own personal sidekick.’

‘Stuart Wagg asked me to pass on an invitation to her, as it happens. I didn’t even realise they’d met. She must have sold him some books. But she said she couldn’t make it. Came up with some excuse about spending the evening with her boyfriend in Grasmere.’

‘An excuse? Doesn’t she have a boyfriend?’

‘I’d be amazed if she didn’t. Very pretty girl.’

As you keep telling me, Hannah thought.

‘You think she was fibbing?’

‘Dunno, it just didn’t ring true. My guess is, she didn’t fancy a night out in a big crowd. She doesn’t strike me as a party animal.’

‘So, Cassie is like me?’

He considered the question as he gulped down the last of his crumpet, and opted for vagueness. Contact.

‘Um. Sort of.’

‘So, what’s the latest on George Saffell?’ Marc asked.

They were in Hannah’s Lexus, driving through the darkness. Their destination was south of the Hawkshead ferry, a modern mansion hidden among the trees on the slopes above Windermere. Marc drove half as many miles in a year as she did, but he wasn’t a good passenger, and she never enjoyed chauffeuring him. When she’d owned a car with a manual gearbox, he twitched with every change of gear. Now she drove an automatic, he twitched all the time. She might have passed her advanced test, he might have picked up a couple of speeding tickets, but if she rounded a bend at speed, his intake of breath sounded like a pistol shot. If she took too long to set off when the lights turned green, his heel drummed on the floor mat in reproach.

‘Still dead, last I heard.’

‘You know what I mean.’ The habitual impatience flared, quick as the strike of a match. Hannah blamed his mother for spoiling him. Even this Christmas, the old lady hadn’t been able to resist the urge to straighten his collar and brush imaginary bits of fluff from his coat at every opportunity. She’d been in her forties when he was born and she couldn’t stop treating him like a precious gift. ‘Has Felicity Larter figured out if it was murder?’

An old Beach Boys hit played on the in-car CD player. Smooth harmonies, a song about heroes and villains.

‘It’s for the coroner to decide, and the inquest was adjourned.’ She felt a flash of irritation. Why didn’t he show the same interest in her own investigations? But perhaps her reaction was unfair. After selling books to the man for years, he was bound to be intrigued by George Saffell’s bizarre demise. It wasn’t every day that one of his most valued customers was roasted alive. ‘Last time we spoke, Felicity had pretty much ruled out an accident.’

‘Not surprised. Strange accident, huh? To incinerate yourself and your prized possessions. You think he killed himself?’

‘Funny way to do it,’ she said. ‘Burning yourself to a crisp, with no chance of second thoughts once the flames take hold.’

Saffell’s boathouse had been built of wood. Luxurious enough to feature in glossy lifestyle magazines, but never meant for round-the-year occupancy. Why would Saffell want to spend his winter evenings there when he had a lovely place out at Troutbeck?

‘Books obsessed him,’ Marc said. ‘Perhaps he thought it was a fitting way to go.’

‘You’d have to be very unhappy to choose that ahead of an overdose of painkillers.’

‘Yeah, he hated pain. According to his wife, even a twinge of toothache made him whimper.’

‘You know her?’

They hadn’t spoken much about Saffell when they first learnt of his death. After initial expressions of shock and dismay, Marc lamented the loss of business. Not so much callous selfishness, as naked human nature. The two men were acquaintances, not friends. When a customer died, there was usually the prospect of buying his collection from the widow at a knock-down price, once a probate valuation at a pittance had been agreed. But even that consolation was denied. Four thousand books worth

small fortune, reduced to ash. For Marc, the destruction of rare books was a crime worse even than murder.

‘Wanda Saffell?’ Was it her imagination, or was he weighing up how much to say? ‘I’ve met her a few times, haven’t I mentioned it?’

‘Doesn’t ring a bell.’

‘You probably weren’t listening after a long day at Divisional HQ,’ he muttered.

‘I’m all ears now.’

‘Wanda was his second wife, the first died young of breast cancer. They married four or five years ago. She was a divorcee who shared his love of books.’

‘Another collector?’

