

CHAPTER ONE

The Reverend Belari mounted the steps of the pulpit in the village church and stood in front of the lectern, looking out over the congregation. Methodically, he placed papers and what looked like a rolled, glossy magazine in front of him, while the congregation waited for him to speak. His thin, emaciated body shook with emotion as he grasped the lectern with white knuckled hands and stared with his eyelids reduced to slits. Several people coughed nervously, in anticipation of the tirade which they felt sure was coming. At a time when congregations were declining, the Reverend Belari always attracted a full church.

In the quiet Cumbrian community of Loriston, where there was little in the way of entertainment, Belari filled the role of a stage actor.

He held the congregation in his stare for several minutes while throats were cleared and those with uneasy consciences tried to look away.

Ponderously, he picked up the magazine and slowly and methodically descended the pulpit stairs. The congregation waited, wondering why their priest was not speaking to them from the pulpit as he always had done.

He walked backwards and forwards across the aisle, waving the rolled magazine before stopping on the steps in front of them and staring while they waited for him to speak. When he spoke, his voice was little

more than a whisper, but a whisper that could be heard clearly throughout the church.

“You will be wondering why I, a priest who normally addresses you from up there - closer to God than you are, have come down amongst you to deliver a message from our Lord.”

He looked around so that his eyes seemed to be resting on each one of them, looking deep into their souls, causing them to shift uncomfortably on the hard wooden benches.

“It is because of sin,” he continued, first in a clear whisper then at full volume, “SIN!!!”

He stopped while the echo of his voice died in the corners of the church. Then he continued in a stage whisper. “Yes, Sin! I see it everywhere in this town, with its undeserved reputation for tranquillity. The town is peaceful and lovely, except for you and your evil.” He pointed his finger and slowly moved it around the church, seeming to cover all of them. “Those to whom I am addressing these words from God will know in their consciences who I mean. I suggest that you think about it. Decide when and where you have sinned. You know! Each one of you knows the Commandments and His words. ‘Thou shalt not sin’.”

He stopped and looked at them with his jaw clenched. “But I know that you ignore his word. I see the evidence when I stand in front of you here. I see it when I walk amongst you in the streets of this otherwise lovely town. I see it when I visit you in your homes.” He raised his hand and again waved the rolled magazine over their heads. “You may wonder what is in my hand; I will tell you; it is a magazine of the Devil. It is just one of many such magazines I have seen; magazines of filth, depravity and lewdness that I have noticed in your own homes. It is not an old magazine, either. Look!” He pointed with outstretched finger at the

magazine. "If you look closely, you will see it is dated May, 1934. One of you has bought this lewd magazine recently and has been reading it in your home. Yes, in your very homes, homes which should be filled with the sanctity of prayer. Homes which I should be able to enter and feel uplifted, when instead I feel degraded."

In the congregation, dumpy, greying women looked sidelong at their menfolk as the priest reached into his cassock pocket and pulled out another rolled up magazine. He placed it in his hand with the other magazine and waved them both menacingly in the air in front of the congregation. Suddenly, he brought them down into his outstretched palm, with a violence that made them all start.

"These are just two of those filthy papers. I picked one up from a dustbin yesterday. The dustbin was outside the house of one of you here. I will not say whose house it was, but you will know."

He held one of the magazines up.

"My friends, I have looked through this paper and it disgusts me. If this unclean paper was unique, I would worry less for your souls."

He waved the magazine above his head and once more slapped it loudly against his outstretched palm.

"But it is not unique. I have seen it and others like it in other places. I have seen them in homes where there are children. Fortunately, all your children are in Sunday school, otherwise I would not wave this venomous filth about, for fear that they would be corrupted. And yet some of you," he waved the magazine slowly over the head of the congregation, as though it were a weapon, "some of you have these things around where our dear children can see them. God's message is that you should be ashamed;

ashamed that you could risk corrupting even your very own children." His eyes lined up along the magazine as he waved it at them, and he noted with satisfaction the bonneted heads of some of the wives turning suspiciously towards their spouses.

