

The House by the Loch

KIRSTY WARK





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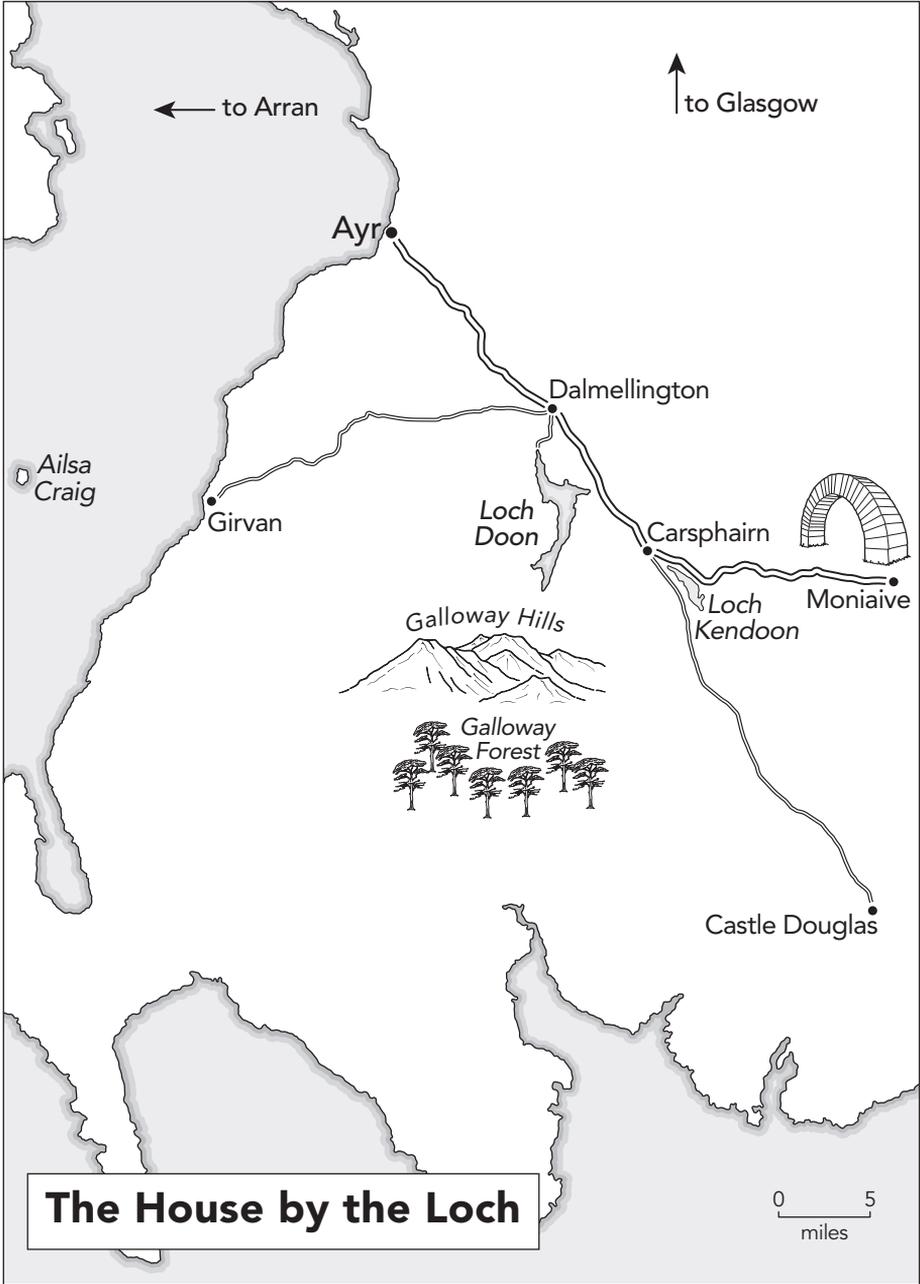
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*To my family, and to my friends,
who know that they are also family.*



*Come away, O human child!
To the waters and the wild
With a faery, hand in hand,
For the world's more full of weeping than you can understand.*

W. B. Yeats, *The Stolen Child*

The House by the Loch

October 1941. Loch Doon

A lonely patch of jewel-coloured nasturtiums sheltered by the stone dyke, shivering in the autumn chill, hoping for a moment of warming sun to keep them alive just a little longer. An early morning wash hung on the line, the sheets edge to edge, shirts billowing upside down like circus artists on a high wire.

