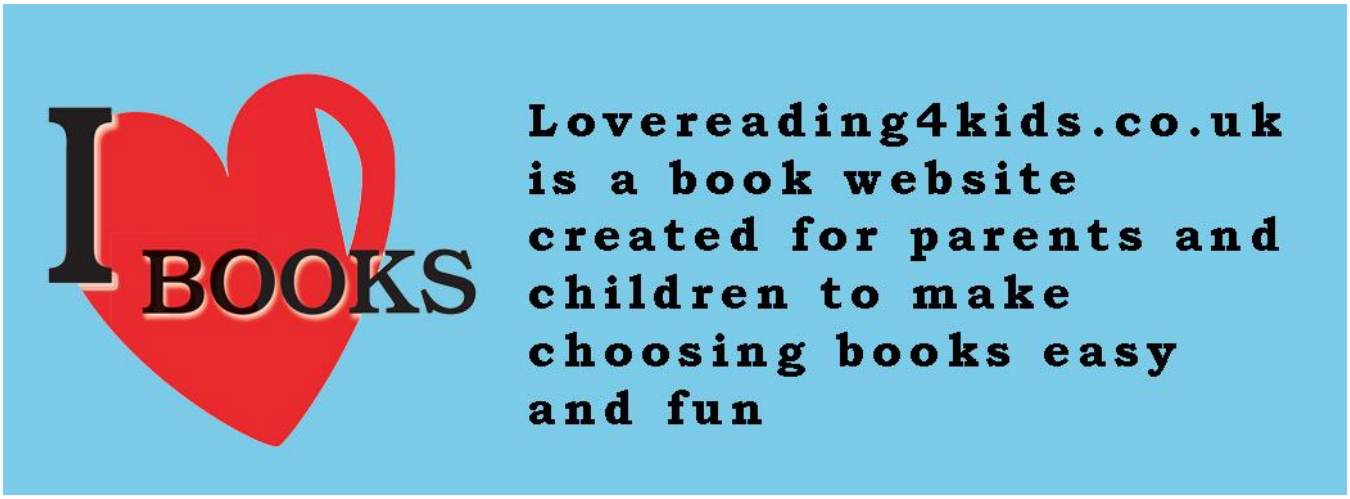


Opening extract from

The Pearl Thief

Written by

Elizabeth Wein

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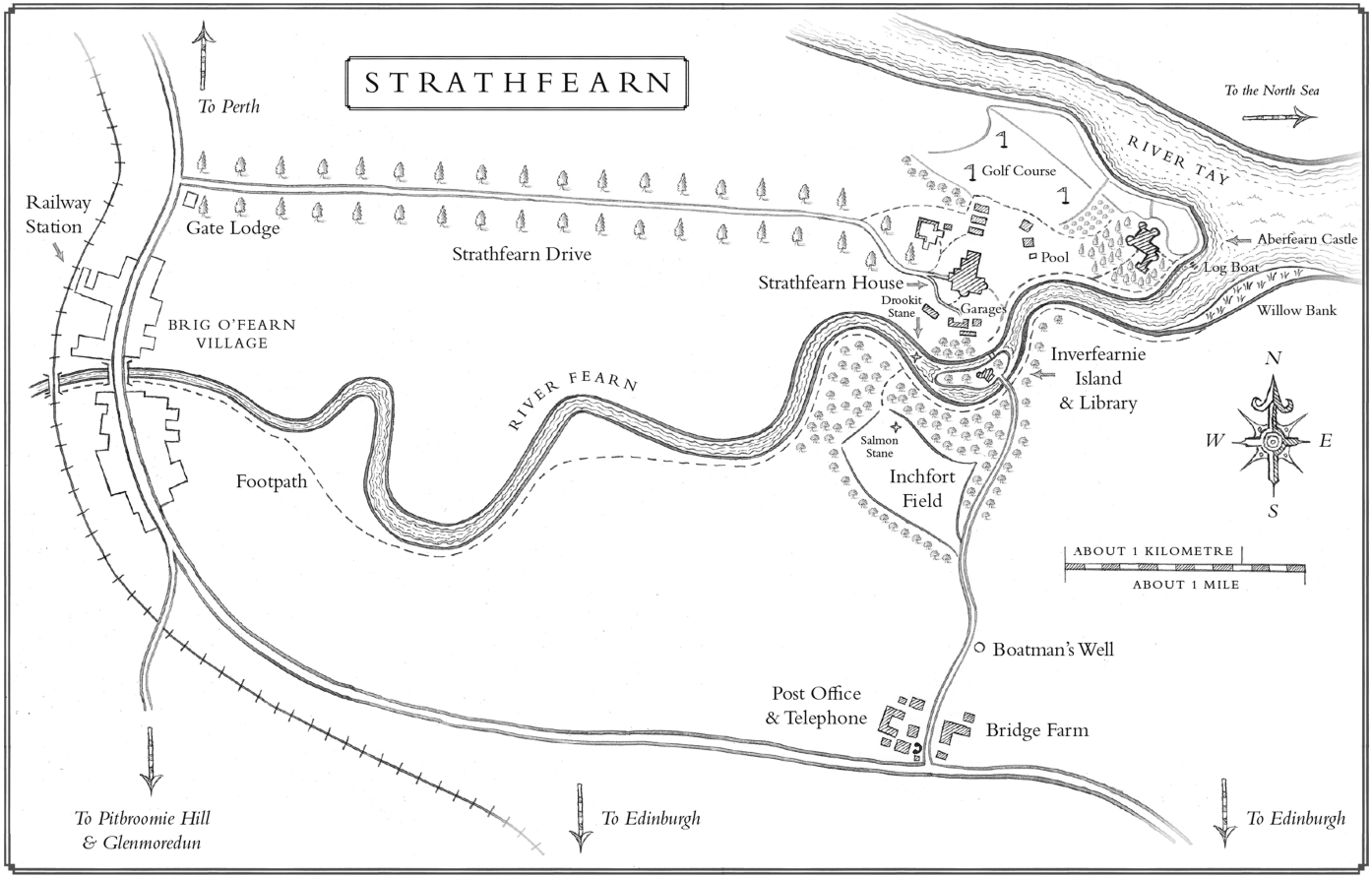
O, my love's like a red, red rose,
that's newly sprung in June;
O, my love's like the melody
that's sweetly play'd in tune.

As fair art thou, my bonnie lass,
so deep in love am I,
and I will love thee still, my dear,
till a' the seas gang dry.

Till a' the seas gang dry, my dear,
and the rocks melt wi' the sun:
I will love thee still, my dear,
while the sands o' life shall run.

And fare thee well, my only love!
And fare thee well awhile!
And I will come again, my love,
tho' it were ten thousand mile.

Robert Burns, 'A Red, Red Rose'


STRATHFEARN
To Perth
To the North Sea
RIVER TAY
Golf Course
Railway Station
Gate Lodge
Strathfearn Drive
Pool
Aberfearn Castle
Log Boat
Strathfearn House
Drookit Stane
Garages
Willow Bank
BRIG O'FEARN VILLAGE
RIVER FEARN
Inverfearnie Island & Library
N
W
E
S
Salmon Stane
Footpath
Inchfort Field
ABOUT 1 KILOMETRE
ABOUT 1 MILE
Boatman's Well
Post Office & Telephone
Bridge Farm
To Pitbroomie Hill & Glenmoredun
To Edinburgh
To Edinburgh

1

AN ASSORTMENT OF THINGS GONE MISSING

'You're a brave lassie.'

That's what my grandfather told me as he gave me his shotgun.

'Stand fast and guard me,' he instructed. 'If this fellow tries to fight, you give him another dose.'

Grandad turned back to the moaning man he'd just wounded. The villain was lying half-sunk in the mud on the edge of the riverbank, clutching his leg where a cartridge-ful of lead pellets had emptied into his thigh. It was a late summer evening, my last with Grandad before I went off to boarding school for the first time, and we'd not expected to shoot anything bigger than a rabbit. But here I was aiming a shotgun at a living man while Grandad waded into the burn, which is what we called the River Fearn where it flowed through his estate, so he could tie the evildoer's hands behind his back with the strap of his shotgun.

'Rape a burn, would you!' Grandad railed at him while he worked. 'I've never seen the like! You've destroyed that

shell bed completely. Two hundred river mussels round about, piled there like a midden heap! And you've not found a single pearl, have you? Because you don't know a pearl mussel from your own backside! You're like a bank robber that's never cracked a safe or seen a banknote!'

