



*The Patterdale Plot*

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## *Chapter One*

‘Still nothing for sale in Patterdale, then?’ said Russell Straw to his daughter, Persimmon, generally known as Simmy. ‘I told you it would never work.’

‘You did,’ she agreed. ‘But we haven’t given up hope yet.’

‘The way I see it, there’s a deadline.’ He looked at her steadily expanding midriff. ‘Another four months or so, in fact.’

‘Five, nearly.’

‘Except you hardly want to be moving house a week before giving birth, do you?’ put in Angie, Simmy’s mother. ‘That’s a recipe for total chaos.’

Simmy sighed. They were only thinking of her welfare, she reminded herself. And they were just as terrified as she was, below the surface. The quest for a house somewhere within reach of both Keswick and Windermere had been going on since June and was no closer to fulfilment now that they were into October. Simmy and Christopher were going to live together and have a baby and get married,

probably in that order. The decisions had all been made four months ago, but putting them into practice turned out to be a whole other thing.

‘We’re going to have a look at Hartsop as well, probably on Wednesday,’ she said. ‘Somebody told Christopher it’s lovely there and neither of us has ever seen it.’

‘Oh – Hartsop!’ Russell was suddenly enthused. ‘On the banks of Brothers Water, very nearby. Easy walking distance from Hayeswater, which everyone confuses with Hawes.’ He grinned happily. ‘That would be like living in paradise, at least in the summer.’

‘I didn’t think there were more than about four houses there,’ said Angie. ‘Just those rather nasty holiday lodges. At least they look nasty on the Internet. I can’t pretend to have seen them in person.’

‘Christopher thinks they’re quite tasteful, actually,’ said Simmy. ‘He says he’s heard that they’re almost invisible from most places.’ But she knew there was almost no chance of buying property in what was termed a ‘conservation village’. If Patterdale was difficult, Hartsop was likely to be impossible. She said as much to her concerned parents. Neither of them gave any reassurances, so she dredged some up for herself. ‘At least it helps that Chris knows some of the estate agents personally. We do get early warning of anything coming onto the market. Especially Robin, of course. He’s the one in Keswick who’s making real efforts to find us something.’

Angie got up from the kitchen chair and started tidying the surfaces. ‘Seven for breakfast tomorrow,’ she muttered. ‘I’ve got an awful feeling we’re almost out of tea bags.’

‘They look like coffee drinkers to me,’ said her husband. ‘I can always tell.’

‘You mean you’re right fifty per cent of the time – like predicting the sex of a baby,’ Angie retorted. ‘You always conveniently forget the times you get it wrong.’

He ignored her. ‘You shouldn’t forget Glenridding,’ he told Simmy. ‘Nicer views, in my opinion. Right over Ullswater to the mountains.’

Simmy nodded. ‘We’ve been looking there as well.’

The weekend had been scheduled for some time as a chance for updating her parents on the house-hunting, as well as other things. The Windermere flower shop had enjoyed a reasonably good summer, with September especially buoyant. Bonnie Lawson, Simmy’s young assistant, had survived the departure of her boyfriend to university without trailing devotedly after him as many people had expected. Ben had gently diverted her, saying he would be very poor company at least for the first term and she would be better off staying where she was. With Simmy’s dramatic change of direction, Bonnie believed herself to be a stabilising factor, taking more responsibility at the shop and listening to worries. She also found the physical details of pregnancy endlessly fascinating, so long as they didn’t become too graphic.

‘How are your bookings at the moment?’ Simmy asked her mother. The B&B had been in high demand all through the summer, but an embarrassing complaint on TripAdvisor had caused a degree of concern. Angie made a virtue of her relaxed approach to rules and cleanliness, allowing dogs in the bedrooms and crumbs on the floor. The big rumpus room on the ground floor was an untidy

space for families to enjoy on rainy days, with half-done jigsaws and muddy shoes all part of the decor. When one neurotic mother found a half-eaten meat pie under a chair, she raised a great fuss and vowed to blacklist Beck View in perpetuity. Luckily for Angie, there was still a hard core of loyal clients who valued the freedom she provided, and returned faithfully, often three or four times a year.

‘The writing’s on the wall,’ she sighed. ‘I haven’t had so many new people lately. And I can’t afford to offend anybody else, so the cleaning’s had to go up a notch.’

Angie was in her mid sixties, and Russell’s seventieth birthday was looming. Having had one or two health scares over the past year, he was much less reliable than he had been as host, bedmaker, cook or cleaner. Angie found herself doing it all, with sporadic help from her daughter. The three available bedrooms meant a full house could total eight with children and nine or ten if there were babies. And a lot of people brought their dogs as well. Anyone could see that such a workload would crush even the stalwart Angie Straw before very much longer.