Ten-year-old Walter MacMillan sat scraping away at the loamy moss on the kitchen step, scuffing his boots, backwards and forwards, the sound filling the bare garden. Suddenly he stilled his leg, pricking up his ears, as out of the silence he heard a faint metallic thrum, like the distant rumble of his father's tractor. He jumped up, grabbing his two home-made paper flags stuck onto sticks, and charged out of the garden gate, his jacket flapping as he pounded down towards the shoreline, a notebook sticking out of his pocket. With each footfall over the rough ground the noise from above sounded louder, more urgent. He imagined that he and the plane were racing each other. He paused as he turned his face skyward to the north, above the brown and purple hills, into the glinting sunshine. His heart was thumping as he scanned the cloudless blue canopy.

Then he saw it. The Spitfire rushed into view, swooping steeply towards him. In a flash he made out the head of the

pilot encased in his flying cap and goggles, and on the fuselage the Czech roundel alongside the RAF ensign. He felt the plane's thundering roar vibrating through his whole being as the plane came level with him, almost kissing the loch. He waved his flags above his head, the Czech one with its blue triangle and bands of red and white higher than the Union flag, and watched spellbound as the Spitfire banked around to rise over Mulwharcher hill and the Merrick.

But then, just when he expected the pilot to soar heavenward, he saw the slender starboard wing tip catch the water. Walter opened his mouth wide and he dropped the flags. His hands shot to his head, his fingers pressed to his face. The Spitfire cartwheeled, its wings threshing through the water, churning up white spume and then, for an instant, it seemed to stand still, balancing on one wing tip, as if it understood its terrible fate, and then it shuddered and sank down into the depths. As the engine sounded a death rattle, waves rushed towards Walter and covered his boots and legs with Loch Doon's brackish water. As he stumbled backwards he let out a long, anguished scream. All he had wanted to do was to greet the pilot, to send him on his way, imagining him, gloved hands clamped to the joystick, headed across the Channel to a dogfight with the Nazis.

Walter never forgot the pilot's face, but it was only when the war ended that he learned his name. For almost seventy years he had imagined that he had seen the boy at the edge of the loch and knew that someone had witnessed him going to his death, and even as a child Walter knew that was important. Every year Walter returned to that same spot, on 25 October, and bowed his head, remembering Flying Officer Frantisek Hekl, and the day the war came to Loch Doon.

PART ONE

The Girl with Brown Eyes

CHAPTER I

Carson and Iona MacMillan knew every inch of the twenty-mile journey south from home in Ayr to the wilderness of Loch Doon. If they closed their eyes they could track their progress by the pitches and turns of the road, the way their stomachs plummeted when the old estate car jumped over a rise in the road and then tipped forwards again. When the car veered to the right off the main road that headed south to Carsphairn and Castle Douglas, and they saw the tracing of the Galloway Hills in the distance, they knew it would be ten minutes, give or take, before they reached their destination.

The tall pines lining the single-track road to the loch stood to attention like an honour guard waiting to greet company. Carried on the breeze came the protest of the cranky old engine and the muffled sound of unruly voices belting out an approximation of the Scissor Sisters song about getting jacked up on some sweet champagne. Inside the tangerine-coloured Volvo the singing was accompanied by a timpani of wine and olive oil bottles and an old ice-cream maker clanking together as the car bumped over potholes.