It was true – the man had torn through dozens of river mussels, methodically splitting the shells open one by one in the hope of finding a rare and beautiful Scottish river pearl. The flat rock at the edge of the riverbank was littered with the broken and dying remains.

Grandad's shotgun was almost too heavy for me to hold steady. I kept it jammed against my shoulder with increasingly aching arms. I swear by my glorious ancestors, that man was twice Grandad's size. Of course Grandad was not a very big man – none of us Murrays is very big. And he was in his seventies, even though he wasn't yet ill. The villain had a pistol – he'd dropped it when he'd been hurt, but it wasn't out of reach. Without me there to guard Grandad as he bound the other man, they might have ended up in a duel. *Brave!* I felt like William Wallace, Guardian of Scotland.

The wounded man was both pathetic and vengeful. 'I'll see you in Sheriff Court,' he told my grandfather, whining and groaning. 'I'm not after salmon and there's no law against pearl fishing, but it's illegal to shoot a man.'

Grandad wasn't scared. 'This is a private river.'

'Those tinker folk take pearls here all the time. They come in their tents and bide a week like gypsies, and go away with their pockets full!'

'No tinker I know would ever rape a burn like this! And they've the decency to ask permission on my private land! There's laws and laws. Respect for a river and its creatures goes unwritten. And the written law says that I can haul you in for poaching on my beat, whether it's salmon or pearls or anything else.'

'I didn't – I wasnae –'

'Whisht. Never mind what you were doing in the water: you pointed your own gun at my wee granddaughter.' Grandad now confiscated the pistol that was lying in the mud, and tucked it into his willow-weave fisherman's creel. 'That's excuse enough for me. I'm the Earl of Strathfearn. Whose word will the law take, laddie, yours or mine?'

Grandad owned all of Strathfearn then, and the salmon and trout fishing rights that went with it. It was a perfect little Scottish estate, with a ruined castle and a baronial manor, nestled in woodland just where the River Fearn meets the River Tay. It's true it's not illegal for anyone to fish for pearls there, but it's still private land. You can't just wade in and destroy someone else's river. I remember how shocking Grandad's accusation sounded: *Rape a burn, would you!*

Was that only three years ago? It feels like Grandad was ill for twice that long. And now he's been dead for months. And the estate was sold and changed hands even while my poor grandmother was still living in it. Grandad was so *alive* then. We'd worked together.

'Steady, lass,' he'd said, seeing my arms trembling. I held on while Grandad dragged the unfortunate mussel-bed destroyer to his feet and helped him out of the burn and on to the riverbank, trailing forget-me-nots and muck and blood. I flinched out of his way in distaste.

He'd aimed a pistol at me earlier. I'd been ahead of Grandad on the river path and the strange man had snarled at me, '*One step closer and you're asking for trouble.*' I'd hesitated, not wanting to turn my back on his gun. But Grandad had taken the law into his own hands and fired first.

Now, as the bound, bleeding prisoner struggled past me so he could pull himself over to the flat rock and rest amid the broken mussel shells, our eyes met for a moment in mutual hatred. I wondered if he really would have shot at me.

'Now see here,' Grandad lectured him, getting out his hip flask and allowing the wounded man to take a taste of the Water of Life. 'See the chimneys rising above the birches at the river's bend? That's the County Council's old library on Inverfearnie Island, and there's a telephone there. You

and I are going to wait here while the lassie goes to ring the police.' He turned to me. 'Julie, tell them to send the Water Bailiff out here. He's the one to deal with a poacher. And then I want you to stay there with the librarian until I come and fetch you. Her name is Mary Kinnaird.'

I gave an internal sigh of relief – not a visible one, because being called 'brave' by my grandad was the highest praise I'd ever aspired to, but relief nevertheless. Ringing the police from the Inverfearnie Library was a mission I felt much more capable of completing than shooting a trespasser. I gave Grandad back his shotgun ceremoniously. Then I sprinted for the library, stung by nettles on the river path and streaking my shins with mud. I skidded over the mossy stones on the humpbacked bridge that connects Inverfearnie Island to the east bank of the Fearn, and came to a breathless halt before the stout oak door of the seventeenth-century library building, churning up the gravel of the drive with my canvas shoes as if I were the messenger at the Battle of Marathon.

