

Chapter One

“... the lowest and vilest alleys in London do not present a more dreadful record of sin than does the smiling and beautiful countryside.”

--Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Adventure of the Copper Beaches*

Friday, October 8th

8:30 AM

The snick of the door roused Nora Tierney from her light sleep, followed by a tiny chink as her tea was set down on the nightstand. Then she heard the stealthy footsteps of Agnes leaving and a second snick as the door shut behind her. Nora kept her eyes closed, waiting for the scent of the tea to reach her. Bergamot--her favorite Earl Grey today. She stretched luxuriously in the comfortable bed and immediately felt the strong kick of her son as he woke, too. She put one hand on her bulging side to feel the healthy thrust, surely a footballer in there. It was a source of constant fascination to her that by Christmas her child would be lying in a cot next to her bed instead of inside her. Nora skipped over the part where he actually made his appearance and deftly pushed away her dread of parenting alone, sitting up and reaching for the hot tea, inhaling its familiar fragrance, sorting her day.

After a quick shower, she would take her daily walk and then visit St. Martin's in town while her energy level was its highest. Right now in her seventh month she was still carrying high, relieving the constant pressure on her bladder but trading it for that on her diaphragm, which made her short of breath at times. She hadn't taken the time in her months in the Lake

District to tour the historical church before this, and was looking for inspiration for the storyline in her next children's book. Perhaps her troupe of fairies could somehow visit the church and save a member of their group stranded there? She could picture the tiny and cantankerous Cosmo falling into one of the organ's pipes. But there could be enormous religious connotations to using the church; she would have to be extremely careful. Still, inspiration was the object of the day.

She sipped her tea, musing on her adopted family at Ramsey Lodge taking care of her, allowing her to remain independent and not run home to Connecticut. Home was still filled with memories of her father's drowning nine years ago. Her mother was currently enjoying a second marriage after years of being alone, and Nora approved of Roger, not wanting to interfere with their time together. She also didn't want to be fussed over by her mother during her pregnancy.

She had been reluctant to leave England, too, the place she considered home after moving there eight years ago. Kate and Simon Ramsey, so alike as brother and sister, yet so different in personality, had gathered her up when she'd decided to keep the baby and raise it as a single parent. They'd convinced her to move into this suite in Ramsey Lodge for at least a year. It made sense, especially after she and Simon signed a contract for the book she wrote that he had charmingly illustrated; they could continue their collaboration with ease. She'd given up her Oxford job as a magazine editor, packed up her flat in August, and moved to Bowness-on-Windermere, a bustling Cumbrian town on the shore of England's largest lake. Not that her trip back to Oxford had been without incident, but it had turned out well, as she'd helped to prove her best friend Val Rogan was not a murderer. As Nora's pregnancy advanced, it was Agnes, the lodge cook, who had taken to bringing her tea in the morning.

“You need a bit of a lie-in whilst you can; when that bairn gets born, you’ll not be sleeping much, trust me on that,” Agnes had insisted in her soft Scottish burr.

Nora reached for the book of baby names she kept on the nightstand, flipping through its sections. When she had decided over the summer to find out the sex of her child, the entire female side of the book was superfluous, yet she was no closer to finding the name that sounded right to her. Living in the United Kingdom, she wanted a name that would allow her boy to fit in without ignoring her American roots. She had also realized as she browsed that her choice would saddle her son for the rest of his life and the prospect filled her with dread. She thought of Alexander McCall Smith’s series on the inhabitants of 44 Scotland Street. One little boy with a vegan father had been named “Tofu,” and Nora shuddered at the thought.

“Names from Shakespeare” she read. Now this might do the trick. Casting her eye down the listing, she discounted the truly obnoxious ones she would never consider such as Antigonus or Polonius. She read out loud, trying the names on for their sound: “Aaron, Abraham, Arthur, Bernardo...” She flipped a few pages, “Malcolm, Nathaniel, Oswald, Paris, Sebastian, Snuff... *Snuff?*”

Maybe not Shakespeare after all.

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Half an hour later, Nora waved to one of the waitresses clearing breakfast in the main dining room on her way out the carved Victorian door to Ramsey Lodge. Darby, the Ramsey’s Lakeland terrier, had not come prancing up to her to be included in her walk. He must be in the kitchen, begging Agnes from scraps from the breakfast dishes. Pausing to clip her long auburn hair away

from her face, she strode down the flagstone path as briskly as her advancing pregnancy would allow. Crossing the road to the path that wound along the shore of the eastern edge of Lake Windermere, Nora moderated her posture. She had a horror of walking like a duck and Kate had assured her only yesterday that she hadn't a waddle in sight.

As if on cue, the back door to Ramsey Lodge opened and Nora watched Darby dart out, followed by Kate with a basket slung over one willowy arm. Simon followed, and the siblings made their way down the last remaining rows of their garden, stooping at times after conferring, selecting autumn vegetables that would be on tonight's menu. Nora admired the energy and determination it took them to keep the lodge running after their parents' death. Kate had been a set designer in London, and enjoyed decorating the rooms at the lodge. Simon continued his painting, an Oxford gallery the lucky recipient of most of his scenes and portraits, and now he was illustrating her children's books. That lucky happenstance was the direct result of the contest Nora had won the previous spring that had brought her to Bowness in the first place.

She turned back to the water as she continued on her walk, swinging her slender arms to loosen up. She didn't want either Ramsey to think she was scrutinizing them. Kate was developing into a dear friend, and Simon—well, his affection for her stirred up feelings in Nora she found comforting at times, overwhelming at others.