Rivulets of condensation trailed down the inside of the windows and the car heater whined with the effort of combating the earthy dampness while the wipers tried to banish the

misty drizzle. As the Volvo emerged from the tunnel of trees it crossed an expanse of tweedy moorland on the way to the head of the loch.

‘Hey, Iona, open your window,’ Patrick MacMillan called out over the music. ‘Look at the rainbow over Knockower.’

His younger daughter obediently wound down the creaking window with both hands and stuck her head out. She screwed up her nose as the rain, persisting through the arriving sunshine, patterned her face with its spray. She nodded eagerly, sending the beads of water that had settled on her curly dark hair flying. ‘I see it, Daddy!’ she said excitedly.

Carson, at the other end of the back seat, rolled her eyes and fiddled with the friendship bracelets wound around her wrist. At fourteen, almost fifteen, she was six years the elder, and had recently emerged from childhood into a tall slender girl, her eyes a deep sea green, her face now almond-shaped like her mother’s. As she sat with her denim-clad legs folded against the back of the driver’s seat, she affected a casual distant look, but the truth was she had a tight knot of excitement in her stomach because she still loved coming to the loch, and especially this weekend.

‘I told you the sun would break through, didn’t I, girls?’ Patrick gave his wife’s knee a self-satisfied squeeze.

Elinor smiled indulgently as she looked down on the loch. ‘Rain, hail, or shine. I love it in all weathers, you know I do,’ she said.

The two identical wooden cabins that had appeared side by side on the north shore of Loch Doon a decade earlier, long gardens rolling down to the water, were a gift to Patrick and his younger sister Fiona from their father, Walter. There had been no discussion, no hint of what was to come, he had simply sent each of his two children a buff-coloured envelope containing a

picture of the cabins that he had ordered from a company in the Borders, the deeds for the land, and a cheque for ten thousand pounds. 'If explanation is required,' he wrote to each, 'some family money has been sitting, untouched, in the bank, and I thought this would be a good use of it. I hope you think so too.' That was all.

The irony of the possibility that it was their late mother Jean's money anchoring them to the loch was not lost on Walter's children. 'You do know what Dad's doing, don't you?' said Fiona when she telephoned Patrick from London.

'Yes, of course I do,' he replied, 'but there's nowhere I'd rather be. It'll give the kids the same freedom that we had.'

There was silence on the line for a moment. 'I know that, Patrick.' He heard the voice as taut as a piano wire. 'And it's all very romantic, but do you ever remember Mum saying, even once, that she loved it?'

Walter's gift, though, was a godsend to Patrick and Elinor, since a teacher and a freelance illustrator's income did not run to a second home. But to Roland, Fiona's husband, the senior partner in the London architectural practice of Stratton and Miles, the simple wooden house was something of a joke, an affront even, and, by dint of distance, the Strattons' visits to Loch Doon had been few and far between, and certainly not with any of their Notting Hill friends.

Carson loved their cabin. When she was younger she imagined herself the heroine of her very own Laura Ingalls Wilder story, peering out from her window in the roof, looking over the lapping water, transported to Wisconsin. Sometimes, burrowed down in her bed in Ayr, her eyes pressed shut, she conjured up the cabin and everything in it: the high shelf that ran around the four walls of the big room downstairs, books and photographs and keepsakes jostling for position; Elinor's

watercolours pinned carelessly to the front of the counter; the spiders scurrying around in the wood basket by the stove; Granny Jean's bejewelled velvet drawstring bag hanging over her bedpost; and the fairy lights that Iona had begged Patrick not to take down after Christmas one year. She even liked to picture the Moses basket in the corner of Iona's bedroom, filled with peach-coloured dolls, their arms and legs poking out of the pile of mildewed soft toys at impossible angles, as if they'd been suffocated. When Carson was six, the basket's appearance at the foot of her parents' bed and the mewling sound from within had been an unwarranted intrusion into her perfect world. 'Can't you make her stop?' Carson had wailed at Elinor when her mother was reading a story with her in the bed. 'Okay, maybe the baby would like to hear "The Worst Witch" too,' her mother had said cheerily and, to Carson's horror, lifted Iona from the basket and latched her onto her breast.

