

Prologue



Two decades earlier

Caro pulled her jersey over her knees knowing she should just be sensible and have an early night. She'd said her goodbyes to her friends who were having drinks not far away and she had a cab booked for five in the morning to get her over to the other side of the Greek island where she'd been staying to catch the ferry to the mainland and the airport.

But the beauty of the evening, dark yet full of the sounds of insects and gently lapping waves, was so seductive. The enormous golden moon shone low over the sea like a lantern. A wild rose bush covered an outcrop of rock and pale-pink petals fell from time to time from the tiny pom-pom flowers filling the air with their scent. Somehow she couldn't tear herself away just yet.

‘Do you mind if I join you?’

Caro jumped slightly. She couldn’t really see who was asking but his voice was nice and her friends were fairly close so she felt perfectly safe.

‘Help yourself,’ she said.

They didn’t speak for several minutes. Caro wasn’t really shy but she was aware that the boy who’d chosen to join her was very attractive. Not that she could see him in detail; it was too dark. But he was tall and well made. She sneaked a look at him and saw that he had a strong nose and chin – a good profile.

‘The thing I’m going to miss about the Greek islands, when I move on,’ he said, ‘is the fragrance. The roses – especially here, just now – smell amazing.’

Caro was surprised. She turned to him, struggling to see him in the dark. She really loved aromas too, but her friends seemed to have no sense of smell and couldn’t detect anything unless it came in a bottle in the duty-free section of an airport.

‘Men don’t usually notice fragrance,’ she said. ‘I think they ruin themselves by over-application of Lynx when they’re at school.’

Her companion laughed. ‘I’m Xander and I’m interested in perfume in spite of the Lynx,’ he said. ‘You smell nice,’ he added.

She shifted away a little bit, not quite sure how to take this. She only wore scent on special occasions

because the only one she really liked was what her mother wore and it was terribly expensive. She didn't have much left, but she'd put some on that evening because she hoped she might get more for her birthday. 'I'm Caro.'

Possibly aware he'd said something a bit odd, he went on. 'So where is home for you, Caro?'

'London,' she said. 'You?'

'A tiny corner of Scotland called Glen Liddell.' He sighed. 'But there's lots of world to be explored before I go back home.'

Possibly because they were in the dark and the night air was so hypnotic they couldn't stop talking. Xander told her how he wanted to study perfume and that his father wouldn't hear of it. She told him how she was feeling pressure to take up her university place but wasn't sure it was what she wanted. They talked about their favourite music, books and films. Sometimes they agreed and sometimes they had to argue the case for some of their more unusual choices. But Caro never felt she had to keep quiet about liking something a bit odd; she knew he wouldn't judge her and would just be interested.

Then suddenly they saw car lights coming along the coast road. It was her cab, dawn was breaking and she had to go.

In the cab on the way to the ferry she realised that tears were trickling out of the corners of her

eyes. She'd met a man she felt totally connected with, in every way, and they hadn't even exchanged contact details. How could she have let that happen? And would she regret it for the rest of her life?

Chapter One



'A caravan,' said Caro, looking about her, trying to keep her feelings out of her voice. It wasn't even a nice caravan. It was made of plastic and had a strong old-carpet smell about it.

'Yes, I'm sorry,' said the woman who had shown Caro to her new temporary home. 'There is a cottage but it needs work doing before it's habitable. It's been rented out and has got into a bit of a state.'

The woman, who had introduced herself as Heather, didn't sound quite apologetic enough about this, Caro felt. Heather was late-middle-aged and kindly, her greying hair cut into a neat bob, but she didn't know – couldn't have known – how disappointed Caro was about her accommodation.

At her interview, which had taken place at a London hotel, there had been talk of a typical Highland cottage, which had given Caro ideas of a low, stone building with a tiled roof, or maybe even

some sort of thatch. She was hazy about Scotland and thatch but the image had been lovely and, in her head, had only smelt of peat smoke or possibly pine trees. Mrs Leonie Gordon (call me Lennie) who'd conducted the interview had been nice, Caro had thought, and although quite grand was warm and friendly. A smelly caravan had not been part of the deal.