‘You could pay someone to come in and clean,’ said Simmy, for the fiftieth time.

Angie made no attempt to present the same tired arguments against this idea. The essence of her resistance was that she feared the critical judgement of another woman. A paid cleaner would want to make changes and introduce new rules. Simmy could see that the whole enterprise would be spoilt if that happened. Angie would grow defensive and irritable, and there would be no fun left at all.

Russell changed the subject with a touch of his old sensitivity. ‘Time for a walk?’ he suggested. ‘The dog hasn’t been anywhere for a while. We’ve got an hour or so before lunch.’

The dog was a long-suffering Lakeland terrier, who tolerated the procession of visiting canines with gritted teeth. He was quite well aware that his own life was unfairly restricted by Angie’s liberal standards, with much of it spent shut in the kitchen to avoid confrontation. He was firmly Russell’s responsibility, with the result that he showed little affection towards either Angie or Simmy.

‘Where do you want to go?’ Simmy asked, with a questioning glance at her mother.

‘I can’t go anywhere, can I? The meal isn’t going to cook itself. You two can pop down to Bowness and back, if you like. But be sure you’re here for one. That gives you time, doesn’t it?’

Beck View was on the southern edge of Windermere, shortly before it morphed into Bowness. A ten-minute walk took you within sight of the lake, and in another ten minutes you could be on the Esplanade, feeding swans and watching the cruise boats coming and going. Even in October, business was brisk, despite the disappearance of school-age children. The day was breezy but fairly mild.

‘We can maybe have a quick aperitif on the way back,’ said Russell, with a twinkle in his eye.

‘All right for some,’ grumbled Angie, but Simmy could see she was relieved to have the house to herself for a while.

Her father’s legs were as functional as ever, after half a lifetime spent tramping the fells of the Lake District,

and he set a brisk pace down to the lakeside. ‘Hang on,’ complained Simmy. ‘You’re going too fast.’

‘The dog doesn’t feel he’s had a walk if he can’t go at a trot. He really needs to be up your way, where he can run free.’ Simmy lived in Troutbeck, where there were fells just outside her door. From Windermere there were few suitable walks where a dog could be safely liberated.

‘You’re welcome any time,’ she said.

‘Until you move, that is,’ he reminded her.

‘Will you mind? You hardly ever do come up to me these days, do you? We had that big walk, ages ago, when there was that dog business, but we never did it again. And now . . .’ She trailed off, thinking that pregnancy, motherhood, commuting and marriage would all curtail her time with her parents, and that this would be a deprivation more for Russell than for Angie.

‘I like Patterdale,’ he reassured her. ‘And Ullswater has always been my favourite of all the meres.’

They reached a point from which the lake could be seen between buildings. ‘The cruise boat’s looking nice,’ said Russell. ‘I always think of postcards when I see it. Must have picked up the Bowness contingent not many minutes ago.’

Simmy had never taken one of the tourist trips around the lake, considering herself too much of a permanent resident for such a thing. She had, however, allowed herself to be ferried across once or twice, with her car. ‘Oh, look!’ She was pointing to a group of people causing an obstruction on the pedestrianised area beside Lake Windermere. ‘What’s happening here?’

‘Protest of some sort,’ he observed cheerfully. ‘It’s a wonder your mother isn’t part of it.’ But they both knew

that Angie's demonstrating days were long past. She hadn't been on a march since 2003.

'Not another zipwire?' She was trying to read the placards, but they were still too far away. The Friends of the Lake District, or some similar organisation, had gone overboard in repelling an attempt to erect a very long zipwire through Grizedale Forest. A year or two previously, the plan had come close enough to success to worry all concerned locals that it would come back in a modified form and be waved through on the second attempt.

'Looks like another tourist village,' said Russell, squinting at the slogans. 'That one says "Enough is Enough". Very informative. And there's "Nothing's More Precious than Our Landscape". Bit wordy, don't you think?'

'Your eyesight's better than mine,' she noted ruefully.

'Oh, I like that one. "Keep Tourism in Proportion". That's almost clever. I mean – there's a logic in there somewhere. If you let too many millions come, they'll just ruin it for themselves and everybody else. Like wind farms,' he finished obscurely.

'Mm,' mumbled Simmy, heading across the road. 'I can see someone I know.'

'So can I. Three, in fact, at the last count.' He followed her to the lakeside and accosted a man in a bright-green zipped-up anorak. 'Tristan! What brings you out onto the campaign trail?'

'Russell. Good to see you. I'm not campaigning, exactly. It's this business at Patterdale that's got us agitated. Another whacking great chalet park, would you believe? Here, have a leaflet.' He thrust a sheet of A5 into Russell's hand.

