

The Aviary

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Also by this author:

In the same series:

The Memory of Pine (2015)

Sgeulachd Castle (2003)

The Short Grioghal (2005)

The Beauty of Braemore (2007)

The Quarterer & the Lengor (2009)

The Heir to Pictavia (2011)

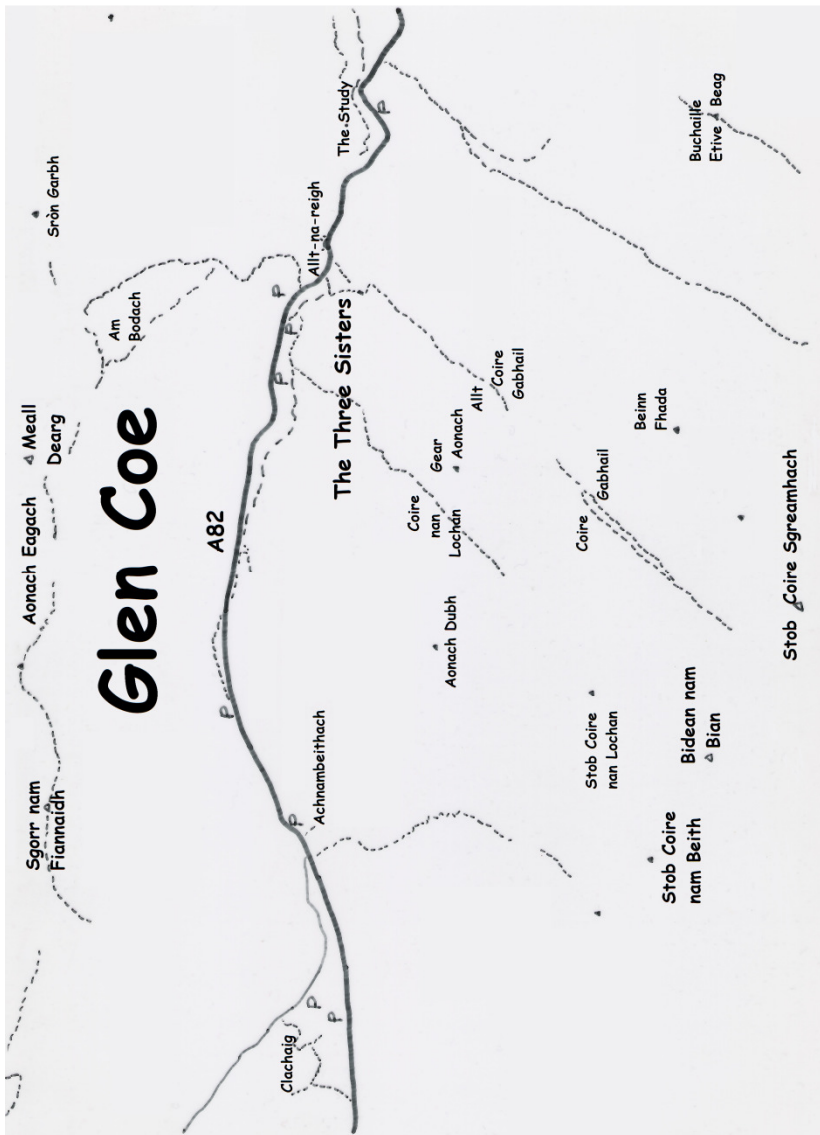
Trilogy:

The Stained Family Tree (2008)

The Marlets' Nest (2008)

The Road to the Isles (2012)

For my wife
Thank you, Nancy
Thank you, Mum



Edinburgh

‘What a nightmare,’ DCI Cameron repeats for the umpteenth time, as he paces the room.

Malcolm is taking the DCI in. Except for those same three words, he hasn’t said anything, not during the entire drive from Fort William to Glencoe, not since they’ve been in Glencoe. The DCI may not be the most talkative of people, but this silence is pushing it. Malcolm would like to know why he was called out of bed before four am and is now waiting in a quiet police station with a clearly tense DCI. Usually things work the other way around, with Malcolm being informed by a lower rank. Then he phones DI Munro, who will eventually inform DCI Cameron. Now Malcolm’s here with the DCI and not a single other colleague from Fort William.