'I'll leave you to settle in,' said Heather, having given the caravan a cursory inspection from the doorway. 'Then come back to the house for sherry. Murdo always has a drink at about six. With luck all the team will be there and you can meet everyone. Though I don't know if Alec will appear. He's been away. That's partly why the cottage isn't ready. So, see you in half an hour? Is that long enough?'

'I should think so,' said Caro. She was feeling gloomy. She knew it was probably because it had been a long journey and parting from her daughter Posy had been difficult but she really hoped it wasn't because she realised that she'd made a dreadful mistake coming up here. Still, it was only for a month or so. Surely she could survive that?

As she patted the bedding to see if it was damp she wondered if she should take a quick picture of the caravan to send to Posy. She probably wouldn't be able to send it for a little while as she doubted the caravan had a signal (although at least the sheets seemed dry) but it might make her daughter laugh.

Posy only knew that her mother had taken a job looking after an elderly gentleman in Scotland (or keeping him out of mischief, more than anything, Lennie, his daughter, had said) because she'd had a lifelong ambition to answer an advertisement in *The Lady* magazine, and also wanted to do something completely different at the beginning of her daughter's trip to Australia, so she wouldn't feel lonely on the Dutch barge they had lived in together in London.

She wouldn't dream of sharing with her daughter the other reason she'd accepted the job because she didn't really like to acknowledge that one to herself.

While she couldn't summon up any enthusiasm for unpacking, Caro made herself look respectable before setting off for 'the Big Hoose', as she thought of it. She didn't go to the lengths she'd gone to for the interview (skirt, knee-length boots, a blow dry she'd paid for and some extra highlights for her dark blonde hair). Now, she made sure her jeans were clean, her make-up was more or less in the right place and scrunched up her hair, which always reverted to curls if not professionally seen to. She added her favourite cashmere poncho on top of her jumper because she felt good in it and was convinced that Scotland was always freezing. Although it felt like winter, it was the end of April and there were signs of spring shyly appearing among the faded bracken, sheltering against the huge granite boul-

ders. As she planned to tell Posy later, there was still quite a lot of snow on the furthest mountains. She'd moved back a season up here; she'd be glad of the jumpers she'd brought with her.

As she walked down the path she examined the Big Hoose, imagining how she would describe it to Posy. She wasn't sure that Posy, who was twenty, would understand what 'Scottish Baronial' looked like but would relate to 'imagine spooky black birds flying out of the turrets to give you the idea, and then take away the spooky black birds – it's huge, it's grey, it has turrets and it doesn't look homely'.

Inside, Caro was hoping for faded tartan carpets, stags' heads and a huge, smouldering fire. She didn't even mind if the fire billowed out smoke from time to time, she just needed to see a flame. Her permanent home, the Dutch barge she'd inherited from her parents, near Canary Wharf, didn't have any sort of burner that had a visible flame and, to her mind, this was one of the few downsides. She made up for the lack with copious candles.

Now, she wished she'd put on her coat and scarf on top of her double layer of cashmere – the wind could 'clean corn' as her father would have said. She also hoped that she wouldn't have to face too much questioning. She was expecting questions from Murdo, Lennie's father, but she didn't want to be grilled by everyone else as well. There was no shame in saying that she'd been a 'shop assistant'

and her reason for leaving was that 'the shop closed down' but it didn't sound very inspiring. She was perfect for the job in many ways, after all. She could play bridge and chess, up to a point, she was quite a good cook (her scrambled eggs were considered excellent by many and this was one of Murdo's favourites, she'd been told) and she had, according to Lennie at her interview, a pleasant speaking voice. This was an advantage when it came to reading the newspaper to Murdo, who had very little sight when it came to small print. Apparently it was the letters to the paper that were his favourite, so he could splutter and exclaim or nod and grunt accordingly. She'd passed the first test, and, now she had Lennie's approval, she had to meet the man whose opinion really counted. She banged hard on the door with the stag's head knocker.