‘No, she runs a small printing press as a hobby, publishes an occasional limited edition. Funded by George, but I get the impression they led separate lives.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ he said vaguely.

‘They hadn’t split up?’

‘Don’t think so. I kept my nose out.’

Having aroused her curiosity, he’d failed to satisfy it. Typical man.

‘The boathouse was gutted long before they brought the fire under control. It stood at the end of a track through woodland, and the alarm wasn’t raised until someone on the other side of Ullswater saw the place engulfed in flames. So Forensics didn’t have a lot to go on. There wasn’t much left of your customer, let alone all those books you sold him.’

Marc flinched in the passenger seat, and for once she thought it wasn’t on account of her driving. He didn’t lack imagination – how could he, a man who loved books so much? – and it didn’t do him any good to dwell on the agonies that Saffell must have suffered. Even a few seconds before the final loss of consciousness must seem like an eternity while you burnt to death.

‘But they found traces of accelerant. Petrol.’

Marc groaned. ‘He may have kept fuel for a boat.’

‘Yeah, but there are signs that his wrists and ankles were tied.’

This was confidential, but Marc wouldn’t shoot his mouth off. He knew when to be discreet.

‘Jesus.’ He shivered. ‘Murder, then.’

‘Looks like it.’

‘Who would want to kill someone as harmless as George Saffell?’

‘Is anyone truly harmless?’

‘That’s a bit profound, Hannah, don’t you think? He was a quiet sort, nothing like the stereotype of a brash estate agent. Old George wouldn’t hurt a fly.’

‘Even so. He must have had an enemy.’

‘I can’t believe it.’

Hannah swore as a car raced up behind them, its full beam dazzling in her rear-view mirror. It overtook them before a bend, cutting back in so sharply that she had to jam her foot down on the brake. She had the impression of a sports car, low and sleek. Tyres squealing, it disappeared into the darkness.

‘Stupid bastard.’

Marc clicked his tongue.

‘Someone’s worried about arriving late for the party.’

‘For God’s sake. For all he cared, we could have crashed.’

‘What makes you think the driver’s a man?’ He seemed about to add something, but changed his mind. ‘Anyway, we survived. And here we are.’

Hannah pulled up in front of a long, narrow driveway that reached through an avenue of dark trees. The gates were open and the lights on top of the brick pillars shone bright. She peered at the house name, carved on a sign made of slate.

‘Crag Gill.’

‘Named after Miss Thornton’s house in *The Picts and the Martyrs*,’ Marc said, as if that explained everything.

The title of the book stirred a memory.

‘Arthur Ransome? The *Swallows and Amazons* man?’

‘Spot on. Stuart has catholic tastes, but he’s especially fond of children’s classics. He has even Ransome in first edition. Mind you, the stuff Ransome wrote for adults is even rarer.’

‘I didn’t realise he wrote for adults.’

‘Believe me, his study of Oscar Wilde is fabulously rare in dust wrapper. Lord Alfred Douglas sued him for libel, and even though Ransome won the case, the controversial bits were censored from the later editions. Then there was his book on Russian folklore. You know he married Trotsky’s secretary?’

It sounded wildly improbable, but Marc loved showing off the extraordinary range of trivia he had accumulated about books and bookmen. She decided to give the answer he hoped for.

‘You’re kidding.’

‘It’s true, I swear it.’ He enjoyed the idea of startling her – perhaps because she was a sceptical police officer. ‘A dealer I know reckons that Ransome personally inscribed his collection of Russian folk tales to his chum Lenin. If it ever shows up, Stuart will be desperate to lay his hands on it, and he’s a man who likes to get what he wants. He’d trade his granny if he could get that book.’

‘So, he’s a true lawyer,’ Hannah murmured. ‘Caring and unselfish.’

‘You’re not going to be sarky with Stuart, are you? Chill out. Don’t forget he’s not just our host, he helps pay our mortgage.’

‘Trust me.’ She pressed her foot down and the car moved forward. ‘I’ll be on my best behaviour.’