Instead there’s Constable – “call me Pete” – Boyle, who’s yawning shamelessly. Malcolm can’t help wondering if Pete could actually pass the police fitness test, because the man’s clearly overweight. His impressive belly bulges and nearly shows itself below his pullover. Neither the DCI nor Malcolm is dressed this casually. Malcolm’s been trained by his former DI in Edinburgh to always wear shirt and tie. The DCI too is dressed formally. Pete’s dressed like he’s going to the pub around the corner in a minute. Worse, he smells like he’s just out of the pub. He obviously didn’t bother to shower and put on fresh clothes when he was called out of bed. He’s not even wearing a tie. What would Edinburgh DI MacIain say about that?

DCI Cameron is looking at his watch again.

‘What a nightmare,’ he sighs again and paces a bit further.

Maybe it’s an April fool, an elaborate one. Maybe all newcomers get this extravagant stunt: called out of bed in the dead of night, driven to Glencoe Station. Then what?

DCIs shouldn’t play jokes on their officers. It would make Malcolm lose respect for his superior.

Pete takes a step closer.

‘He’s always like that?’ he whispers.

Pete reeks of sweat. It’s not even five am and the man reeks of sweat. Malcolm is seriously wondering if he has to put up with this for the rest of day.

‘No,’ Malcolm replies quietly.

The DCI does look agitated. Unless he’s a really good actor. Malcolm can’t know really. He’s only been stationed in Fort

William since the end of last October, which is not even six months. Moreover, Malcolm's never had that many dealings with the DCI. Malcolm's business is with DI Munro. Malcolm works with the constables. The entire team are on a first-name basis, which came as a bit of a shock for Malcolm. Five years Malcolm worked for DI MacIain in Edinburgh, and he was not once called by his first name. MacIain just doesn't do first names. Munro does. Even the DCI does first names. Malcolm still thinks those above him should at least use his last name. He would prefer to be called by his last name, or even better, with his full title, like in Edinburgh. It was Constable Drummond back then. It should be Sergeant Drummond now. Instead he's called Malcolm by his superiors. He'd be called Sergeant Drummond by DI MacIain.

Malcolm's been thinking a lot about Edinburgh lately. He had thought a move away from Edinburgh could maybe undo things, or at least kick off some new start, but apart from being accused of running away, Malcolm hasn't got any closer to his siblings. On the contrary.

'Really? Because he's very nervous right now.'

Maybe the DCI is simply annoyed as well as nervous. Pete's scratching his thick beard. Malcolm has never seen a police officer with such an untidy appearance. He's even wearing walking boots. Malcolm doesn't even have walking boots. He has a pair of running shoes, and he wouldn't dream of wearing those at work.

'If I had known I would have had to get up this early, I would have taken precautions,' Pete whispers loudly.

Malcolm's sure the DCI must have heard that.

'You didn't know who called you out of bed?'

'Well, yes, but I didn't know... Well, you know.'

The door swings open and a uniformed police officer enters. The second man to step inside must have been up well before Malcolm himself, but still he's as impeccably dressed as ever. Malcolm's sure this man didn't neglect his personal hygiene before bolting off to Glencoe.

'Ah, DI MacIain, you made it.'

Malcolm can't believe his eyes. MacIain is Edinburgh CID. What is he doing in Glencoe?

'Who's that?' Pete bends towards Malcolm.

'DI MacIain, Edinburgh CID.'

'What's he doing here in Glencoe?'

'Your guess is as good as mine.'

'Sir,' MacIain says and puts his trolley and rucksack down.