Heather opened the door and let Caro into a hall that was satisfyingly Scottish. It was large and gave the impression that it been like this for generations. There were the hoped-for stags' heads on the walls, no doubt stalked by long-dead ancestors, and the faded tartan carpet had rips in it repaired with gaffer tape. Pervading everything was the smell of peat smoke to add the final Caledonian flourish. Caro gave a little sigh of happiness. This was what she'd travelled over four hundred miles north for.

The furniture was a mixture of periods but none of it was new. A leather hall chair was spewing

horsehair from where the gaffer tape – obviously used to mend everything – had peeled off. Caro would have liked a few moments to examine her surroundings, but Heather had things to do.

‘Now,’ she said briskly. ‘Himself is in the drawing room. If you’d like to go through and introduce yourself, I’ll go and get the drinks.’

As she was ‘staff’ and not a regular guest, Caro could only comply with this suggestion although it was the last thing she wanted to do. She wasn’t particularly shy but the thought of meeting her new employer without any sort of buffer was daunting. However, she obviously couldn’t hover in the hall even though she was dying to inspect the ancient framed maps and family portraits. She took a breath and set forth.

The first thing that struck her when she reached the drawing room was the large bay window that had a wonderful view over the loch. The hills and mountains beyond were truly majestic and Caro longed to gaze at them, too. But she was not here for the scenery and standing by the fire, wearing tweed from head to foot, was a formidable old gentleman.

Caro felt a flash of recognition and she realised that he had a look of her father. Piercing blue eyes under bushy, sandy eyebrows, a wind-burnt complexion and a resolute mouth. The fact that he could hardly see didn’t seem to affect his penetrating gaze.

Caro realised she had one chance to get this right. Show fear now and he'd bully her into the ground. Lennie had warned her of this at the interview and her own knowledge of old-fashioned gentlemen, used to getting their own way, confirmed it.

'Hello!' she said, walking towards him. 'I'm Caro Fitzwarren.' She took his hand and shook it.

He squeezed it in return. 'So you're m'minder, eh?'

Already half prepared to be evicted from the house and sent back to London on the first train, Caro made a decision. 'Your minder? Oh God! I thought I was here to play a little gentle rummy and lean over your shoulder while you played patience. And possibly read you the less offensive letters to *The Times*. I didn't know you needed a minder!'

There was an agonisingly long pause and then he nodded. The bright eyes produced a twinkle and they both relaxed a little. 'I think you might do,' he said. 'Murdo McLean. Everyone calls me Murdo.'

Just then a little dog of varying breeds ran into the room and up to Murdo.

'This is my dog, George,' said Murdo. 'Disobedient little brute but small enough not to do too much damage.'

George ran to Caro and sniffed her. Then he raised his leg and relieved himself on her jeans.

‘Oh my God!’ she said before she could stop herself.

‘He hasn’t done it again, has he?’ said Murdo, and then roared, ‘Heather! Bastard dog! Pissed on a visitor! He should have been put down. I knew he was a bad ‘un.’

Caro could tell from this diatribe that Murdo was devoted to George and hoped she too might come to forgive the little dog in time.

Heather came running in. She had a spray bottle and a cloth in her hand. ‘Trouble is,’ she said, handing the bottle and the cloth to Caro, ‘he doesn’t do it for months so you forget he might.’

‘It means he likes you,’ said Murdo gruffly, with no hint of embarrassment.

Caro sprayed and rubbed, knowing only a proper wash would do the job.

‘Actually, would you mind if I went back and changed? It won’t take a second,’ she said.

Heather nodded. ‘Bring your jeans back with you and I’ll put them in the machine.’

When Caro came back, slightly out of breath, the drawing room seemed full of people. Fortunately, or maybe deliberately, Heather was on hand again to meet her.

‘I am so sorry about the dog!’ she said, taking the jeans. ‘Murdo dotes on him, of course, and it seems to have made George a bit territorial. But he’s a grand little dog really.’

'I realised Murdo loved George and it's a case of "Love me, love my dog" with him. I'm sure we'll become friends. Eventually,' said Caro.