‘Impossible. Where would they put it? Don’t they know the place floods almost every year, so they can’t be thinking of that level area between the road and the fells?’ Russell’s knowledge of the entire Lake District was legendary. ‘And anywhere else is far too steep and rocky to be practical.’

‘That’s not true at all, I’m afraid. Read the leaflet.’

Russell stood obediently scanning the page, while the other man chatted to him. Simmy turned away, watching the people and wondering how much any of them really cared if a new chalet park appeared in remote little Patterdale. ‘Can’t see much wrong with it, personally,’ said Russell.

‘You should,’ his friend informed him. ‘There’s dirty work afoot, you see if there isn’t.’

‘And he should know,’ Russell muttered to Simmy, a minute later. ‘Finger in every pie, has old Tristan.’

‘Who is he?’

‘Leading light in the Lib Dems for a while. Now he’s something environmental. Or do I mean ecological? He grows things in a glasshouse. He’s started talking about removing all the sheep from the fells, so the trees can grow back. I think he calls himself a consultant, which we all know means nothing in the real world.’

‘Sounds as if he’s one of the good guys, all the same.’ Simmy rather fancied the idea of forest-covered hilltops.

‘That’s what he’d like you to think,’ said her father darkly.

They each had a leaflet, printed on both sides, with a map, and a quote from Caroline Lucas. The point was made that there were empty slopes on the western side of Patterdale that were apparently vulnerable to

development unless strenuously protected. The threatened proposal was for a 'modest' two-acre site, with ten small chalets specifically designed for 'low-tech' tourist use. The protesters made their sarcasm unambiguous by repeating the words 'modest' and 'low-tech' in a second paragraph, with acid commentary. Simmy read it with a sinking heart. While she did not agree that the 'lodges' made of timber and discreetly positioned were particularly intrusive, it did seem a pity to keep on adding more of them to the landscape. Her own home village of Troutbeck, above Ambleside, was host to a very large number of the things, which had become grudgingly accepted by local people, over a period of time. The visitors brought cash with them, after all. But nobody pretended that the park in any way enhanced the landscape.

Another of the people Russell had recognised came up to them. 'Coming to join us?' she asked him with an air of challenge. Simmy watched her, noting the wispy hair and unhealthy skin. The woman was somewhere in her mid fifties, thin and tired-looking. Probably very hard-working, Simmy thought charitably.

'Candy,' Russell greeted her, with far less bonhomie than he had shown Tristan. 'This is my daughter, Persimmon. You might have seen her in her shop. Simmy, this is Candy Proctor. She's got a B&B two doors along from us.'

'Answer the question,' the woman insisted, having barely glanced at Simmy. 'Can we count on your support?'

'Let me think about it,' he said evasively. 'We've got to get back now. Angie's doing a Sunday roast.'

'Still eating meat, then?'

The voice came from behind Simmy's right shoulder, soft and unthreatening. She turned and smiled. 'Ninian! I saw you just now. Yes, I still eat meat. My mother would disown me otherwise. How are you? It's ages since I saw you.'

He bowed vaguely, his gaze on her rounded shape. 'Is that what I think it is?'

She laughed. 'Hadn't you heard?' Ninian and she had been in a relationship not so long ago, which had petered out with no recriminations. Ninian Tripp the potter lacked the energy for recriminations.

'Not in so many words. I assumed it was on the cards, that's all. Please accept my congratulations. And I forgive you for eating our fellow creatures, under the circumstances.'

'Thank you. You're not part of this protest, are you? Just about everybody we know seems to be here.'

He shuddered melodramatically. 'Perish the thought! Although I admire their spirit. They've been at this since before eleven this morning. I saw them when I came down into town earlier on. They've got right completely on their side, but they'll lose, of course. What's another handful of tasteful little chalets, more or less, in the great scheme of things? That's what the planners will say, mark my words.'

Russell and his near-neighbour were arguing in a desultory fashion, without any real conviction on his part, and an air of weariness on hers. The dog stood patiently at Russell's heel, well accustomed to such slow perambulations, where its master repeatedly paused to converse. Eventually, her father reached out a hand to Simmy. 'Come on. We're going

to be late,' he urged, as if the delay had been all her doing.

Candy Proctor raised her chin and addressed Ninian. 'I heard what you said just now,' she accused. 'And I'll have you know we will not be beaten. The whole population of Patterdale is with us.'

'All twenty-seven of them,' muttered Russell, as they walked away.

'It's more than that,' Simmy corrected him. 'But what I don't understand is why are they protesting in Bowness? Patterdale's nearly fifteen miles from here.'

'And that's a very good question,' said her father.