"Sinners!" his voice boomed over them, echoing off the stone walls of the church. "Some of you have forgotten that God created man and woman for the sole purpose of bringing children into the world. And when the family is complete, any thoughts of union of bodies should be put aside. The purpose has been served. God is satisfied with you and you should devote your lives, as I have mine, to the glory of our maker."

His voice dropped to a whisper again, "Repent and pray to God for your souls. Even though I am ashamed for you, you can be sure that I will also be praying for your souls because the Lord would welcome you back, if you would only change your ways and repent."

Sitting at the back of the congregation, Grace Belari, his daughter, would have liked to stand up and reject her father's claims. To tell him and the congregation that they were being fed nonsense; that the dilemma of man's purpose was far more complex than they were being told. She had long been unable to share her father's single-minded convictions, and found his sermons so exaggerated that she would often feign illness just to get out of going to his services. She could hardly bear to listen to his distorted and over-simplistic preaching to his unquestioning congregations. In reaction to his beliefs about a wrathful God, she had found herself becoming increasingly agnostic, shielding herself from what she considered little more than a naive attempt to explain the inexplicable forces of Nature.

Suddenly feeling unable to stay and listen to his vituperation any longer, she silently rose from her seat at the end of a row of pews. With relief, she opened the door and quietly left. The air was fresh outside and she breathed deeply, glad to leave behind the musty smell of the church which, for most of her twenty one years, had filled her with dread. After walking for five minutes, she looked back, knowing that she would not be able to see the church, now hidden behind tall beech trees. The lane took her past the high privet hedges concealing the vicarage where she had lived with her parents almost all her life. She knew that he could not be there but still walked hastily past the house. Even when he was absent, the house seemed to be filled with his lurking presence with too many dark corners which she could not enter without a feeling of foreboding. As she walked quickly away from the place, the fog that always clouded her mind within the walls of the church began to lift, as she breathed the scents of the countryside.

Driven by her need to get away from him, and all that he stood for, she was impelled to get into the hills which lay some distance off. Here she knew she would escape from a father who required unquestioning conformity to his own ideals, without regard for her thoughts and feelings. She could also leave behind the uninspiring town and the people of narrow experience and narrower aspirations who lived in it.

In the hills and in the fields, she was able to find harmony with her spirit of freedom and a creative urge, so powerful that it seemed to produce a pressure in her brain. The pressure made her head ache with desire for a life that she knew too well she would never find in Loriston.

When she was alone and the house was out of sight, she would begin to sing, softly at first, directing her voice around her as she moved her body slowly, dancing to the rhythm of the music. She was singing to the trees and to the birds, but most of all, she was singing to the undiscovered self inside her head.

As she danced, her mood changed from depression to euphoria, and she was able to forget the suspicious glances that followed her into every corner of the rectory. As the memory of those dark corners left her, she was able to convince herself that she was destined to take her part in a world where religion was irrelevant, and art, music and philosophy were the only topics discussed.

In that state of euphoria, her thoughts often turned to imagined young men, attractive, with interesting minds; men concocted from novels she had read, or even to real young men seen in bars and restaurants during a brief period of her life spent living in Paris. In Loriston there were no such men. The few that she had known as she had grown up were now living in cities and could be reached only in her imagination. In Paris, although she had had a short liaison with an artist, she had never known the romantic love which so often dominated her thoughts. Thinking of what such love might be like, when she finally experienced it, set her body trembling and gyrating to the rhythm of the music in her head, which gradually took control of her.

The wind, often wild in that empty landscape, was driving her to dance more violently, accompanying her in and out of the trees scattered around the hills. She was intensely aware of the grass beneath her bare feet, and of the wind clutching at her flimsy dress. It almost seemed to her that she was twin souls, the one, detached and observing,

watching her own movements, the other violent and possessed by an un-worldly force which seemed to take her to the edge of sanity.

She had seen the influence of mind-enhancing drugs during her time in Paris and felt disgust at their effect on people. Such was her father's influence that she had never even considered taking drugs herself, but when she danced, the uninhibited wildness of her movements made her feel as though she had been drugged. It had been several weeks since she discovered her special tree, slightly stunted and sad-looking, seeming to be lost and struggling to survive in the wind-blasted country. It seemed so in need of friendship that she felt compelled to dance round it, to show that someone cared. She had danced so many times that it had become a silent friend to her.