Heather sighed, as if with relief. 'It's not everyone who could forgive a dog for lifting its leg on them.'

Caro shrugged. 'It's either that, or go home,' she said bluntly.

Heather acknowledged the truth of this with a nod. 'Now let's get you to meet the family.'

'Are they all family?' said Caro, suddenly a bit overwhelmed by the number of people that seemed to be in the drawing room.

'Not all. One or two people work on the estate in some way or other. Now let me take you around and introduce you.'

Caro noticed a girl – mid-teens probably – with a long rose-gold plait over one shoulder. She was strikingly beautiful and looked quintessentially Scottish, Caro decided.

'That's Rowan, Murdo's granddaughter,' said Heather. 'I worry that it's a bit lonely for her up here. Beauty alone isn't enough when you're seventeen.'

Caro nodded. She wouldn't have thought Rowan was older than about fifteen. 'Are her parents here? I'm just trying to work out who everyone is and how they fit in.'

'Skye and Alec will be here later, I think. Skye's a bit ...' Heather paused, obviously thinking of how

to describe her without being disloyal to the family.
'Artistic.'

Caro laughed. 'I used to work in an artists' supplies shop. Some of our customers were away with the fairies.'

Heather nodded. 'We'd call her "fey" round here. Alec is more reserved so don't take offence if he doesn't seem friendly. He is very busy and doesn't socialise much. He lives in a but and ben up the glen a bit.'

'So he's Murdo's son?'

'That's right. I'll introduce you to Rab. He runs the smokery. And then there's Ewan, he's my husband, and he does everything on the estate no one else does and a lot besides. Now, what would you like to drink? There's whisky or sherry?'

Caro hesitated. Part of her yearned for something warming and relaxing but she felt she should hold back until she'd talked to Murdo for a bit.

'I'd better go and talk to Murdo first,' she said. 'I didn't get a chance earlier.'

Heather shook her head. 'That wee dog! But Murdo will expect you to be sociable. Have a dram. I'll bring it over.'

As Caro went across to Murdo she realised how grateful she was to Heather. Although obviously dedicated to the family, she would steer her through if things became rocky.

'Murdo? It's Caro.'

The old man turned towards Caro. 'I'm not blind, you know, just a bit less sharp-eyed than I used to be. Doesn't mean I'm stupid, either.'

'Certainly not but we didn't get a chance to talk earlier.' She waited for him to respond. 'So what's the routine? What time would you like me to turn up in the morning?'

'About nine. I have my breakfast and then I like to read the paper. You can help with that. Then we might go for a drive around the estate – check on things, you know. Can you drive a Land Rover?'

'I've never tried but I'm sure I can.'

'This one's a bit of an antique but, like me, it's got plenty of life in it. Takes all the hills, can drive over a stream and up the other side without a bit of bother.'

When Caro had been asked if she could drive she'd got the impression it would be trips to the shops or the doctor's surgery, not serious off-roading. Still, she'd do her best. And if she needed to ask Ewan or someone to give her a crash course in Land-Rover-wrangling, she would.

'Have you met m'son yet?'

'No, your daughter interviewed me, in London.'

'Lennie? She's gone to be with her daughter, in Canada. She's having a baby.'

'She told me. It'll be lovely for her daughter to have her mother with her.' Caro paused. 'Lennie – she did ask me to call her that – explained that you

just needed a bit of a hand about the place and you weren't to be nannied.'

Murdo gave a bark that was apparently laughter. 'Wish she knew how to take her own advice! Bossy woman, my daughter.' He paused. 'Though better than my son. He doesn't care a jot about the estate.'

While he was talking, Caro wondered why Murdo didn't have a Scottish accent – he couldn't have sounded more English. It was probably a class thing.

'I've only been here five minutes but it does seem a very beautiful area. I can't wait to explore a bit.'

'I'll show you around,' he said confidently. When she didn't respond instantly he went on, 'M'sight's not as bad as people make out. I know every stick and stone of this land. Was born here, and I'll die here.'