* * *

Marc was right, she needed to chill out. Another New Year’s resolution. But an upmarket party wasn’t the best place to turn over a new leaf. From the moment a flunkey whisked away her coat as she stepped through the door into the vast living room of Crag Gill, Hannah realised she was out of her depth. She wasn’t accustomed to how the other half live.

A singer who had reached the final of *Britain’s Got Talent* was crooning ‘This Guy’s in Love with You’, accompanied by a pianist who bore a spooky resemblance to the late Liberace. Hannah overheard a perma-tanned presenter moaning about the demise of regional television to a quiz show hostess who was even more scantily clad off the screen than on. A pair of muscular foreign blokes dripping gold and jewellery were presumably premier league footballers. As Marc vanished into the crowd, she was plied with champagne by a handsome waiter who gave her a casual appraising glance before his eye roved past her, in the direction of a group of pretty girls in very short skirts, no doubt invited to keep the footballers onside.

Well, half a glass wouldn’t do any harm.

As she took a sip, a hand squeezed her wrist. It hurt a little.

‘Hannah, we meet again! And if I may say so, you’re looking lovelier than ever.’

Stuart Wagg was a lawyer, so Hannah supposed he was well versed in the art of embellishing the truth. He had the knack of blending flattery with a self-mocking smile, and as she withdrew from his grasp, she felt a surge of amused satisfaction at the compliment, rather than annoyance at slick and superficial charm. The halter-neck top had been a good idea, and she was glad she’d chosen the dangly earrings and charm bracelet. Marc had bought them as extra Christmas presents; along with a bottle of unexpectedly subtle perfume, they compensated for the tarty underwear.

‘How are you?’

He treated her to an ironic smile. ‘Keeping the wolf from the door.’

The entertaining room had a double-height glass wall overlooking the lake, but even with the curtains drawn apart and the terraced garden illuminated by complicated electronic gimmickry, the water was lost in the darkness. Despite its nostalgic name, Stuart Wagg’s home was defiantly twenty-first century, a triumph of modernist design. It was like a bunker cut into the hillside, boasting a seeded grass roof and constructed of timber and traditional stone. Stuart was six feet four and he made sure his home suited tall people. The armchairs were vast, even the sink in the cloakroom was set high. Instead of doors, archways separated the rooms, so the living space seemed almost endless. Six months ago, the place had featured in *The Independent*’s property supplement. Hannah recalled the journalist drooling over the white walls, plain elm floorboards and luxurious fabrics, positively swooning over the green silk and suede throw that adorned two L-shaped sofas. After weeks of poring over interior-decor magazines for cheap solutions to design challenges, she recognised ‘no expense spared’ when she saw it.

‘I see the economic downturn hasn’t touched the legal profession.’

His dark eyebrows jiggled. ‘It’s all about keeping up appearances.’

Stuart Wagg was lean and fit; she’d heard that, when he wasn’t chasing rare books to add to his collection, he spent his spare time tramping on his own across the fells. Black open-neck shirt, white trousers, big bare feet. A legal eagle without socks or shoes? No mistaking him for your average Lake District lawyer, toiling away over house conveyances or a neighbour’s boundary dispute in the county court. Stuart acted for millionaires, drafting wills and trusts so as to keep their fortunes out of the taxman’s clutches. His clients included sports agents and pop music impresarios and he was more at home lunching with media moguls at the Ivy in London than snacking in the cafeteria opposite his firm’s main office in Bowness. He avoided the hoi polloi in the criminal courts unless, as a rare favour, he agreed to represent a celebrity faced with a driving ban for racing his Ferrari along the A591 as though competing in the Monaco Grand Prix.

‘Is that so?’

‘Of course. We all take care about the picture we present of ourselves to the outside world. What lies beneath is much more fascinating, don’t you agree?’

He held her gaze, as if daring her to guess what was in his mind. Better not to know. All around were people talking at the tops of their voices. Stuart was a famously generous host and the Veve Clicquot loosened tongues. With the heating on full blast, the crush of bodies made even this airy room seem stuffy and oppressive. Her head ached with the din and the lack of oxygen. Marc seemed captivated by a young redhead who was offering drink, canapés, and a generous display of tanned flesh.

