

The
CHILDREN
of **WOLF**
ROCK

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faber

First published in 2026
by Faber & Faber Limited
51 Hatton Garden
London EC1N 8HN

Printed by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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A CIP record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-571-38252-1

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2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

For Alice Swan, my brilliant editor and friend.

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PART ONE

THE SECRET VALLEY

CHAPTER ONE

Stormy Loch

High in the mountains of western Scotland, there is a loch, and on its shores there is a castle, and in that castle there is a school.

The mountains are rugged and wild. The loch is wide and long, home to eels, carp and many different birds. The castle itself is square and solid, with a tower in each corner.

The school, Stormy Loch Academy, is marvellous. Its founder and headmaster, Major Fortescue, is a bearded giant of a man. He walks with a stick and wears a patch over his left eye, legacies of the many wars he has fought in. These wars are the reason Major Fortescue started his school here. Through all the terrible things he has seen, he has never lost

sight of the beauty of the world, and he knows how it can change lives. His mission now is to share this beauty with his students, and to give them the strength and courage to fight for it.

Difficult work, sometimes, and even dangerous, but fighting for the beauty of the world is important. The major believes that everyone who comes to the school should join in looking after it. Students help on the school farm, which produces much of their food. They do housework and odd jobs, and are expected to be responsible. There are no traditional punishments here, no isolation or wall of shame or pointless copying out of lines, but if students make a mess, they are expected to clean it up. If they are rude, to apologise. If they accidentally forget to close the gate to the pigpen, they must run after the escaped pigs and bring them home. This, Major Fortescue thunders in the first assembly of every new term, is called Facing the Consequences of Our Actions, and is a Useful Life Lesson.

The reward of this Useful Life Lesson is freedom.

If you want to hurl paint at walls to discover your inner artist, you may do so (as long as you tidy up

afterwards). If you feel a need to row across the loch to search for rare butterflies on the opposite bank, away you go (as long as you wear a life jacket). If you want to practise goalkeeping from dinner until bedtime, there is nothing to stop you (as long as you can find someone willing to practise shooting). And for three days every summer term, groups of Year Sevens are dropped off in the wilderness for the Great Orienteering Challenge, to hike and map-read their way unsupervised to a mystery destination.

It's a chaotic sort of place, always short of money, rarely clean and never tidy. Students quite often get lost, or break a limb, or forget to turn up for lessons. And it is very far from anywhere. There is a village a few miles away, but it's a long drive on tiny roads, and the nearest train station is so small it's really only a platform. If you like shops and bustle and a comfortable life, this is not the place for you. But if you like places that make you feel like you are bigger than you thought – like anything is possible – then you are going to love it.

Let's go there now, together. It's the middle of the night, but the moon is full and bright. Come!

We'll start in this lay-by at the side of the road. This is where the school bus picks up students at the start of term, to avoid too many cars going up the mountain. We'll climb on foot along a steep narrow lane, through woods of oak and birch and pine, until we reach a high, empty plateau. At the end of the plateau we'll go through a pass, where we'll stop a moment. The lane loops down again from here, through more woods. It's tradition on the first day of every term, for all students who are able, to run this last part, so you're seeing it as they would.

Come, let's go, down through the dark and lovely trees, sweet with the scent of recent rain. Nearly there! The road is levelling out now, the trees replaced by giant rhododendrons. See that glow through their dense and twisted branches? Moonlight, reflected on the loch. Look up! Have you ever seen such stars?

We're coming out of the woods. Can you see, in the shadows, the stone griffins on those two crumbling pillars? This is the entrance to the school. Come, we'll go in – round a bend – here it is.

The castle, straight out of a fairy tale.

All the lights are off. It's the first night of the

Easter holidays, and almost everyone has gone home. The few who remain are variously asleep, unable to sleep or avoiding sleep altogether, but we'll get to them later, just as we'll get to the woman weeping on an island hundreds of miles away, and to the man going through a pile of important-looking papers, the remains of a broken vase in the bin beside him. Be quick! There's something you need to see. We'll go this way, past the leaning tower with ivy twisting up its walls. They used to keep prisoners here in medieval times, but these days it's the music block. We'll talk about that later too, but for now we'll just tiptoe past it to the back of the castle, till we're outside the kitchen.

Look over there, the furthest window.

This is what you need to see – the beginning of our story.

Watch!

The window is open, and a girl is climbing out.

CHAPTER TWO

The Wolf's Head

Minna Greenwood was not supposed to go to Stormy Loch.

For the whole of the summer holidays, she had been dreading starting Year Seven at St Swithin's, her local secondary. But near the end of August, her mother had met Major Fortescue on a train. She had been so impressed with what she learned about Stormy Loch that she had gone to visit, and decided it was *perfect* for her eldest child.

'Boarding school?' David, Minna's father, had been astonished when she told him. 'But why?'

Julia Greenwood had looked out of the window to the single tree in the tiny garden of their small suburban house. Minna was lying on her belly on

the highest branch she could reach, barefoot, her mop of chestnut curls over her face and her limbs dangling like a kitten's.