'Amazing,' Caro said, not sure what the right response was.

Then, to her relief, the man who ran the smokery, Rab, came up. 'Good evening, Murdo. How do you do – Caro, is it?'

'Short for Caroline,' she explained.

Rab nodded. 'I hope you'll come and take a look at the smokery while you're here. It's coming along nicely.'

He had a lovely soft Scottish accent, Caro noticed, and she found herself smiling in response. 'I'd love to. Do you do salmon? Or kippers? Or what?'

‘Mostly salmon and kippers but we want to expand.’

Murdo snorted. ‘Waste of time. It’s not making money.’

Caro saw Rab give Murdo a look that was part resentment and part irritation. ‘It just needs a bit of investment.’ Would he have looked at his boss like that if Murdo had been able to see? Caro wondered.

‘This is a sporting estate,’ declared Murdo. ‘We don’t need fancy fal-lals. Making smoked salmon – ridiculous! We’re not goddamn shopkeepers!’

Rab gave Caro an embarrassed smile. ‘You see we don’t agree on this.’

‘Nothing wrong with being a shopkeeper,’ said Caro, realising too late which one of these men she needed to keep on the right side of. ‘I was one myself until recently.’

‘Really?’ said Murdo crossly. ‘Had I known—’

‘I still have all the qualifications mentioned in the advertisement,’ said Caro, quiet but firm. ‘So my recent employment isn’t really relevant.’

As she heard the words coming out of her mouth she remembered hoping no one would ask her about what she’d done before and here she was, talking about it for the second time on her first evening. She realised it was because she felt Rab needed supporting. Murdo could indeed be rather a bully, she decided. Still, she only had to put up with him for a month or two. And maybe she

would win him round. She didn't want to have to tell Posy she'd failed, and had been mad to come up here just so she could fulfil a very childish ambition.

She was just trying to think of something faintly placatory to say to Murdo when there was a commotion at the door. A dog streaked into the room, found George (who was under the table) and started a fight.

Then a man and a woman appeared: the man in pursuit of the dog, and the woman smiling at everybody dreamily as if there was no altercation.

Rowan got up and went over to the woman, who was obviously her mother. Seeing them together emphasised how alike they were – and how beautiful. The girl didn't take any notice of the dog fight either.

The man reached in under the table and dragged out the larger, younger dog, who appeared to be some sort of spaniel. 'You tell him, George!' he said. 'Skye, you must learn to control your dog.'

'He's Rowan's dog, sweetie,' said the woman. 'She must learn to take responsibility for her things.'

Rowan shot her mother a resigned look and the spaniel wriggled his way free from the man.

Seeing there was going to be more noise (although Caro realised now it wasn't actual fighting, more an old dog telling off a young one) she called to the spaniel, 'Here, boy!'

The dog – and she realised it was hardly more than a puppy – came to Caro, possibly hoping her beckoning hand had something edible in it. She caught its collar and stroked its neck. It was, she decided, adorable.

The man came over. ‘I’m so sorry. He’s entirely untrained.’

Caro looked up at him. She’d recognised him the moment he’d entered the room but to her relief he didn’t seem to recognise her. Of course it had been nearly pitch dark when they’d met and anyway twenty years would have changed her a lot. ‘It’s fine. He’s lovely and he hasn’t peed on me.’

Alec laughed and Caro’s heart gave a lurch. ‘Oh God, did George do that? How embarrassing! My father is no better at dog-training than Rowan is. I’m Alec, by the way.’ He turned to his daughter. ‘Rowan? Come and meet – Caro, is it? Is that what Heather told me?’

‘That’s right,’ said Caro, wondering why Alec would introduce his daughter before his wife.

Rowan came over. ‘Hello,’ she said quietly, with the same soft accent that Rab had.

‘Is this your dog?’ asked Caro, smiling encouragingly.

Rowan shrugged. ‘Mum gave him to me. He’s called Galahad.’

‘Gally for short,’ said Alec.