In the field, there was a scooped-out hole almost nine feet wide. When, exhausted from her exertions, she finished her dancing; her exhilaration was such that she would feel convinced she could leap from one side to the other. She had never managed it and always landed awkwardly on its sloping sides. She would fall to the ground, worn-out but happy, lying for blissful minutes with her mind running forward to a creative future which she was sure she would have.

The exhaustion was not only physical. Dancing set her emotions racing; sometimes with such turbulence that she became fearful that she was being taken over by them. She seemed almost to possess an alter ego from some other world. She knew from her time in Paris that artists sometimes felt this way when they came back to work begun years previously. The work would sometimes seem to have developed a personality and the artist become aware of illusions which had been buried in their sub-conscious minds or had been forgotten.

After her dance, she would lie on the grass, looking up at the sky for such long periods that her clothes would become damp. Eventually, when the damp and cold ground became uncomfortable, she would get up, shake her skirt to remove odd bits of grass, and reluctantly make her way home. Gradually, as she walked, she would return to reality, but still changed by the violent sensations of the dancing, so that, even when her heart stopped racing and her energy had returned, she would still remain ecstatic.

Without knowing why, she felt as though she were being guided by the same benign force that had controlled her dancing, to wander back along a different road to the one that led to her parent's house. The road passed a wooded area and she turned down an overgrown path leading off the road. Her way was blocked by tortuously-shaped undergrowth which seemed almost to want to prevent her passage. Although filled with apprehension, she continued to make her way over fallen trees and brambles, which tore at her dress. Finally, she came to a clearing and, with some surprise, realised that she had found the deserted house that she had heard people talk about, the home and studio of the artist, Artemus Ruane. Reputed to be an almost feral creature, who had had a series of women living there with him at different times.

With difficulty, she pushed aside the undergrowth with a stick she had picked up, and eventually reached the entrance to the house. Filled with anxiety, she waited outside for some time before feeling able to push open the door which was not locked. Inside, she was surprised to see how light it was, and looking up, she saw that most of the roof was glass. Even though the glass was partially obscured by the plant tendrils snaking over it, light still streamed into

the room. Covering one wall was a painting of a landscape, with mountains so high they passed beyond the top of the canvas. In front of them were strange creatures that seemed to be looking down at her. Although at first they filled her with apprehension, when she examined them more closely she saw that the painter had somehow managed to impart a sense of humour in their eyes, so that the strangeness disappeared. She then saw that in the corner of the painting was a figure of a young woman in shadow, sitting on a fallen tree. She was facing the animals with her arm raised in a manner that made Grace feel that she was in control of them.

The scene was so powerful that she began to feel part of it as though she herself were the shadowy figure in the corner. After gazing at it entranced for a long time, she turned her eyes away and looked in the right hand corner of the painting, and saw the name 'Artemus Ruane'. Grace smiled to herself; the date beneath the name was in the year she had been born. She began to study the painting more closely; the colours, the careful brush strokes, the general composition and the confidence of the artist, all filled her with delight and amazement.

She remembered that her mother had talked about this painter, had known about his life and referred to him as a man who always seemed alone even when surrounded by admirers. She had heard that at one time he had fallen ill from suspected food poisoning which, it was rumoured, was really a mental problem. He had been taken to hospital but, when he was only partially recovered, had put on his clothes and walked out of the hospital, and had not been seen in the town until many months later.

She looked around the room she had entered and saw that the internal walls of the house had been

removed and the building, apart from one small bathroom, consisted of just the large space in which he would have eaten, slept and painted.

The furniture seemed to be scattered where he must have left it and, as she looked round, she saw that this man had had a sense of fun and had arranged objects in what seemed to Grace to be the style of Marcel Duchamp. He had painted vaguely human features on a turnip, given it a hat and placed it in a flower pot.