Cameron and MacIain shake hands. It's a firm handshake. The last time Malcolm shook that hand was the day he switched Edinburgh for Fort William. "If you want to return, you know there's a vacancy in nine months, Sergeant Drummond," MacIain had said. Malcolm knew back then and he still does. Malcolm even heard on the grapevine that MacIain had preferred Malcolm to wait the nine months. But one doesn't turn down a promotion from Constable to Sergeant. Not even when it means leaving Edinburgh, for possibly the wrong reasons. Malcolm had liked working in Edinburgh really. He's still not used to Fort William. Ben Nevis, Glen Nevis, Peat Track, Steall Falls: Malcolm has heard a lot about them, but still doesn't feel the urge to take a closer look at any of the places. He can see the top of the world on a daily basis. It's quite enough for Malcolm. The great outdoors have never appealed at all. Malcolm is all for creature comforts.

What man is MacIain? Malcolm never got to the bottom of him. It was work only. MacIain's a hard worker and a strict boss, but he isn't too good to credit his team when a result is there. With MacIain's solid record, Malcolm realises full well that it's that praise that allowed Malcolm to be promoted this early in his career. Malcolm also knows he didn't always deserve the credit he got. Especially since he and MacIain usually didn't see eye to eye. Malcolm takes basic facts and adds everything together. MacIain has this habit of widening the investigation until Malcolm loses the plot. Malcolm would get annoyed when MacIain seemed to ignore the basic evidence. Even the very last case they both worked on was a testimony to their different points of view.

For Malcolm it still is an open-and-shut case, but MacIain cracked the case wide open and left it momentarily unsolved. Six months and still no one has been charged with the exceptionally brutal murder of two Edinburgh university professors and a third individual murdered an hour or so earlier. Malcolm is still convinced it's the student on whose computer Malcolm found the evidence proving the student had arranged to meet the two professors at the scene of the murder. But the student claimed his computer had been stolen, notably by the first murder victim. There is no record of a stolen computer with the police, so Malcolm doubted him. MacIain believed the student. So they let him go. The murders are still unsolved. There were no other leads, or at least no concrete ones. Malcolm hasn't heard of any breakthrough since. Maybe some day he'll hear it was the student after all. Granted, his motive was weak, but he had the means.

Who needs motive when a finger is clearly pointing one way? He asked MacIain that same question. He never got an answer.

The DCI seems to calm down a bit. Yes, MacIain can have that effect. There's a lot of confidence in his hand.

'Andrew, may I call you Andrew?' Cameron rattles as he's turning to Malcolm and Pete.

No, he may not, Malcolm is thinking. MacIain doesn't do first names. He's simply incapable of it.

'Sir,' MacIain swallows down the request.

'You remember your former colleague, Andrew?'

'Sergeant Drummond,' he nods at Malcolm.

MacIain will *never* call him Malcolm. No matter how much they disagreed, MacIain always addressed him appropriately.

'And this is our local constable, Pete Boyle.'

'Constable Boyle.'

'Oh, Pete, Boss. Call me Pete.'

That won't go down well, like the rest of his appearance. It takes a split second for MacIain to take in Pete. Malcolm can tell he doesn't like what he's seeing. MacIain asks a lot from his men, and he has minimum standards. Pete doesn't tick a single box of the absolute necessities.

'Constable Boyle,' MacIain repeats.

'Now,' Cameron proceeds, 'You're Edinburgh men, I'm sure you can cooperate on this delicate case. Have you had time to look into this ugly business?'

MacIain nods.

'I have all the names and details, Sir, unless something came up since.'

'No, no. You inform your colleagues here. You can rely on as many uniformed police as necessary. You will find several sent from Fort William by the time you return from the scene. More CID will be a little more tricky for the moment, but I'll see who I can find. Forensics have been informed and will be moved in as soon as you give the green light.'

Malcolm can't believe what he's hearing. MacIain's been brought from Edinburgh to lead an investigation in Highland area, with just Malcolm and Pete, and a few uniformed officers? What case is this? Just how ugly is this that it can only be looked at by three people?

One thing's for sure: this is not an April fool. MacIain doesn't do those either.

‘I heard you have one colleague working for you in Edinburgh?’

MacIain nods again. That can only be Tom. The entire station calls him by his first name – or by his nickname Tommy Tabard – but even after fourteen years, MacIain still addresses his most loyal officer as DC Baird. And Tom is incredibly loyal to MacIain, no matter what the DI asks of him. Getting up at four in the morning is nothing compared to what he’s been put through over the years. But all know – including MacIain himself – that as a tandem, Tom and the DI are a force to be reckoned with. MacIain won’t work any case without his right-hand man. Tom simply wouldn’t be working at all if it hadn’t been for MacIain fourteen years ago.