The ten-and-a-half mile lake stretched out past the horizon. Breaking through the trees across the lake were peaks of stone houses with gaily painted gingerbread, some with gazebos and elaborate matching boathouses. Nora could see clusters of boats swaying at different docks along both sides of the shore, accompanied by Jet skis and windsurfers. Lines of canoes and sculls in bright colors waited to skim once more over the clear water. Overhead, a loud

squawking flock of greylag geese suddenly broke the quiet. Nora recognized them from the guidebook Keith Clarendon had given her when she'd won the contest that brought her here. Keith was her contact from Worth's, the travel agency that had sponsored the contest (It's Always Worth Your While With Us!). Tirelessly efficient, he was a wealth of local knowledge, having grown up in Bowness.

The geese whirled overhead. These biggest and noisiest of Lakeland birds flew between pastures, bathing and roosting in the tarns and lakes. It had gotten very windy last night, and Nora wondered where they went in poor weather. Farther up the shore Nora saw the huge, white steamship *Swan* tethered to its dock. Too early for the crew or strings of tourists who would later cram on board, she knew. Maybe Kate would find the time to take their cruise with her later this week. The boat would pass Belle Isle on its way up and back to Waterhead, with a stop off for lunch. Belle Isle was the home of her fairies and seeing it again from all sides might prove stimulating for her next book.

Nora drew in great gulps of fresh air, deep cleansing breaths to expand her lungs. The baby kicked in his own morning calisthenics. She rounded the corner of Bowness Bay, eye roaming the shallow water along the pebbly shore. She knew the lake dropped to well over two hundred feet in depth in its center, but here it was clear, and Nora searched for small fish among the waving grasses at its edge. The tip of an overturned green scull a few yards ahead caught her eye, wobbling up and down at the water's edge, disturbing the neatness of the stony shore.

As Nora walked closer to the scull, the next slopping wave slapped it higher onto the pebbles, and without pausing to question the movement, Nora left the path and reached out to pull on the scull's tip to keep it on the shore. Someone would be looking for this later today. She

was surprised when it barely budged, and heaved harder, balancing herself so she wouldn't strain but throwing her small frame into the effort. It must be filled with sand and water, she thought, and tugged harder. Suddenly there was a sucking sound, and two-thirds of the scull slid up the bank, toppling Nora off balance onto the dampness on her knees, bringing her abruptly opposite what had kept it in the water.

Nora's water-splashed glasses could not disguise the swollen, glassy-edged face of a very dead young man, partially covered in muck from the water's edge. He lay bent on his side from the pressure of her dragging on the scull, the dripping water revealing the greenish cast of his skin, mottled with gouges and missing pieces of flesh. His swollen purple lips were grinning grotesquely at her, and she saw one eye socket was actually vacant. She smelled mud and varnish, as the distorted features lapsed and moved with the next wave. Nora's stomach contents roiled and threatened to come back up; the child within her stilled. Then her screams echoed across the water when she realized she knew who it was.

Chapter Two

“ ‘The trained observer, the expert, without a doubt he is useful,’ Poirot answered. “”

--Agatha Christie, *Murder on the Links*

9:20 AM

The sound of screaming woke up Daniel Rowley, who reluctantly opened his eyes, and then swung his heavy legs over the cot's edge to land with a thump on the bare wooden floor. There was a chill in the room this morning, and he knew he must have fallen into bed yet again without banking up the fire. A glance down at his still-clothed body confirmed this, and he wiped his grimy hands across his face and staggered to the toilet, ignoring the dull headache he'd come to expect.

By now the screams had stopped. After splashing cold water on his face, he toweled off with a corner of his torn bathrobe, thrown over the bathroom door, then picked his way to the rickety porch. Safely hidden by a stand of overgrown juniper bushes, he watched as a crowd gathered upriver around the red-haired woman whose screams had woken him far too early. The commotion was across from the grounds of the lodge where he worked. A police siren announced official business as a white squad skidded to a stop near the footpath. Thankfully, the constable turned the siren off but left his flasher on. He ran over to the woman sitting huddled on a bench between Kate and Simon Ramsey. It was that Tierney woman who'd come to live with them in the spring. Simon had his arm around her, and all three spoke to the officer. Daniel watched

Simon stand and walk with the PC to an overturned green scull. The constable knelt down, then came quickly upright and ran to his vehicle, Simon following behind at a much slower pace, his head down.

Daniel liked the way the revolving blue light on top of the car reflected off the water's surface. He carried kindling inside from a stack on the porch and lit the fire, then set up his kettle for a good cuppa on the two-ring burner. When the tea was done, he poured three heaping tablespoons of honey into it and carried the sweet brew back to the porch.

Now a second official car had arrived, its beam counter-playing the first across the lake's surface. Yellow crime scene tape was spread over a portion of the footpath, blocking access. The Ramseys and the Tierney woman had disappeared, but Daniel knew more cars would soon arrive, to be followed surely by the SOCO's—Scene of Crime Officers--who would look like giant insects in their white lint-free suits as they scoured the scene. It was amazing what you could learn from television these days. A district van pulled up, and a photographer started to gather his equipment from the back. The noise attracted a few of the villagers and a handful of tourists.

Daniel sipped his sweet tea, the hot liquid burning its way down his raw throat. He balanced the chipped mug carefully on the porch railing. Going back inside, he inspected his three chairs, chose the one with the sturdiest legs, and dragged it out from the cottage to the porch. Placing it in his vantage point behind the screen of bushes, he settled back to enjoy the show.