It was past six and the library was closed. I knew that Mary Kinnaird, the new librarian and custodian who lived there all alone, had only just finished university, but I'd never met her, and it certainly never occurred to me that she wouldn't be able to hear the bell. When nobody came, not even after I gave a series of pounding kicks to the door, I decided the situation was desperate enough to warrant

breaking in and climbing through a window. They were casement windows that opened outward – if I broke a pane near a latch it would be easy to get in. I snatched up a handful of stones from the gravel drive and hurled them hard at one of the leaded windowpanes nearest the ground. The glass smashed explosively, and I could hear the rocks hitting the floor inside like hailstones.

That brought the young librarian running with a shotgun of her own. She threw open the door.

She was bold as a crow. I stared at her openly, not because of the flat, skewed features of her face, but because she was aiming at my head. The library window I'd smashed was public property.

Nothing for it but to plunge in. 'Miss Kinnaird?' I panted, out of breath after my marathon. 'My grandad has caught a poacher and I – I need to use your telephone – to ring the police.'

Her smooth, broad brow crinkled into the tiniest of irritated frowns. She'd sensed the importance of what I'd said, but she hadn't heard all of it. Now she lowered her gun and I could see that around her neck hung two items essential to her work: a gold mechanical pencil on a slender rope of braided silk, and a peculiar curled brass horn, about the size of a fist, on a thick gold chain. She'd lowered the gun so she could hold the beautiful horn to her ear.

'Your grandad needs help?' she said tartly. 'Speak up, please.'

'STRATHFEARN HAS CAUGHT A THIEF AND I NEED TO USE YOUR TELEPHONE,' I bellowed into the ear trumpet.

The poor astonished young woman gasped. 'Oh! Strathfearn is your grandfather?'

'Aye, Sandy Murray, Earl of Strathfearn,' I said with pride.

'Well, you'd better come in,' she told me briskly. 'I'll ring the police for you.'

I wondered how she managed the telephone if she couldn't hear, but I didn't dare to ask.

'Grandad said to send Sergeant Angus Henderson,' I said. 'He's the Water Bailiff for the Strathfearn Estate. He polices the riverbank.'

'Oh, aye, I know Angus Henderson.'

She shepherded me past the wood and glass display cases on the ground floor and into her study. But I poked my head around the door to watch her sitting at the telephone in its dark little nook of a cupboard under the winding stairs. I listened as she asked the switchboard operator to put her through to the police station in the village at Brig O'Fearn. There was a sort of Bakelite ear trumpet attached to the telephone receiver. So that answered my question.

I went and sat down in the big red leather reading chair in Mary Kinnaird's study, feeling rather stunned and exhausted, and after a few minutes she came in with a tray of tea and shortbread.

'I expect Grandad will pay for your window,' I told her straight away. I assumed his wealth was limitless, three years ago. I hoped he wouldn't be angry, and I wondered how he was getting on, waiting alone with the vicious and miserable prisoner. 'I'm very sorry I had to break the glass.'

'And I am very sorry I pointed my gun at you.' Mary knelt on the floor beside me, there being no other chair but the one behind her desk.

She offered the shortbread. I found I was ravenous.

'Oh, I knew you wouldn't hurt me,' I told her. 'You are too bonny.'

'You wee sook!' she scolded. 'Bonny?'

'Not beautiful,' I told her truthfully. 'Your face is kind. You're sort of fluttery and quiet, like a pigeon.'

She threw her head back and laughed.

'*Prrrrrt*,' she said in pigeon-talk, and this made me laugh too. Suddenly I liked her very much.

'What's your name?' she asked me.

'Lady Julia Lindsay MacKenzie Wallace Beaufort-Stuart,' I reeled off glibly.

'Oh my, that is quite a name. Must I call you Lady Julia?'

'Grandad calls me Julie.'

'I will compromise with Julia. Beaufort and Stuart are both the names of Scottish queens; I can't quite lower myself to Julie.' She smiled serenely. 'Not Murray? Isn't that your grandfather's name?'

'Some of my brothers have Murray as a family name.'

'You know the Murrays were in favour with Mary Stuart. There's a bracelet on display in the library that belonged to her when she was a child. She gave it to your grandfather's people because she was their patron, four hundred years ago.'

'Scottish river pearls – I know! Grandad showed me when I was little. They're the only thing I remember about the display cases. All those dull old books along with this beautiful wee bracelet that belonged to Mary Queen of Scots! And I'm related to her on the Stuart side.'