Stuart’s eyes rested on a dark-haired woman in the throng. She was chatting to a tall, gaunt man in a white linen suit. Hannah recognised them both. The man’s mugshot had appeared in the local media following his arrival at the Cumbria Culture Company. Stuart Wagg’s firm had sponsored his

recruitment, to run a literary festival in aid of cancer charities. Stuart fancied himself as a patron of the arts and worthy causes. With shaven head, tanned features, and coal-coloured eyes, the man's looks were striking, but it was the woman who seized Hannah's attention.

As she watched, a woman in a black dress joined the couple. Her blonde bob and glacial elegance would have set Alfred Hitchcock panting, but the champagne had brought a flush to her cheeks. Something about her was familiar, but Hannah couldn't place it. Her arrival prompted the dark-haired woman to edge away through the crowd towards Stuart and Hannah.

'There you are!'

Stuart Wagg took her arm, lazily proprietorial. As if she were a book in his collection that he might trade in for a finer copy.

'I was starting to worry that you might have had a better offer,' he said, with the smug self-deprecating smile of a man confident that such a thing could never happen.

The woman squeezed his hand and said in a disbelieving tone, 'From Arlo Denstone?'

'Good-looking feller,' he teased.

'Not my type.'

'Phew, that's a relief. Now, let me introduce you to Detective Chief Inspector Hannah Scarlett, one of Cumbria Constabulary's finest. Hannah, please meet a dear friend of mine. Louise Kind.'

Louise looked her straight in the eye, but Hannah didn't want to be the first to blink. This was the sister of Daniel, and daughter of Ben. Two men who meant a good deal to her, though she'd always been reluctant to ask herself why. She wore a belted, Grecian-style dress with a plunging neckline and a discreet diamond necklace that must have cost a fortune. The last time Hannah had seen her, Louise had been encased in a shapeless jacket and corduroy jeans. Admittedly, that had been out of doors at a skydiving display, but even so, the graceless duckling had transformed into a glamorous swan.

'We've met before.'

'Really, darling?' Stuart Wagg's bushy eyebrows skipped again in their quizzical dance. 'You never told me you were in cahoots with the local constabulary.'

'My brother introduced us. It's a small world. Hannah used to work with our father. Isn't that so, DCI Scarlett?'

'Small world is right.' Hannah nodded. 'Good to see you again, Louise.'

She was conscious of her host's scrutiny. It made her feel like a courtroom exhibit, or an ill-drafted codicil to a miser's last will and testament. Her cheeks burnt, though surely it was ludicrous to be embarrassed by meeting the sister of Daniel Kind.

'Must circulate.' Stuart Wagg gave Louise a nod of dismissal. 'See you later.'

'So, you and Stuart are together?' Hannah asked when he was out of earshot.

'Sort of.' Louise fingered the necklace in an abstracted manner. A Christmas present from Stuart, no doubt. He'd probably just walked into the jeweller's and asked for the priciest necklace in the shop. 'It's a very recent thing. We met at a legal conference. You might remember, I used to lecture in Manchester. I've only just arrived up here.'

'You've moved in?'

'Mmmm...' An evasive smile. 'Let's say, it's too far to commute with comfort and I didn't only want to be a weekend visitor. We've just spent our first Christmas together, and I feel extra lucky. I start a brand-new job at the University of South Lakeland next term.'

'Congratulations.'

'Well...let's see how things turn out.' Louise fiddled with her bracelet. 'How come you know Stuart?'

‘My partner Marc owns a second-hand bookshop.’ Hannah caught sight of him on the other side of the room, ~~accepting the waitress’s offer to replenish his glass of champagne with a broad grin~~ ‘Stuart’s one of his best customers.’

Louise tapped the side of her head. ‘Doh! I should have made the connection. See, I never inherited those detective skills.’

It was on the tip of Hannah’s tongue to say: *Not like Daniel*. But she didn’t want to be the first to speak his name.

‘Your father taught me all I know about detective work.’

‘He’d have been proud of your success. Head of the Cold Case Review Team? A top job.’