Tom was badly injured during what was supposed to have been a routine house visit. But a gas explosion put Tom in hospital for weeks. When he was finally released he was diagnosed with a serious hearing impairment and loss of balance. All was set in motion for an honourable discharge, but Tom pleaded to stay with the police. Unfortunately none of his superior officers was willing to take on a mere constable still struggling to come to terms with his disabilities. None, except for newly transferred then DS MacIain. He was prepared to supervise DC Baird. From what Malcolm heard, MacIain was given a clear warning that Tom would be his sole responsibility if things went wrong. But things didn’t go wrong. On the contrary, the tandem worked and a year later MacIain was promoted to Detective Inspector.

‘Yes, Sir, DC Baird has already provided me information on all those in the Valley.’

Tom may be less mobile, but he’s the best researcher. He needs the minimum of information to give MacIain the maximum in no time. MacIain will always carry an iPad Tom will send all information to. Malcolm doesn’t know how long it took MacIain to get to Glencoe, but he’s sure Tom has already been doing some research for his DI.

‘Who’s that they’re talking about?’

‘DC Baird, the DI’s right-hand man... and left-hand man.’

Tom has his own “man” though. No one knows who Tom’s boyfriend is, but he’s been with his “man” for some thirteen years now. MacIain hates it when Tom talks about his personal life. Malcolm thinks that’s rather unfair of MacIain. It’s not because MacIain doesn’t have a life of his own that he should deny Tom his happiness. And it’s obvious Tom’s “man” is making him happy.

Pete seems puzzled. Malcolm still has a fair few questions too.

‘Good, good... Uh, I needn’t remind you this is a delicate situation?’

‘No, Sir.’

‘Good, good. Uh, you know I have a relative...’

‘Yes, Sir, I do.’

‘Good, good. I will inform the uh, next of kin. Keep me informed of your progress. I need to be kept informed, Andrew.’

‘Sir.’

MacIain really hates being called by his first name. But he swallows this invasion of his privacy and nods again. Cameron greets Pete and Malcolm, as well as the officer by the door. Then he’s out. So what’s going on?

‘Constable MacDonald, you will find accommodation in Glencoe for nine?’

‘Yes, Sir. How about accommodation for you?’

‘Will be taken care of.’

No doubt Tom will do that for him.

‘And transportation for all of us out of the Valley?’

‘Yes, Sir, I will call Fort William right away.’

‘Do you think you could find us something to drink, or even eat?’

‘Yes, Sir.’

‘Thank you, Constable.’

MacIain turns around and walks to a whiteboard.

‘Constable Boyle...’

‘Call me, Pete, Boss.’

‘It’s Sir, Constable Boyle.’

It’s futile to even try, but Pete obviously can’t know the DI’s habits. He will, though. MacIain is unwavering, so Pete had better adapt. They’re about the same age, Pete and MacIain, but they’re exact opposites. In their late forties, Pete’s about three times the DI’s size; the former sports an untidy beard and even untidier clothes with the latter as clean-shaven as a baby while wearing the obligatory shirt and tie. Malcolm feels increasingly sure MacIain will comment on Pete’s dress-code any time soon.

But for now, Malcolm would finally like to know exactly what ugly business brought the three of them to Glencoe at five in the morning.

‘Sergeant Drummond,’ MacIain states.

MacIain's typing something on his iPad. That didn't take long. He then takes a pen.

'A few days ago, ten people set out from Glasgow: eight police officers and two well-known Munro baggers.'

'Glasgow?'

Highland police area and Glasgow police? With an Edinburgh officer leading an investigation? Those eight Glasgow officers won't appreciate being interrogated by a rival from the Old Reekie.

'Last night they camped in the Lost Valley.'

Malcolm doesn't like the sound of that. He doesn't want to walk into any valley, let alone at this hour. It will be another hour before it's light. Moreover, he doesn't have the right clothes for any expedition into the Glen Coe wilderness.