Rowan's mother, Skye, swayed up to join them. 'You must be Caro, come to help with my father-in-law. I gather you're from London. Please don't bring the influence of the city to bear on my daughter.' She smiled winsomely. 'She's led a deliberately sheltered life. I assume I can trust you not to fill my daughter's ears with anything unsuitable?'

Caro thought that Skye's beauty would have been greater had her smile been sincere. She ignored the woman's question and turned back to the girl. 'Rowan, you have really lovely hair.'

Rowan started to smile in response but her mother broke in. 'We don't want to encourage Rowan to think about superficial things like physical beauty. Rowan is very sensitive – vulnerable to the wrong influences. It's why we've homeschooled her: we wanted to set her on the right course. We hope we can trust her to follow it now.'

'Bloody ridiculous!' said Murdo, who somehow managed to overhear this bit of conversation. 'She's seventeen! She's not a child any more. She should go away to finish her schooling.'

'She's far too young to leave home!'

'Nonsense!' said Murdo. 'I went to prep school when I was seven – never did me any harm!'

This was obviously a very well-worn argument. 'If you overlook your complete lack of sensitivity and insight,' said Skye, but so quietly that Caro,

who was standing only a couple of feet away, could only just hear it.

‘He’s a dreadful old man,’ Skye whispered. ‘Terribly domineering. You’ll have to be careful he doesn’t bully you.’

But although this was exactly what Caro had been thinking earlier, now she felt protective of him. ‘I’m sure I’ll cope.’

She felt she was well up for Murdo – he was what she was expecting after all. But what about the rest of the family? They were another prospect all together.

Chapter Two



Caro had very little energy left for emailing when she got in, but she knew Posy would be anxious to hear how her mother was getting on in Scotland. And once she got started, Caro found it cathartic to write down some of her first impressions.

Caro realised she'd have to be careful how she talked about Rab from the smokery, who had kindly escorted her back up the hill to her little plastic home. Posy would want to know if she 'liked' him because she was so keen for her mother to find a partner. Caro did like Rab but not in the way Posy meant it and, anyway, he probably had a wife and family.

She was free to let rip about the caravan not being as expected with a turf fire and stone walls, but being made of plastic and having an odd smell. And she put in how her new boss's dog had peed on her leg because it would make Posy laugh. She rounded

the email off with a quick and pithy description of Murdo and then fell into bed. She almost felt obliged to add a PS – that someone had put a hot-water bottle in the bed and that was lovely. It must have been Heather, thought Caro as she cuddled into it. How extremely kind.

Rab had suggested it would be a good idea for her to get used to the Land Rover before she drove Murdo round the estate in it and they'd arranged to meet up so she could have a practice with him. This was after she'd admitted she didn't do a lot of driving as she lived in London, and when she did it was in an ordinary car on ordinary roads.

'He'll want to take you everywhere,' Rab had said, 'and some of the tracks are in very bad repair. He'll swear at you if you crash the gears or slip back going up a steep bank.'

However, she had slept well and felt excited as she left the caravan, wearing pretty much all of her clothes, to find Rab and the Land Rover.

'Well, that was fun!' she said after half an hour of bouncing around the property with Rab roaring instructions – roaring not because he was bad-tempered but so he could be heard over the sound of the engine.

'Now you'd better go in for your porridge,' Rab said, laughing. 'You've done really well.'

‘For a girl?’ she said, teasing him.

He shook his head. ‘For someone who hasn’t driven a cranky old Defender before.’

Caro stopped. ‘I thought it was a Land Rover?’

‘It is! Don’t worry. Now I’m away off to the smokery.’

‘You’re not coming in for breakfast then?’

He shook his head. ‘No. I was invited to dinner as part of your welcome. I don’t live in the big house. I had breakfast hours ago. I may see you at lunchtime though.’

Caro went in through the back door, as directed by Rab. She liked him, he’d be a good friend, but there was no chemistry there. He was too beardy for her. And besides, although she despised herself for being so foolish, Caro’s interest in men was only pointing in one direction at the moment. She was harking back to a man she’d met for one night, over twenty years ago. The fact that Alec was married didn’t stop her feeling attracted, but it would stop her letting him guess her feelings, even if her pride alone wasn’t enough. But she was realistic and very confident that when she got to know him better she would stop fancying him. Familiarity breeding contempt, and all that. It had always worked for her in the past.