Mary laughed. 'Those books are first editions of Robert Burns's poems! I don't find them dull. But the pearls are everybody's favourite.'

My hidden criminal inner self noted what an idiot the wounded trespasser was, stripping young mussels from the river when this perfect treasure lay in plain sight of the general public every day.

But perhaps the river seemed easier prey than Mary Kinnaird.

She said to me then, 'So I'm a Mary and you're a Stuart. And I have the keys to the case. Would you like to try on Mary Queen of Scots' pearl bracelet while you wait for your grandad to come back for you?'

Mary Kinnaird suddenly became my favourite person in the entire world.

I noticed something. 'How can you hear me without your trumpet?'

'I'm watching your mouth move. It helps a great deal to see your mouth straight on. I don't like the trumpet much.'

'The trumpet is *splendid*.'

She twisted her mouth again. It wasn't a smile. 'But the trumpet makes me different from everyone else. And I am already a bit different.'

'No one's *exactly* alike,' I said blithely. 'I can find my mother in a candlelit hall full of dancers by the scent she wears. Everybody's different.'

It was very easy for me to say, flush with the fear and triumph of my last summer afternoon with my grandfather, the Earl of Strathfearn. I was safe now, eating shortbread in the Inverfearnie Library, and looking forward to trying on pearls that had once been worn by Mary Queen of Scots. *Everybody's different*: it was easy for me to say.

★

'You're a brave lassie!'

It was a perfect echo of Grandad, but of course now it wasn't Grandad and there wasn't a life at stake. It was only the taxi driver congratulating me.

'A lass like you, taking the train alone across Europe! Times have changed.'

'I had my own berth on the Night Ferry,' I told him modestly. 'Men and women are separated.'

I didn't tell him I was coming home from my Swiss *boarding school* for the summer holidays – I'd spent the entire trip carefully trying to disguise myself as being closer to twenty than to sixteen. I'd put my hair up in a chignon and hidden my ridiculously babyish panama school hat in a big paper bag. With my childish socks and school blazer crammed into my overnight case and the collar of my blouse undone, and the help of a lipstick bought in the rail station in Paris, I thought I pulled off a believable imitation of someone old enough to have left school.

'But I did arrange the journey myself,' I couldn't help boasting. 'My people aren't expecting me for another three days. It may be my own fault I've lost my luggage though. I think it is having its own little secret holiday in a hidden corner of the port at Dunkirk.'

The taxi driver laughed. Now we were on the Perth Road on our way to Strathfearn House. Nearly there – nearly! Scotland, summer, the river, Grandad …

And then that moment when I realised all over again that Grandad was gone forever, and this was the *last* summer at Strathfearn.

'My grandfather died earlier this year and my grandmother's selling their house,' I told the taxi driver. 'My mother and I are going to help her with the packing up.'

'Oh, aye, Strathfearn House – he was a good man, Sandy Murray, Earl of Strathfearn. I saw in the *Perth Mercury* that the Glenfearn School bought the estate. They've been working like Trojans to get the house and grounds ready for the students to move in next term. Lucky lads! Your grandad had a nine-hole golf course out there, didn't he? Good deal of debt though …'

Bother the *Mercury*. I hoped they hadn't published an amount, although I supposed they must have printed some number when the estate went up for sale, including the house and everything in it that my grandmother hadn't brought with her from France in 1885. She must have been so ashamed. Grandad left tens of thousands of pounds' worth of debt. Originally he lost a great deal of money when the stock market collapsed in 1929, but then he added to it by borrowing to put a new roof on Strathfearn

House; then he'd had to sell parts of the estate to pay back the loan; and then he'd been struck with bone cancer. And the treatment, and the visits to specialists in Europe and America, and the alterations to the house so he could go on living in it, and the private nurses …

And suddenly I was longing to be at Strathfearn, even if it wasn't ours any more; longing to see my mother and grandmother and my friend Mary Kinnaird, longing for one last summer of childish freedom on the River Fearn; but also full of grown-up excitement about being included as someone sensible enough to help settle the Murray Estate, when any one of my five big brothers could have done it. I didn't want the summer to begin. I didn't want it to end.

The taxi could not go right up to the house because a digger and a steamroller were engaged in widening the drive. I had to put the fare on my mother's account, but the driver just laughed and said he knew where to find us. I got out to walk the last third of a mile.