'When one of them was murdered,' MacIain adds.

Why couldn't the killer murder one of them when they were *out* of the Valley? The DI can't seriously expect Malcolm to actually walk to the scene, right? Malcolm's already staking his money on one of the Munro baggers. Such fools to insist on choosing the hard way! There is a reason there are roads. It's so people can easily get from one place to the other. There's no point in climbing a mountain just for the fun of it. There is no fun in depleting your own resources for the sake of it.

"Lost Valley" is all there's written on the board. But Malcolm knows that look. It's the look right before the flood gates are opened.

'At exactly two am a tape was played for the whole Valley to hear. After this diversion, the group gathered and looked to see where everyone was. Everyone was accounted for. Except for one: DI Amanda Anderson. She was murdered.'

Malcolm knows only one other Anderson, and that is retired DCI Anthony Anderson, the active ghost of Fort William. He's been retired for three years now, and still he visits the station on a fortnightly basis at least. The man seems incapable of understanding the station will run just fine without him.

'Apart from DI Anderson, the group consists of the following people: seven colleagues – Sergeants John Abercromby, Gary Hay, Leonard Lindsay and Jim Wemyss and DCs Annie Cranstoun, George Mackie and Jonathan Sinclair.'

The board is getting filled in no time. Except for the name Sinclair, none rings a bell with Malcolm.

'Also, two Munro baggers: Dennis Haldane and Doug Munro.'

That last name rings more than a bell. It definitely explains why MacIain is here and not Malcolm's boss.

'They tried to phone from the scene of the crime, but that didn't work. So they split in two groups. Sergeants Abercromby and Lindsay, together with Constable Sinclair and Doug Munro went back to the entrance of the Valley where they alerted us. The four of them are still waiting there. They have been since three am this morning.'

A mixture of panic and frustration is filling Malcolm. So he's been brought to Glencoe to team up with a bunch of backpacking Glaswegian colleagues. Why didn't the DCI tell him they would be investigating a murder in a valley? Malcolm could have told him then he wasn't the best man for the job. Like MacIain doesn't do first names, Malcolm doesn't do hiking, scrambling, backpacking, anything that involves walking boots. In fact walking is something Malcolm prefers doing on firm ground.

'Really? That's a long wait,' Pete states seriously.

As far as Malcolm is concerned, they could wait a lot longer too.

'Yes, and we shouldn't keep them waiting any longer, Constable Boyle.'

They are actually going out. Can Malcolm still object?

'Now before we go, some facts we can already jot down.'

MacIain puts his pen on Doug Munro's name.

'He's DI Munro's son,' Malcolm complains.

'Indeed,' MacIain continues, ignoring Malcolm's frustration, 'As well as the elder brother of an officer also working in Fort William. Obviously the eight officers have friends and relatives all over the Glasgow police force, and beyond. So their relatives are out of the investigation. DI Anderson is the daughter of former DCI Anthony Anderson, who headed Fort William police station up to a few years ago.'

It rules out the rest of the Fort William police station. Malcolm is the last one to join the station and all the rest will have either worked under Anderson, or known him pretty well. Suddenly, waiting those nine months didn't seem like such a bad idea. Malcolm's sure he wouldn't have been called out of bed to be dragged over here, had he decided to wait for his promotion in Edinburgh. He wouldn't even have been called out of bed to work behind the scene, like Tom's doing right now.

MacIain is taking a step back to see how his scribbles look on the board.

‘Huh,’ he mutters, ‘Well, look at that. They’re all... Hmm. Never mind.’

Malcolm won’t.

MacIain is adding the age of each of the scramblers.

Why the hell did they have to camp in a valley? Couldn’t they have camped on a proper camping space? Nice and open? Close to the road? Malcolm’s praying the Valley is close to the road. He really can’t see the bloody fun of pitching a tent so far from civilisation.

‘Sergeants Abercromby, Lindsay and Wemyss all graduated with DI Anderson. DI Anderson not only rose to DI a lot faster than her male colleagues, but is commanding one of them: DS Abercromby. We need to figure out how the three of them feel about that.’