‘It’s a backwater,’ Hannah said. ‘I was steered into it after I messed up on a case, and I haven’t managed to worm my way out of it.’

‘But you enjoy being a detective.’ A statement, not a question. ‘Daniel was sure you did.’

Hannah clenched her fist, as if she’d scored a goal. Louise had mentioned him first.

‘He was right. I was always ambitious. Driven, your father said.’

‘Like Daniel,’ Louise said. ‘Or at least like Daniel used to be.’

‘Has he changed?’

‘You know his partner Aimee died?’

Hannah nodded. Aimee was the journalist Miranda’s predecessor; she and Daniel had been together when he worked in Oxford and built a lucrative career writing history books and adapting them for television. By the sound of things, Aimee had been a flake, and in the end she committed suicide. After that, Daniel wanted a complete break, and as soon as he met Miranda, he’d abandoned the dreaming spires for the Lake District. The cottage in Brackdale became his bolt-hole, until Miranda went back home to London, and left him with fresh wounds to lick.

‘It must have been very hard for him.’

‘Aimee’s death put his career into perspective. But you can’t mourn for ever. I want to see that old hunger in him again.’

‘People don’t really change.’ As she spoke, Hannah realised she believed this, with a passion. ‘Not in fundamentals.’

‘If you’re right, those cold cases should fire your own enthusiasm.’

‘At least they give me the chance to be a detective again. Your father warned me, the higher I climbed, the further away from real police work I’d find myself. The upper echelons are for political movers and shakers. Not people who simply want to solve crimes.’

‘I remember Dad saying that,’ Louise murmured. ‘Before he left us for his fancy woman.’

‘It must have been tough for you when Ben left home.’

‘For all of us. Daniel, me, our mother.’ Louise sighed. ‘It’s history now. As much in the past as the stuff Daniel studies.’

Hannah could resist temptation no longer.

‘So, what is he up to these days?’

‘You don’t keep in touch?’

Hannah shook her head. ‘He went to America.’

‘There’s always email.’ Louise pursed her lips, like a schoolmarm disappointed by a feeble answer from an otherwise diligent pupil. ‘He didn’t intend to be away for long, but one thing led to another and he finished up on a lecture tour. He only arrived back in England yesterday.’

‘He’s back in the Lakes again?’

‘At Tarn Cottage, yes. Brackdale is his home, don’t forget.’

‘I heard,’ Hannah said carefully, ‘that Miranda wanted them to move to London.’

‘Miranda?’ Louise didn’t bother to hide her scorn. ‘That’s over and done with, surely you heard? you ask me, it was never going to last. Chalk and cheese. She wasn’t right for Daniel.’

Louise must already have had two or three drinks. The first time they’d met, she’d seemed buttoned up, someone who never gave anything away. Her candour was as unexpected as the low-cut Grecian gown.

Hannah took a sip of lemonade. Thank God the need to drive Marc home had kept her sober. She mustn’t give too much away.

‘Please pass on my regards.’

‘You can always lift up the phone yourself.’

That was more like the Louise of old. Awkward and blunt as a Coniston crag.

‘Perhaps, one of these days.’

‘I expect he’ll give you a call. He may even want to pick your brains.’

‘Unlikely, I think. An Oxford don...’

‘You’re an expert in murder, aren’t you?’

Hannah stared. ‘Murder?’

‘Didn’t you know? It’s his latest obsession, it’s the reason Arlo Denstone persuaded him to be keynote speaker at his Thomas De Quincey Festival. Murder considered as one of the fine arts.’

‘You mean—?’

A woman cried out, a sound of anger mixed with pain. Hannah spun round, in time to see the Hitchcock blonde lift her full glass of red wine and throw its contents at her companion.

Arlo Denstone’s white teeth maintained their sardonic gleam even as the wine dripped from his cheek and chin, and down his white jacket.

The woman made a choking noise, as though she’d been strangled, and ran for the door.

For a couple of seconds, nobody moved, nobody made a sound. Stuart Wagg was first to react. As the door banged shut behind the woman, he moved after her, followed by a handsome Asian man in a well-cut suit. Their swift, silent strides reminded Hannah of two panthers in pursuit of their prey.