Carson thought of the two cabins as best friends, twins even, but at the beginning of that year, as soon as the unusually heavy snowfalls that had marked the start of 2005 had melted into the loch, the MacMillans had watched, amazed, as the Strattons' cabin was bulldozed into matchsticks one Saturday and dumped in a line of skips. Patrick didn't keep any wood for his log store. 'It would be too weird,' he said to Elinor, shaking himself, 'burning Fiona's house. I would feel like a grave robber.'

Almost as quickly, a beautiful two-storey larch-clad box appeared in exactly the same place, following detailed plans and strict instructions faxed by Fiona to a local builder in the nearby town of Dalmellington. Walter had been absent, but not unduly dismayed, during the demolition, and became a regular visitor as the new house took shape, asking the

construction team technical questions, which they answered, sometimes testily, fretting over the installation of a burnished dark wood floor, checking more than once that the plate-glass front elevation would withstand a bird strike and that the glass balustrade on the upper balcony was firmly enough in place. Then, days before the weekend of the unveiling, he was there when the furniture van arrived from London and, with Fiona's precise diagrams in hand, he directed the placing of the pair of huge pale linen-coloured sofas, the copper arc floor light, the faintly patterned rugs imported from America that to Walter just looked washed out, and the positioning of the paintings, most precious of all the Sean Scully oil, purchased specifically and perfectly for the only windowless wall, upon which the light from the south would fall at the height of the day.

Patrick steered the car down the incline along the single-track road that hugged the loch until, almost halfway along the six miles, the MacMillan land hove into view. 'Whoa . . . it's finally unwrapped,' exclaimed Patrick as they approached the turn-off and he swung the car through the open gates. 'What a difference a month makes. Not a bay tree out of place, and look over there' – he pointed to a plinth at the bottom of the garden at the water's edge – 'Roland's very own Barbara Hepworth!'

Carson strained her neck to see what Patrick was talking about and made out the squat, smooth bronze mother with her protective arm around her baby.

'So that's the secret he promised Fiona,' said Elinor, raising her eyebrows. 'Hmm, it's quite something.' She looked askance at Patrick. 'Maybe he'll christen it with a magnum of something expensive – or perhaps champagne's a bit common for Roland.'

'Do I hear the tiniest bat squeak of jealousy – about the house, I mean?'

Elinor shook her head. 'Not at all. I mean it. I love our rustic home.'

Patrick brought the Volvo to a halt beside the Strattons' gleaming black Range Rover. 'Well, if it means we'll get to see more of them, that's all to the good, isn't it?'

Before Elinor could reply Iona suddenly let out a wail. 'Where's our cabin?' She unbuckled her seat belt and pushed her way between the front seats. 'I can't see it any more.'

'Don't be such a baby, Iona,' Carson said mockingly, 'it's where it's always been.'

'But I can't see it,' she whined.

'That's because it's behind that bloody great box,' Elinor hissed under her breath.

'Mum! Stop it.' Carson's face was aflame.

'Come on, Eli,' said Patrick. 'You never know, maybe we'll do the same one day.'

Elinor snorted, and, waving at Fiona who was waiting for them on the newly laid turf at the side of the house, spoke through a rictus grin. 'What? When we win the lottery?'

Fiona came towards them blowing extravagant kisses and put her head through the driver's window before Patrick could get out, leaning in to hug him. 'So lovely to see you all. Roland says could you park round at yours, so he can take some photos of the house in the evening light.'

Patrick guffawed. 'Are you serious? Surely Roland's not suggesting our old banger is a blot on the landscape?'