The first person I recognised was Sergeant Angus Henderson, the Water Bailiff whom Grandad sent for to take custody of the pearl thief we caught. Henderson was there with his bicycle, with his tall cromach across the bars as if he were about to do a high-wire act and needed a long stick to balance him. He was having a row with the driver of the steamroller.

'I've told you before to keep your men off the path by the Fearn when they're ditch-digging!' the Water Bailiff roared. 'Bad enough the place crawling with those dirty tinker folk camped up in Inchfort Field, in and out the water looking for pearls. That river path to the Inverfearnie Library is off limits to your men.'

'Those men are digging the pipeline for the new swimming pool – how d'you expect them to stay off the river path?' steamed the roller driver. 'All the work is downstream of Inverfearnie. I dinnae want them mixed up with those sleekit tinkers anyway. Bloody light-fingered sneaks. You'd not believe how many tools go missing, spades and whatnot.'

I did not want to get caught in the crossfire of this battle. The Water Bailiff is a terrifyingly tall and gaunt ex-Black Watch policeman. Grandad told us that in the heat of the Great War, Henderson allegedly shot one of his own men in the back for running away from a battle, and then strangled a German officer, an enemy Hun, with his bare hands.

'I'm off down the Fearn path now, and if I catch any of your men there …' Henderson let the threat hang, but gave his cromach staff a shake.

The Water Bailiff had been known to thrash every single one of my five brothers for some reason or other in the

past – guddling for rainbow trout out of the brown trout season, or swimming in the Fearn when the salmon were running, or just for getting in his way as he patrolled the narrow path along the burn on his bicycle.

I stepped back so I was well out of his way as he set off along the drive ahead of me. When he'd become nothing but a dark beetling shape among the bright green beeches, I held tight to my small overnight case and set off after him, considerably more slowly. I was looking forward to getting out of my modified school uniform if I could. But the dark skirt and white blouse did give me a smart official air, like a post office clerk or a prospective stenographer for the Glenfearn School, and the men working on the drive paid no attention to me.

My grandmother's roses in the French forecourt garden in front of Strathfearn House were blooming in a glorious blazing riot of June colour, oblivious to the chaos throughout the rest of the grounds. There were people all about, hard at work building new dormitories and classrooms and playing fields. None of them I recognised. I let myself into the house – the doors were wide open.

The whole of the baronial reception hall had been emptied of its rosewood furniture and stripped of the ancestral paintings. I felt as though I had never been there before in my life.

I went straight to my grandmother's favourite sitting room and discovered it was also in disarray; and my remaining family members were nowhere to be found. I hadn't told anyone I was coming three days earlier than expected. So, like a hunted fox bolting to the safety of its den, I sought out the nursery bathroom high in the back of the east wing, and drew myself a bath because I had been travelling for three days and the hot water seemed to be working as usual.

I didn't have any clean clothes of my own to change into, but it is a good big bathroom, and in addition to a six-foot-long tub and painted commode there is a tall chest full of children's cast-offs. I put on a mothy tennis pullover which left my arms daringly bare and a kilt that must have been forgotten some time ago by one of my big brothers (probably Sandy, who was Grandad's favourite, his namesake and his heir, and who had spent more time there than the rest of us).

I was David Balfour from *Kidnapped* again, the way I'd been the whole summer I was thirteen, to my brothers' amusement and my nanny Solange's despair. I plaited my hair and stuffed it up under a shapeless faded wool tam-o'-shanter to get it out of my face, and wove my way through the passages back to the central oak staircase.

The banisters were covered with dust sheets because the walls had just been painted a modern cool pale blue –

not horrible, but so *different* from the heraldic Victorian wallpaper. Light in shades of lemon and sapphire and scarlet spilled through the tall stained-glass window on the landing. As I turned the corner, the telephone in the hall below me started to ring.

I swithered on the landing, wondering if I should answer it. But then I heard footsteps and a click and the ringing stopped, and a harassed man's voice said, 'Yes, this is he … No, they're not gypsies, they're tinkers. Scottish Travellers. It's tiresome, but they're allowed to stay in that field till the end of this summer.' The voice took a sudden change of tone and continued brightly, 'Oh, you've sent the Water Bailiff up there *now*? My foreman thinks they're pretty bold thieves – wants him to check all their gear for missing tools … Jolly good!' His footsteps thumped smartly back the way they'd come.