Murdo didn’t like small talk at breakfast, she had been told. He did, however, like to read the paper.

As he could no longer read it for himself, it meant Caro had to.

'Morning, Murdo!' she said breezily as she came in.

George, asleep under his master's chair, awoke and thumped his stubby tail in welcome. An improvement on his behaviour yesterday, thought Caro.

'Is it morning? Could be the middle of the night for all I can tell. I'm nearly blind, you know,' said Murdo.

Caro's sigh of frustration was almost silent. 'I promise I won't say another word if it's going to make you so grumpy,' she said.

'Who are you to tell me I'm grumpy?' demanded Murdo.

'I'm the woman hired by your daughter, at vast expense, to keep you amused while she is away, if you really have forgotten.'

'Whisht with your nonsense!' said Heather, putting a large plate of kippers in front of Murdo. 'And let the poor woman have a bite to eat before you jump down her throat.'

The way Heather seemed to ignore Murdo's brusqueness reinforced Caro's opinion that he shouldn't be pandered to. 'Oh, don't worry,' said Caro. 'I'm used to grumpy old men.'

'What?' Murdo was outraged.

'Grumpy old men who can be completely charming if they have a mind to.' She paused. 'I rather like them.'

Caro had confirmed it had been Heather who'd put the hot-water bottle in her bed. Heather had brushed it off as not being a big thing to do, but had obviously liked Caro being so appreciative. Caro knew that Heather would have had to run up the hill to the caravan while the house was full of people, most of them wanting food.

While Caro waited for her porridge, she looked at Murdo's kippers dubiously.

She said, 'Will you manage the kippers or would you like me to help you take out the bones?'

'They're fillets, so I just eat them,' said Murdo. 'You can pour the coffee when it comes. I'm not completely helpless.'

Caro started on her porridge, wondering why there were only two places set at the big round table. Last night there'd been a lot of family for dinner.

'Will Alec and Skye and Rowan be joining us for breakfast?' she asked.

'Certainly not. They have their own house. Not sure who lives where now though.' He carried a forkful of kipper successfully to his mouth, only losing a bit of it on the way. 'God knows where the woman lives,' he went on. 'She left m'son, you know, but she still lives locally. I suppose it's handy for young Rowan. Plenty of houses on the estate.' He paused while he loaded up another forkful of kipper. 'Happy with your accommodation, are you?'

Caro suddenly *was* happy with her accommodation. Alec and Skye weren't married any more. That made her very happy indeed. The plastic caravan no longer seemed important. 'It's fine, thank you.' She spooned up her last bit of porridge. 'Tell me when you'd like me to start reading the paper.'

'Just having porridge, are you? Find I'm starving at ten o'clock if I have that.'

'I'll maybe have some toast as well then.' She wanted to cut down on carbs but the news that Alec was single meant she didn't care for a moment. She shook her head to clear it. 'So? Home news? Foreign news? What do you like?'

'Deaths column. I want to know who's dropped off the perch since yesterday.'

'I get that,' said Caro, finding the page. 'It means you've won.'

After that they went on to world events and Caro was given Murdo's opinion of the current government (although Caro realised it wouldn't have mattered who was in power, Murdo's opinion would still have been low). After the obituaries, Caro was free to go.

'Meet you by the vehicle at ten,' Murdo told her. 'You can drive me round the estate. I'll point out the landmarks and the best views to you.'

The sky had cleared while they'd been at breakfast and it was a beautiful day by the time Caro met Murdo by the Land Rover.

She found she really enjoyed driving the big, primitive vehicle – it made her feel a bit like the Queen in the various films there'd been about her, driving over her estate like a pro. Murdo was good company, in spite of his outlandish and outdated opinions. Whether he could see or not, he told her to stop at all the right places, to see the vistas that could be spotted between the trees, showing the loch and the snow-capped mountains in the distance.