A nervous look flickered across Fiona's eyes. 'Oh, you know how Roland is. Everything in its place.'

Carson caught the look of sympathy on her mother's face as she smiled at her sister-in-law. 'Of course, Patrick will park round the back. It's fine . . . really,' she said brightly as she jumped out of the car.

Carson and Iona followed behind Elinor and stood watching the two women embrace. They looked so different to Carson, as if a bear were hugging a bird. Her mother, slightly dishevelled, the tumble of sandy red hair, an old fisherman's knitted sweater and a pair of cowboy boots peeping out from her jeans; and Fiona, engulfed by a pale blue linen shirt, her collarbone jutting where the fabric fell away at her neck. Her perfectly highlighted blonde hair was tied into a ponytail and two gold bangles jangled loosely on her arm. The two women stepped back, still holding on to each other. Carson had the odd impression that her mother was holding her aunt up.

'I can't believe it's been six months since I've seen you,' said Elinor. 'We're all excited about the house. You are so talented, Fiona.'

Carson heard the fervour in her mother's voice.

Fiona lifted her hand in protest. 'It's Roland's design.'

Elinor grimaced. 'I know better than that. It's your vision.'

Fiona flushed a little. 'Well, we're all going to celebrate. I want us all to have a great time. Especially Pete.'

'Where is my nephew?' Elinor grinned.

'He's on the jetty, helping Dad varnish the boat.'

Fiona turned to Carson and Iona. 'Let me look at you both.' She hugged her nieces to her and Carson felt her ribs, one by one, so thin and hard she was alarmed at the sudden thought that they might snap. Fiona tightened her grip as if she were unsure of her bearings, and took a deep breath, and when she finally let the girls free and flicked her hand to her brow, Carson was sure she glimpsed a tear on her eyelash, glinting like a tiny diamond. 'Go find Pete . . . and Granddad too. They're desperate to see you.'

Pete Stratton had just turned sixteen, fourteen months older than Carson. He was sallow-skinned and rangy, his mouth had

a downward tilt, and his unkempt hair flopped across his forehead like an attitude. He had an infinitesimally small skull tattoo concealed beneath his watchstrap which he had revealed secretly to an adoring Iona the Christmas before. Carson's relationship with her cousin was trickier. That same holiday he had left her smarting when he had opened the door of the MacMillan cabin and found her wrapped in her old baby blanket on the sofa, her treasured copy of *Peter Pan* propped up on her knees. 'Finished *War and Peace* already?' he laughed. Carson had just glared at him, unable to find an instant retort that was witty or cutting enough, and quickly turned back to the lost boys, her face scarlet.

She wondered at her aunt's insistence that Pete and Walter could not wait to see her. Pete always paid attention to Iona – her sister would not allow it any other way – but Carson could feel the indifference to the older of his country cousins from two hundred paces; and as for her granddad, he and she were forever in each other's company at the loch. She sensed a desperation in Fiona's eagerness that the weekend should go well.

Carson's earliest memory of the cabin almost a decade before was the pungent smell of raw timber which made her nose itch and the great clatter she could make with her feet when she marched across the new boards while Walter clapped in time. He was as constant to her as the North Star which, he told her back then, and often since, protected them all every night.

The MacMillans often spent weekends on the loch. In the early days the car was always laden on the journey from Ayr: a gate-leg table bequeathed by an elderly aunt, Turkish rugs and kilims from a second-hand shop, cardboard boxes with lamps and lanterns and old books about the flora and fauna of

Galloway, a CD player, fishing rods, life jackets and a beautifully framed antique map of Loch Doon which had been a wedding present from Walter. When Patrick had opened the envelope from Walter, it occurred to him that the map might have been a hint about the much greater gift that was to follow.