Goodness, everyone seemed to have it in for the Travelling folk.

This Scottish traveller didn't bother anybody. If the ditch-diggers were all downstream and the Water Bailiff was off bothering the campers at Inchfort Field, I could count on having the river path to the library on Inverfearnie Island all to myself. I thought I would go to say hello to Mary Kinnaird, who would not care if I was wearing only a kilt and a tennis pullover.

I crossed the broad lawn, broken by men smoothing earth and digging pits and laying paths. In the distance by the edge of the River Tay, over the tops of the birch trees, I could see the ruinous towers of Aberfearn Castle. The Big House is new by comparison; it was built in 1840, before Grandad was born. Before the railway came through. It was hard to believe that none of this was ours any more.

I passed into the dapple of sunlight and shade in the birch wood by the river.

An otter slid into the burn as I started along the path, and I saw a kingfisher darting among the low branches trailing in the water on the opposite bank. For a moment I stood still, watching and breathing it in. The smell of the Tay and the Fearn! Oh, how I'd missed it, and how I would miss it after this last summer!

See me, kilted and barefoot on the native soil of my ancestors, declaiming Allan Cunningham in dramatic rhapsody:

'O hame, hame, hame, to my ain countree!
When the flower is i' the bud and the leaf is on the tree,
The larks shall sing me hame in my ain countree!'

I crossed from the west bank of the Fearn to Inverfearnie Island by the footbridge. It is a creaky old iron suspension bridge so narrow you can't pass two abreast, erected in the year of Queen Victoria's Jubilee. I jumped along its span to

make it sway, the way my brothers and I had always done when we were little.

The library stood proud on the unnatural mound of Inverfearnie Island, which Grandad always told us might hide a Bronze Age burial beneath it. The oak front door of the library was locked, just as it had been three years ago.

This time, knowing Mary much better than I did then, I went round to the kitchen door. It was standing ajar.

'MARY?'

I let myself in, hollering, because she can never hear you.

The kitchen was tidy and empty. I went through to her study, yelling my friend's name. She wasn't there, either, and it was also tidy and empty, as if she hadn't been in all day.

I glanced into the telephone cupboard with its red velvet stool, in the dark little nook under the winding stairs. No one.

I went through to the library.

The library is two rooms on top of each other, the walls surrounded by shelves and scarcely a single book newer than before the Great War, apart from recent volumes of antiquarian journals and almanacs. But they still lend books to anglers and Scots language scholars and farmers trying to solve boundary disputes, and there is almost always someone or other studying in the Upper Reading Room.

I spared a reverent glance for the pearl bracelet. It lay locked under glass on its bed of black velvet, on permanent loan to the Perthshire and Kinross-shire Council for display in the library here. I couldn't quite believe Mary had let me try those pearls on. They were beautiful fat Tay river pearls, so pale a grey they shone nearly like silver, the size of small marbles. Staring into the glass until it began to get fogged by my own breath, I could remember exactly how they'd felt against my wrist, cool and heavy with the magic of having been worn by Mary Stuart herself, whose surname I shared, as young as me and already Queen of Scotland.

I wiped the glass and turned away to continue the hunt for my own living Mary. I took the narrow winding steps to the Upper Reading Room of the library two at a time.

'AHOY, MARY!'

And the Upper Reading Room was empty too.

But here was a strange thing. The Upper Reading Room was empty, but unlike the rest of Mary Kinnaird's domain, it was not tidy. The great big chestnut table was covered end to end in ephemera and artefacts. I identified these as what my brothers and I called 'the Murray Hoard': intriguing archaeological finds that our grandfather used to keep on display in the tower room at Strathfearn House. I guessed

that this must be a grand sorting job, with Mary called upon to catalogue the priceless ancient pieces before they went to auction. Iron and bronze spear tips, all different sizes and shapes, lay in rows, with more waiting in cigar boxes; I recognised an iridescent Roman glass vial shaped like a leaping fish which was, Grandad told me, nearly two thousand years old; and the dark polished stone axe heads were eerily three times that.

And there was my favourite item, a small round cup made of blackened wood set in silver filigree. I could picture it sitting in a back corner of a dusty glass case in the tower of the Big House, full to the brim with loose pearls like the ones on the bracelet downstairs. I had never been allowed to touch the cup, but Grandad had let me play with the pearls when I was very small.

