

PROLOGUE

He was sitting opposite her, behind a desk untidy with piles of paper, two phones and a small white plastic sign: Martin Jackson Investigations (Lakeland) Ltd.

A large desk diary with scrawled writing over it sat open immediately in front of him.

'He's looking older,' Sophie thought, his hair now quite grey, the lines on his forehead deeper.

A computer screen stood on one side of the desk, a black keyboard in front of it, though Martin was fiddling with a buff envelope in his hands.

She said, "So what is it you want me to help you with? You find missing people?"

"That's most of the job," he said. "I avoid marital cases if I can. I'm too old to chase around after errant husbands."

"Or wives?"

"Or wives." He smiled as he said it, pushing his glasses higher up his nose. "I need someone to do the legwork in the missing persons cases that I specialise in. And, well, at some point I will want to retire."

"So do many people go missing around here?" she asked.

"A surprising number. Sometimes locals. Sometimes visitors. They generally just go off-grid. Disappear."

"And people come to you if the police or whatever can't help?"

"Can't or won't. After all, it's not a crime to just disappear. There are agencies that try to help as well, but resources are limited and Cumbria, particularly the Lake District, is quite a special place."

"So why do people disappear?"

"Could be in some sort of trouble. Money problems. Often family reasons. A new partner. An old school friend who is now much more than a school friend. That sort of thing."

"Is it sometimes a body rather than a person that is found?"

"Not often. Though it can be. Accident, suicide, illness or otherwise."

"Otherwise?"

"Murder statistics in the Lake District National Park are tiny."

"That's good," she said, smiling.

"But then, if the police treated a disappearance as a potential murder, it would do dreadful things to their unsolved crime statistics."

"Ah," she said.

"I wouldn't worry about that. Look, I've written up what I'd be wanting you to do, along with a salary, holidays and things. It's here." He passed her the envelope.

She opened it and scanned an offer that should allow her to live comfortably in Keswick. More than bar and shop work, anyway.

She had been in New Zealand for a year and a half, coming back to Britain when the lure of the Lake District and England became too much and she had caught a flight home. Even so, just a few days back in Keswick had shown her that a degree in Medieval History and a year of travelling around the other side of the world didn't mean much when you were looking for any sort of a job other than in a shop or bar. Except for this possibility of a job with Martin just up the road from the Moot Hall in Keswick's town square.

Martin said, "Think about it, Sophie. I've known you most of your life off and on, so the job is yours if you want it."

She took a moment and looked around the office.

Behind Martin on the wall was a framed oil painting of Derwentwater in blues and turquoises, the view from high above the lake to one side. She could make out the wooded islands dotting the lake. The islands' trees were in their summer greenery, as were the patches of woodland on the lake shore.

At the far end of Derwentwater the town of Keswick nestled underneath giant Skiddaw. Its slopes were clothed in the dark green of forestry low down, leading upwards to the dark grey slate of higher ground.

Skiddaw was her favourite fell, she thought, or her favourite 'mountain' to someone from outside Cumbria.

In the valley by Skiddaw lay a pale blue Bassenthwaite Lake, the water reflecting a gorgeous sky with swirls of white clouds. Beyond that the painter had shown a suggestion of more mountains, these ones faint and in the distance, perhaps Scotland, over the border.

But her eye kept being drawn back to the foreground. It was a place she knew well – the rocky edge of Surprise View, the top of a cliff, with its unfenced drop into the valley far below.

Two full bookcases stood to one side of the office, holding arch files, books and various coloured folders. A bunch of keys with a large letter M keyring hung from a hook on the side of one of the bookcases.

There was a smaller second desk against the wall under the window, an open file on it with a yellow post-it sticker on one of the pages.

She tried to imagine herself sitting there, a computer squeezed on to the desk. What would it be like working for Martin, searching for missing people who maybe didn't want to be found?

"Will you give me a few weeks to think? You remember Lucy? She lives in London now and she's invited me to stay. I thought coming back to the Lake District would be coming home, but there's really not so much for me here now after my dad..."

Her voice trailed away.

"Of course. Take your time. And if you don't want it, and the bright lights are calling you away again, I'll quite understand."

"I might have grown out of the bright lights," she said, "but I need to be sure."

She stood, pushing the envelope into the small purple rucksack she carried everywhere.

"I do appreciate the offer, you know," she said. "Say hello to Linda for me."

At the top of the stairs that led down to the street door, she turned to wave and he called, "Look after yourself, Sophie."

"You too."

Ben Walker picked his way carefully across the rock-strewn and moss-covered ground, noting where the Mountain Rescue leader ahead of him placed his feet, trying to copy him. It would be too easy to fall or twist an ankle. His guide had full walking boots on, after all, while Ben just had trainers.

He paused, looking around. Everywhere was green – every boulder and rock and fallen tree had a thick coating of moss or lichen. Even the trunks of the trees had deep patches of moss growing on them. Above him was a canopy of summer leaves and branches that daylight could only penetrate in small patches.

The air was damp and musty, with no breath of wind.

"Are you OK there?"

The crunch and slip of his guide's footsteps had stopped.

Ben took a moment. The rescue leader, in his official red jacket with the Mountain Rescue logo, was looking at him intently.

"Just taking it slowly over this ground."

"It's not far now."

Ben halted and looked past the leader, seeing three more of the red-jacketed Mountain Rescue group ahead amongst the trees and clustered around something on the ground. Beyond them was the cliff face.

"There?" he asked.

"Yes. I should warn you it's not good."

"It's not my first."

His guide nodded. "You knew him though?"

"Everyone local knew him."

He looked upwards, but the trees prevented a sight of what he knew must be above: the viewpoint of Surprise View high above Derwentwater and the valley of Borrowdale, with its sheer drop-off.

Ben made his way over, stopping short of the small group, but there, twisted and broken, lay a body.

The rescue leader turned to Ben and said, "I knew him as well. Slightly anyway."

"Definitely him then?"

"Oh, yes. I'm afraid so."

Ben stepped forwards and looked down at the body.

Poor Martin, he thought. Poor. Dead. Martin.