Carson slept under the eaves in a room at the top of a narrow set of stairs and, eventually, Iona joined her there in the identical bedroom across the landing. At night, more often than not, Iona would tunnel in like a warm mole beside her sister, and Carson never minded, not at the loch. At home in Ayr she was always prying into Carson's stuff, taking her jewellery and digging her finger into her lip balms, messing up her CDs and parading around in her shoes, but at Loch Doon she seemed less irritating, as if she had turned into an entertaining little pixie. Perhaps it was because the girls were less confined at the cabin. The air was soft and clear, the skies big and, surrounded by the Galloway Hills, the loch seemed to be in its own benign world. When Carson and Iona were younger Elinor kept them both in her sights, sitting them down with paints and paper, or dragooning them into hoeing weeds in her vegetable garden, but gradually she let them wander beyond the garden, and Carson surrendered herself to the task of being Iona's keeper.

'Come on, Car, I want to see Pete,' shouted Iona as she tore off to the jetty, racing past Roland who was making his way in the other direction. Neither uncle nor his younger niece paid each other any attention but he stopped when Carson came level with him.

'Hello there, Car,' he said fondly, his tall frame looming over her. He gave her an expensively scented hug, his blue linen jacket falling open to reveal a paisley-patterned silk lining. He nodded up in the direction of the new house. 'Ready

for tomorrow's celebrations? How do you like it?' Carson reddened, trying to think up something sophisticated to say, but Roland went on, almost to himself, as if listing the house for a catalogue entry, 'You know, I might just win a prize or two with this one, low energy costs, sedum roof, larch cladding . . . It's a small pavilion in the park, really.'

Carson was not quite sure what he was talking about, but she turned around and looked intently at the house, and thought how settled it looked among the trees, its strong outline softened by the pattern of the branches, the glass wall sparkling at them. 'I like it,' she replied finally. 'I watched the men working on it even at the weekends. It happened so quickly. It's handsome.'

Roland looked pleased. 'Why thank you. I must admit I left all the hard work to your aunt' – he winked at her – 'but I drew up the plans, of course,' he added with a wave of his hand as he strode on up to the house.

'He's so damned pompous.' Elinor's words rang in Carson's ears as she walked on, but she found her uncle more interesting than most people she knew. She liked his conversation.

It wasn't so long ago that she had crept to the door of her cabin bedroom the better to catch her parents' murmured voices.

'She wants to make it work, Eli. I think that's what the house is all about.'

'She shouldn't have married him in the first place. And she should have left him when she miscarried. She's so talented and he has just undermined her every step of the way.'

'For God's sake, you can't say that. Then there would have been no Pete.'

'I'm sorry, I don't mean that; but Patrick, he's pathologically incapable of being faithful. It's destroying her.'

‘What can I do if Fiona won’t do anything – except drink more?’ said Patrick. ‘He thinks it’s all part of being a player, I imagine.’

As Carson reached the jetty, a pair of mallards executed a perfect flypast as if for her, dipping and rising gracefully over the ripples in the midday sunshine. In the distance the ridges of the Merrick shimmered softly. She felt a flutter of anticipation as she looked for the others.

Walter’s wooden rowing boat, which had been his father’s before him, was raised on blocks on the shingle and as Carson approached she heard her grandfather’s steady clear voice, with its trace of Galloway burr, before she saw him, half hidden by the hull. ‘Now, Pete, the wood below the waterline won’t rot. Why not?’

She looked down and saw Iona squatting by her cousin, her hands pressed on her knees, gazing at him eagerly. Pete stared at his grandfather blankly.

‘Because it’s cut off from the air,’ Walter said, ‘but you mustn’t let water lie in the bilge. If you do it will eventually get underneath the varnish.’ He handed Pete a brush. ‘Right, lad, it’s dry now, so get the final coat on while the sun is shining.’ Just then Carson blocked Walter’s light and he looked up, blinking. ‘Well, my chickadee. How are you this fine Galloway day?’