She almost laughed aloud into the silent room when she saw that on one large cupboard, a hand had been painted with its index finger pointing at the catch on its door. Almost against her better judgment, she crossed the creaking floor and did what the hand seemed to be asking. As she opened the cupboard door, it sagged down on rusty hinges.

Inside were several other paintings; some of them loosely rolled and others still in simple frames. She took them out and carried them one by one over to the light, which filtered through the fronds covering the glass roof. The first painting was of a woman, lying nude on a couch, looking at the painter with such tenderness that Grace was sure that she must have been the painter's lover. She turned the painting over. On the back was written 'Zelda, the only love'.

Several other paintings were of people who held no interest for her and she put them aside.

At the back of the cupboard, she pulled out the last painting and, as soon as she saw it, became transfixed with the image of a young man, also nude, but seated sideways on a chair. His hands were across the back and his head, turned to the viewer, resting on his hands. The figure was about quarter size but was so lifelike that the young man seemed to look straight into her mind. She had never seen any creature so

beautiful and could not take her eyes off his extraordinary face. The longer she looked at him, the more real he became. The painter's skill was such that he seemed to have built the person from the inside, so that she felt that if she had touched the image, the body would be warm. She turned the painting over and could just make out, grimed over with dust, the name 'Edward Alleyne, Paris'

She recognised that what she immediately felt for the man portrayed in the painting was what the romantics called love at first sight; love that was both physical and emotional. The sensation overpowered her and made her feel weak. She propped the painting against the cupboard and knelt in front of it, and after a few moments, began to feel her eyes fill with tears, not from sadness but from a happiness she had never felt before. She stared at him for so long that she began to feel that she knew him, and that if she talked to him, he would listen and understand.

This intensity of feeling was a new experience for her. Her life had so often been spent alone, looking out at the world. Whenever she was in the company of others, she talked, laughed, listened, but felt different from them. There seemed to be a force inside her which others did not have, nor, seemingly, even recognise. When she was face to face with other people, she felt inhibited, and the contact lacked the closeness that she experienced with people she saw in passing, who were not even known to her, and whom she had not even spoken to. It was as though she had built the unknown people into composite personalities. From the age of ten, just by looking at them, she seemed to be able to understand other people, their doubts, their fears, their loves and their philosophies. She noticed that she was most able to do this when she was in the presence of the people she knew she

would never meet - at a concert when the music flooded into her body, or, when she was walking around paintings in an art gallery and, as well as looking at the paintings, observed the other viewers. At such times, she would look at people and feel so close to them that she was afraid they would notice that she was looking into the minds behind their faces, able to interpret their thoughts so intimately that they would feel invaded. She had read widely, fascinated by books on any subject, but particularly those on philosophy and she was captivated by the attempts man made to rationalise the often confusing world around. The Greek religions, based on their many gods, particularly charmed her. She had read of the Delphic Oracle, the female Pythia of Delphi who would sit beside a hole and become intoxicated by the gas issuing from it. In her drugged state, she behaved so strangely that her words were considered to come direct from the Gods, and it was thought that she had the god Apollo inside her. Grace felt more affinity with this ancient mythological life than with the often mundane world around her.

Her ability to understand the minds of strangers made her feel that she also had the spirit of a god inside her. She felt that she had power and, like those the Greeks called 'shamane', was able to contact the gods. In her wilder moments, when she became almost intoxicated with the ramblings in her mind, she felt she was drinking from a river in which the whole of human sensation was dissolved, which was entering her own body, liberating her spirit.

But her liberated spirit remained trapped in the small town life she led and she was desperate to find release and a way of expressing herself. She could not believe that reincarnation of people was a reality, but

she was sure that her thoughts were a reincarnation of the ideas passed through her from earlier generations.

In the state of aloneness in which she normally lived, and which only disappeared when she danced with nature, she would lose herself in her reading. She had been intrigued to read how with Dionysian, orgiastic dancing, the Greeks were able to cure many mental problems, which in modern times would either be treated with drugs or considered incurable. In these Corybantic rhythms, people suffering from mental stresses danced until exhausted, when they would fall to the ground in deep sleep. For some ailments, the music of particular gods was used.