'My mother's mother's mother's …' he'd said they were. I can't remember how many mothers back they went. All those pearls were found in Scottish rivers. I'd loved the way out of all the ancient artefacts in his collection, only the pearls didn't look old. Like the royal pearls downstairs, they were as beautiful and ageless as the rivers where they'd been grown.

Now the cup was empty. The pearls were gone. Another wave of sadness washed over me. I'd felt instinctively that they belonged in that cup. Grandad must have sold them, as

he'd sold so many of his heirlooms and so much of his land, to keep the estate going during his illness.

I was surprised that Mary would have gone out leaving a door open with all this valuable stuff lying about. She takes her job as the Inverfearnie Library custodian very seriously.

I poked my nose into the other rooms, her bedroom and the bathroom, but Mary was nowhere to be found.

I decided to leave her a note. I went back up to where she'd been working. There was paper everywhere, but all covered with lists and descriptions of artefacts. Finally I settled on an empty brown envelope addressed to my grandfather and postmarked *Oxford* from two years ago. The back was engraved with the name of a scholar I'd never heard of at the Ashmolean Museum. The envelope had been slit open with a knife or letter opener long ago, and whatever message it had once contained was not lying about in an obvious place. It didn't seem important in any way, so I wrote to Mary on the back quickly to say that I was home in Scotland and staying at Strathfearn House for the next few weeks, and that I would stop in again to visit.

Here was another odd thing. When I went to prop my message against a chipped clay pot of unknown origin, in front of the pushed-back chair where Mary would be sure

to see it when she came back, a pearl fell out of the envelope.

I thought it dropped off *me* at first – as if I'd been wearing it in my hair, or as an earring! It was the palest rose-petal pink, the size of a barley grain and perfectly round. It hit the green baize table cover with a sound like *pip* and lay still. It was intact and beautiful.

I picked it up – it was so round I had to wedge it beneath my fingernail to get hold of it. It must have been part of the collection. I thought of dropping it into the black wooden cup. But afraid of disturbing the cataloguing system, I put it back inside the envelope it had fallen out of. I folded the envelope over so the pearl couldn't fall out again and propped it against one of the jam jars.

I went back outside, leaving the kitchen door a little open behind me, the way I'd found it.

The hammering and drilling and tractoring going on at the Big House and further downstream was no more than a faint hum. I didn't feel like going back to the Big House. I thought I'd go to look at the Drookit Stane and the Salmon Stane, the standing stones in the river and Inchfort Field, just to make sure the builders hadn't knocked them down to make an access road or boat ramp or something. Maybe I'd just peek at the one in Inchfort Field without

leaving the birch wood. I didn't want to get mixed up with the Water Bailiff.

I went down the gravel driveway, and crossed the humped bridge of moss-covered stone, as old as the seventeenth-century library itself, that leads to the opposite bank of the Fearn. Then I continued along the path on the other side of the river.

Where the burn bends it has scooped out a little shingle beach on one bank, where we used to swim. There was a heron standing midstream near the tall Drookit Stane, absolutely still, focused on fishing. Its shadow was dark against the stone and its reflection rippled in the water. I stopped still too – but not still enough. It heard me and lifted off awkwardly, heading downstream with long, slow wing beats.

I sat down on the flat sun-dappled rock slab where the wounded poacher had rested, and where Grandad had taught me and my brothers to guddle for trout. I wondered if I could still catch a fish using only my hands. No one was about, not even the heron, and I was overcome with a wave of sadness over my grandfather and his house and his things that weren't ours any more, and all the summers that would never come back.

So I lay down and slid my bare arm into the clear brown water.

There. I was minding my own business, waiting for a fish to tickle. I suppose I didn't really have any right to fish there because it wasn't our land any longer. Julie the poacher!

I thought about the pearls that I'd never see again, and all my grandmother had lost. I thought about picking an armful of her own roses for her. The plan improved: I would dig some up so she could take them with her when she had to leave the house for good.

I'd not slept well on the trains across Europe. I'd been travelling for three days. I was lying in the sun and lulled by the sound of running water, and I fell asleep thinking about roses.

I remember what it looked like when my head exploded with light and darkness, but I didn't remember anything else until the moment I found myself in St John's Infirmary in Perth three days later.