‘I’m good, Granddad,’ she replied distractedly, her eyes flitting towards her cousin, his mouth pressed shut and his sharp cheeks flushed as he painstakingly swept the brush backwards and forwards with long even strokes.

‘Good lad,’ said Walter, looking thoughtfully at his grandson. ‘Feel the weight of the brush; not too much varnish.’

Carson bridled a little. She knew that voice, the fondness in the words as they rolled around Pete. As she furrowed her

brows she observed her cousin, the bend of the neck, the way he jutted out his chin as he concentrated, and wondered with a pang of jealousy if the traces of her grandfather in her were as evident as they were in Pete.

‘If you’re going to go fishing on Sunday, we’ll need to get a crack on,’ said Walter as he picked up another brush and dipped it into the varnish. ‘Now the Lord says that on the Sabbath you can only fish for brown trout, so I’m going to have to give you some of my best flies. I don’t want you coming back empty-handed.’ He turned to Carson. ‘You’re going too, aren’t you, m’girl?’

Her eyes flicked to Pete as she nodded. ‘I think that’s the plan.’

Walter had dreamed up the idea of a fishing trip and mentioned it in passing some weeks earlier. ‘You’d enjoy that, wouldn’t you, Car?’ he had said in a way that allowed for only one reply.

‘I’m coming, amn’t I, Pete?’ wheedled Iona, ignoring her sister. ‘I can fish.’

‘Waving a toy net around on the beach is *not* fishing,’ Carson snorted.

‘Carson!’ Walter said sharply.

Carson felt the rebuke like a slap and saw the hurt on her sister’s face. ‘I’m sorry, Iona, it’s just that you’ve never fished from a boat,’ Carson said in quiet voice.

‘I’ll take you both,’ said Pete, his eyes meeting Carson’s for a moment before he looked back at his brush. ‘I can handle the boat. I’ve been out with Granddad before, and anyway I often go fishing on the lakes in the Cotswolds.’

Walter pressed his lips together, trying to hold in a smile. ‘Well, it’s a bit different here. The wind can get up before you know it. But if you stay in sight, and if you’re careful, no reason

why not.' He flicked Iona's chin. 'And I've got just the thing for you: Granny Jean's old dapping rod – not that she ever used it, but it's a good one. Shorter than usual and you won't have to cast. We'll put a big juicy fly on it and you can dance it about in the water. You'll have a trout after it in no time.'

Iona gave Carson a hard stare. 'Thank you, Granddad.' Her hands were thrust into the pockets of her denim dungarees, mimicking Walter in his overalls, cementing her alliance. 'I can share it with you, Carson, if you like,' she said sweetly.

'No, Iona,' Walter said firmly. 'There's a couple of junior Hardy rods in the garden shed.'

'That's okay, Granddad,' said Pete, 'I've got a new fibreglass one.'

'You have, have you?' Walter stroked his tidy grey moustache. 'Well, I've got some swanky new flies to use with it. The trout up here are a bit different – they're wild for a start.' He chuckled, and then winked at Carson, and immediately her world seemed sunnier again.

Carson knew that now that she was almost fifteen some of her friends, who congregated conspiratorially in cafés, and smoked and drank in the corners of shaded parks, and lately believed that make-up heavily applied added to their allure, thought it odd that she spent so much time with Walter. They assessed her slyly, with pity even, but were secretly relieved that she was out of the competition on some faraway loch, because Carson had an effortless beauty, luminous skin, long dark eyelashes that needed no help from mascara and unruly auburn hair that she often scraped behind one ear.

She had always cleaved to Walter's quiet solidity, his benign gaze, and never minded that his stories were oft repeated. Sometimes they just sat together on the jetty in old canvas camping chairs and listened and watched: the whoosh of water

when ducks made a landing, the plop of oars when a fisherman rowed past, momentarily pausing to doff his cap to Walter, a swift darting onto a soft wave for a drink.