* * *

The night blazed. Shell after shell cracked like gunfire, now bursting into stars of red and white and gold, now splitting into shoals of fish swimming through the darkness, now fanning out as silver snakes that slid across the sky.

Stuart Wagg stood in front of his guests as they watched the fireworks. Feet planted on a low brick wall that fringed a circular paved area, he was bathed in light cast by lamps set above the glazed doors, holding a microphone in his hand like a singer on a stage. That little drama indoors half an hour earlier might never have happened. Arlo Denstone had changed into a striped blazer borrowed from his host and stood admiring the display as if he didn’t have a care in the world. Stuart puffed his chest out like a benevolent Victorian squire, presiding over an assembly of tenant farmers.

Crag Gill basked in ever-changing coloured lights. To Hannah, it looked more like a spaceship than a home. She glanced over her shoulder. Away from the crowd, and in the shadows, Louise Kind shifted from one foot to another. Her expression was impossible to read. She didn’t like the limelight, unlike her lover.

Stuart lifted his champagne glass with a flourish and bellowed into the microphone.

‘Happy New Year, everybody!’

As people drank and marvelled at the cascades of fire above them, Hannah spotted Marc. His gait was unsteady and he kept spilling his champagne as he traced a zigzag route over the grass towards her.

‘Darling!’ Christ, he was slurring already. Just as well they’d arrived later than most of the other guests. He’d never been a hardened boozier, and it didn’t take much to get him pissed. ‘Happy New Year!’

She tilted her glass and turned her cheek to allow him to kiss it. Instead he fumbled for her backside.

‘Come on, Marc. You’ve had enough.’

‘Why must you always be such a spoilsport?’ His breath felt hot on her neck. ‘I mean, we can’t leave yet. It would look rude.’

She had to raise her voice to make herself heard above the din of the fireworks. ‘I don’t want you falling flat on your face. We’ve had one scene here already tonight.’

He chortled. ‘Excellent, wasn’t it?’

A barrage of coloured cornets shot into the sky, transforming into graceful palms, followed by candles that soared and roared and became golden branches, seeming to reach almost to the people gathered on the ground. They gazed up to the heavens and held their breath, wondering what might come next.

Hannah feigned covering her ears as another explosion echoed in them. How many thousands of pounds going up in smoke, right in front of their eyes? Stuart Wagg never knew when to stop. He had no restraint.

‘So, you know the woman who had the hissy fit?’

He smirked. ‘You’ll never guess her name.’

‘No need to guess, though I should have recognised her from the press pictures. Louise Kind told me she is Wanda Saffell.’

Yes, the recently widowed Wanda. Out on the razzle with her husband barely cold in the grave? A bit naughty, on the face of it, but Hannah knew better than to jump to conclusions. The fact the woman had chucked her drink at her companion and then run weeping from the room showed that her nerves were in bad shape.

‘You always know everything,’ he mumbled.

‘If only.’

‘All right, then. What was all the fuss about?’

‘Good question.’ Hannah found herself itching to know the answer.

‘Tell you one thing.’ He leant towards her. ‘You were wrong about the driver who nearly ran into me out in the lane. That wasn’t some boy racer, it was Wanda.’

‘You think so?’

‘A waitress told me she’d only arrived five minutes before us. Marched in and grabbed a glass of champagne, then knocked it back in a couple of gulps and demanded a refill.’

Hannah looked round. ‘Is she still here?’

‘Raj Doshi, one of Stuart’s partners, gave her a lift home. Said she wasn’t fit to drive in her sports car.’

‘We’ll make a detective of you yet.’

‘If you ask me, that woman has anger management issues.’

‘Psychologist as well as detective, eh? Come on, time to go.’

As she took Marc’s arm and headed back for the warm indoors, she recalled the sight of Aris

Denstone, fishing a handkerchief out of his pocket. Still with the hint of a smile on his face, he began to mop his cheeks as a dull crimson stain spread across the front of his jacket.

Anyone would think Wanda Saffell had stabbed him in the heart.

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