'It is a really beautiful estate,' she said to him when they had stopped at a particularly beautiful spot.

He grunted. 'Been in my family for over four hundred years. It's in my blood.'

'I understand why. It must be very precious to you.'

'Like my heart and lungs are precious to me,' said Murdo. 'Just a shame it's not precious to the next generation.' He harrumphed – a sound, Caro had discovered, that could mean various things. It quite often meant 'I want to change the subject'. Now it clearly also meant he was a bit upset.

'Oh, look!' said Caro delightedly, seeing a bright ginger creature leaping through the trees and stopping at the tree nearest to them. 'A red squirrel! In that tree! I've never seen one before. It's so beautiful!'

'For one, I can't look, I'm practically blind,' said Murdo, who obviously liked to rub it in, 'and for a

second, we only have reds up here, so we just call them squirrels.'

Feeling foolish and a bit irritated by him spoiling the mood for her, Caro started up the Land Rover and carried on down the track.

'Stop here!' Murdo ordered a few moments later. 'Down there we can see the cottage you're using, right?'

Caro looked and saw the sort of cottage she'd dreamt of staying in. Grey stone, slate roof, painted woodwork. 'Oh yes! I hadn't realised we were so near home.'

'I took you round in a loop,' said Murdo, pleased with himself.

'So you have. I can see the main house now.' She made a decision. 'Actually, Murdo? Would you mind if I popped down to my cottage? I just want to get an extra cardigan.'

'Well, don't be long.'

She ran, determined to steal a few moments inspecting her would-be home. Why couldn't she stay in it? Heather had mentioned building work but there was no sign of scaffolding or ladders or anything like that. She walked all round it. There was a little garden at the back, mostly consisting of moss-covered boulders and low walls. Lichen hung from an old washing line as well as from the trees. It gave the impression of a garden under an enchantment, waiting for the spell to be broken so it would

grow again. Caro realised it was probably just winter holding it back. Even at the end of April, spring was hardly apparent here – so late compared to the south of England.

Knowing her time was limited, she peered in through the window, blocking out the light with her hands. In the sitting room all she could see was some furniture.

She walked quickly round to the kitchen and peered in another window. No sign of any building or plumbing work, but where she'd have expected to see a dresser were shelves, and on the shelves were rows of small amber bottles that reminded Caro of a school laboratory. She resolved to come back and see what she could find out. Yes, it was being nosy, but she felt she had a right to know why she was deprived of this Highland gem.

'Did you find your cardigan?' asked Murdo, as Caro arrived back in the driving seat, panting hard from her uphill dash.

'What? Oh, yes thank you.'

'It's just you seem not to have it with you.'

He was blind! How could he see that? 'No! Well, I washed it last night and it wasn't quite dry.'

'What sort of a damn fool thing is that to do?' said Murdo. 'Washing jumpers at night?'

'I spilt something on it on the journey up here,' said Caro crossly, irrationally annoyed at having her

actions questioned even though she hadn't actually performed them.

'Give it to Heather to deal with. She's good at those things.'

'I'm sure Heather has more than enough to do without adding my washing to the list,' she replied.

'Don't get snappy with me, missy!'

'Sorry,' said Caro automatically although she was aware she mustn't make a habit of apologising to Murdo. He wouldn't respect her if she did. 'Oh, look, there's Alec. Is he waiting for us? Or should I take the Land Rover round the back?'

'Let's see what he wants. Good-for-nothing scoundrel.'

As she pulled up in front of the big house, Caro noted there was more regret than censure in his tone.

Alec came up to the driver's side and Caro wound down the window.

'Good morning,' he said. 'Did you have a nice drive?'

'Lovely!' said Caro. 'It's so beautiful here. Murdo told me all the best places to stop to admire the view and I saw a red squirrel – squirrel I mean.'

Alec frowned a little. 'Sorry?'

'Murdo told me off for calling them red squirrels when it's the only kind you have here,' Caro explained. She found being near him a bit awkward.