When she was eight he told her that the night sky over Galloway was very special because it was darker than anywhere else in Europe. They stood outside the cabin, the air so cold and sharp on her face it stung her skin, and he mapped out the coal-black sky for her, holding on to her shoulder, directing her gaze to a shimmering band of light. The Milky Way was the first galaxy he showed her, and then the Andromeda. ‘Come on, Car,’ he whispered, ‘let’s take a run down the loch. I’ll show you my special observatory.’ She had no idea what he meant, but they drove two miles to the old red sandstone house where he had lived long ago and walked a hundred yards onto the moor by the light of the moon, to a great slab of rock. ‘I used to climb out of my bedroom window and drop down onto the woodstore as quietly as a cat and come here. Climb up and I’ll show you.’ They both lay on the rough granite, looking heavenward at the sea of quivering lights, Walter’s tweed cap beneath his granddaughter’s head. ‘It looks like magic, doesn’t it, Car? I was your age when I first lay here, and it feels just the same as when I was a wee boy.’ Carson blinked as the stars started to dance on her eyes. ‘And do you know that sometimes when I can’t sleep I come and lie here for a while.’ He sat up and patted the rock. ‘See, there’s the dent my head has made I’ve been here so often.’

Carson looked around at the spot and frowned. ‘Granddad, that’s not true. The rock’s too hard.’ She thought for a moment. ‘You could have frozen to death in the winter.’

‘Don’t you worry about me. Just look at the stars.’

‘I think the spirals look like the sequins on Granny Jean’s black velvet bag.’

Walter looked at her in surprise. 'Well, well. I didn't know you had that bag.'

'Aunt Fiona gave it to me, but don't worry,' Carson said solemnly, 'I'm keeping it safe.'

Walter could conjure up facts and stories like a magician pulling an endless string of knotted handkerchiefs from his top pocket. The Sunday before the Strattons' arrival, after the removal van had disappeared back to London, Carson and her grandfather spent the afternoon on the moorland above the loch, by Whitespout Lane, near the high streak of water that fell one hundred feet and splashed onto the rocks, sending a fine mist shimmering in the air.

They moved over the soft ground like the search party they were, scanning it for a strange little bog plant, the round-leaved sundew that Walter had described to Elinor and she, immediately excited at the prospect of it, had printed out a picture for Carson. She and Walter traversed the moor for more than an hour, a few feet apart, faces to the floor, before he called out, 'Found the little blighter!' He knelt down gingerly and pulled back the peaty moss to reveal a little ball-like flower with red-tinged leaves surrounding its spiky yellow centre. 'Look, Carson,' he said to her, 'it's caught a spider.'

Carson dropped to her knees and watched, horrified, as a tiny spider, trapped in the sticky residue on the tip of the flower's tendril, tried desperately to free itself. 'Is the flower really going to eat it?' she asked in a plaintive voice.

Walter nodded his head. 'The leaves will close over the spider eventually so that the sundew can digest it. Not much of a meal, I admit.'

'Oh, that's gross!' she said.

'It's not all bad. Sundews love midges, and God knows we don't need so many of them.' He laughed as he cut a tiny circle

of moss around the flower and eased it into a box he had fished out of his pocket.

‘What about ladybirds?’

‘Good point. Life’s not always fair, is it?’ He sighed and put his hand on Carson’s shoulder to hoist himself back up. ‘My, look at that.’ Walter nodded into the distance where a curtain of rain was drawing along Cairnsmore of Carsphairn. ‘We had better be getting back.’

Carson pulled herself up straight and cleared her throat.

There’s Cairnsmore of Fleet,
And there’s Cairnsmore of Dee,
But Cairnsmore of Carsphairn
Is the highest of all three.

‘Good girl,’ Walter said fondly.

‘You used to give us a twenty pence piece out of your waist-coat pocket when we recited that properly.’

‘Well now, it obviously worked, didn’t it?’ he said with a chuckle.