Julia smiled. She adored her daughter. She didn't *want* to send her away.

'Because it will suit her,' she said.

'But how can we afford it?'

'They have scholarships,' said Julia. 'David, think! Remember when we went to St Swithin's open day?'

Up on her branch, Minna flipped over and lay with her legs up against the trunk, wiggling her grubby pink toes.

David's lips twitched. Julia was right. St Swithin's was a big grey hulk of a place, built to resemble a prison. Minna would be miserable there.

School had been fine for Minna at first, when she was allowed to do things she enjoyed, but as she moved up the years she had found it steadily harder. How did people *sit* for so long? How did they concentrate, keep quiet, remember to put their hand up to speak? Minna *never* put her hand up. When she wanted to say something, the words burst out; when she couldn't stay still, she ran or

danced. When she was happy or sad, she laughed or cried. When she was bored, she daydreamed.

For all these reasons her parents loved her, yet somehow this behaviour was considered wrong.

Teachers called Minna disruptive. Other children called her annoying.

By Year Three, Minna was routinely spending lessons in the head teacher's office. By Year Four, she had found a trick; the only way to make school work. She imagined a den inside her head, snug with blankets and cushions, and she climbed into it until the end of the school day. She learned almost nothing, and it was hard to make real friends if you didn't talk, but at least she was *quiet* now. It was a relief for everyone except her parents, because the effort of behaving at school led to spectacular meltdowns at home, like smashing mugs and teapots, or throwing all her little sister Lola's toys out of the window, or crying uncontrollably for hours.

'They're really strict on discipline at St Swithin's,' murmured Julia now. 'At Stormy Loch, they let them do whatever they want.'

David's eyes widened. '*Whatever* they want?'

‘Pretty much,’ said Julia.

‘Huh,’ said David. Then, ‘What if she’s not happy there?’

‘If she’s not happy, we’ll bring her home.’

The thought of going away to school was so terrifying to Minna she didn’t speak for a week, right up to the moment when they put her on the bus in the Stormy Loch lay-by.

But then . . .

Along with thirty other students, she climbed out of the bus at the end of the plateau. Still silent, she ran as instructed down the winding lane through the woods and the rhododendron grove, through the griffin gates and round the final bend . . .

Where she stopped.

For as long as she lived, Minna would remember this moment.

Other students shoved past her. Minna didn’t notice.

She just stood.

Staring.

The sky was clear that day, the loch a shining

blue, the grey stone of the castle softened by the sun, but it was the mountains that drew Minna's attention.

All around her, purple, brown, green, grey, rolling on and on as far as she could see . . .

'Are you all right there?'

The voice, high above Minna, somehow both boomed and whispered. She looked up, and for a wild moment thought one of the mountains had taken human form.

Then she recognised Major Fortescue from his picture on the school website.

'Can I help with anything?' he asked.

The major's good eye was twinkling in a way that made it impossible not to say exactly what you were thinking.

'The mountains,' Minna whispered.

'Ah, yes,' said Major Fortescue.

Together, they gazed up the valley, Major Fortescue with pride, Minna in awe.

The castle was on her left, its courtyard crowded with students and teachers. The loch was on her right. Straight ahead, the lane continued along

the edge of lawns and playing fields, past farm buildings to a gate. Beyond the gate, at the end of a sheep-dotted meadow, a rough crag towered over the landscape like a giant watchtower.

Minna looked at it curiously. ‘What’s that?’ she asked.

‘That,’ said the major, ‘is Wolf Rock.’

‘Wolf Rock . . .’ Minna narrowed her eyes to see better. Yes, she could see how the tapering of the crag at one end looked like a muzzle, how the pointed rocks at the top could pass for ears, and how the ring of boulders around its base could be the thick, strong fur around its neck.

You would see the whole world from up there, thought Minna. You would feel like a queen – an *empress!*

The Empress of the Mountain.

‘Can I go there?’ she asked.

Major Fortescue laughed.

‘Of course! There’s even a path, though it’s completely overgrown these days.’

‘Can I go *now?*’

The major glanced towards the courtyard, where

teachers armed with clipboards were checking names off lists.

‘You won’t have time today,’ he said. ‘And tomorrow is induction day. Saturday would be better.’

Minna frowned. Saturday seemed awfully far away.

‘You promise I can go?’ she asked. ‘It’s not, like, a joke?’

‘I never joke,’ said the major.

‘I’d rather go now,’ said Minna. ‘But I suppose I can wait.’

The major’s eye danced.

‘That’s very good of you,’ he said. ‘Now off you go and settle in.’

He watched as Minna hurried towards the castle. A gust of wind whipped up from the loch as she reached the courtyard. She stopped and raised her face to it, reminding him of a baby deer he had once seen, a few hours old, greeting a brand-new world.

He smiled. It seemed Julia Greenwood knew her daughter well.

Stormy Loch did suit her.