Anderson and her peers all are or were thirty-two.

‘They went out hiking with Anderson,’ Malcolm grumbles, ‘They can’t have been on hostile grounds if they decided to team up for something like that.’

MacIain points his pen at Malcolm.

‘We need to know how this trip came about.’

MacIain returns to the board. Munro is thirty; Haldane is thirty-four. Hay is forty with Mackie in his late forties; two men working under a younger superior. Cranstoun is twenty-five and Sinclair is the Benjamin of the group with only twenty-four years of age. MacIain is pointing his pen at Sinclair.

‘DC Sinclair is the godson of DCI Cameron.’

‘Oooh, no wonder the big guy was so nervous,’ Pete states smilingly.

MacIain is not amused with his remark.

‘DC Sinclair phoned DCI Cameron, while DS Abercromby phoned 999. So that’s eight police officers with friends, colleagues and family members all over Glasgow and Fort William. That’s our first problem. Second problem, the scene of the murder.’

That is a problem indeed.

‘Why’s that a problem, Boss?’

‘It’s Sir. The problem in this case, Constable Boyle, is that Glen Coe is an area popular with Munro baggers, so Doug Munro and Dennis Haldane will know this area very well.’

‘I don’t see the problem,’ Pete confesses.

‘They have an advantage over us. We need someone on our side who knows that place equally well.’

‘So we need another scrambler.’

‘Yes, Sergeant Drummond. But it will be hard to find one readily available who doesn’t know either Munro or Haldane. They are pretty well-known in their circle.’

‘Fantastic. Anyone from the Mountain Rescue Team?’

‘Dennis Haldane’s school friend works there.’

‘National Trust?’

‘Brother-in-law.’

‘The world is full of nutters,’ Malcolm grumbles.

‘I’m astounded to find your motivation for moving to Fort William wasn’t the surrounding scenery, Sergeant Drummond,’ MacIain states sarcastically, ‘Which leaves us with the question: who will not only take us into the Lost Valley, but will be able to give us an independent opinion on the ins and outs of that place?’

‘Isn’t a valley open by definition?’ Malcolm asks dryly.

Flat and open. Maybe Malcolm could stroll into the place wearing his regular shoes all the same.

‘Not that one,’ Pete shakes his head and slurps the tea MacDonald brought in, ‘It’s closed off.’

‘You obviously haven’t explored your new working patch, Sergeant Drummond.’

‘I hate anything that’s not nicely paved,’ Malcolm grumbles. ‘And you’re working in Fort William, laddie?’ Pete thunders loudly.

Malcolm angrily swings his head in Pete’s direction.

‘Sorry, I meant, Serg.’

MacIain takes his iPad and readily produces a map. The man and his toy; or maybe Tom already sent that map to the DI.

‘Right, Coire Gabhail, the Lost Valley.’

Malcolm recognises the A82. A broken line leads into Coire Gabhail. The Valley itself is completely surrounded by mountain sides and proper unpronounceable Munros. Not even that; they couldn’t even give those bloody mountains names he can actually utter. Malcolm will never climb anything he can’t pronounce. He simply refuses.

Pete plants his index on the screen.

‘That’s the only real way in,’ he speaks with his mouth full of biscuits.

‘Fingers off, Constable.’

‘Sorry, Boss.’

This is going to prove a ridiculously long day if Pete’s not going to step up his game.

‘Sir, not Boss. Given the presence of Bidean nam Bian and Stob Coire Sgreamhach at the back of the Valley, I’m sure the likes of Doug Munro and Dennis Haldane manage another way in and out of that Valley, Constable Boyle.’

MacIain can even pronounce their names.

‘No matter if there are several ways in and out, Sir, the most likely option is that the killer’s one of them. By the sound of it, the Munro baggers are topping my list.’

‘I know how you compile your list, Sergeant. But if it was one of them, he or she must have nerves of steel.’

‘Or several of them are in it together.’

‘In any case, Sergeant, we need someone on our side to tell us the ins and outs of that place.’

MacIain is looking in MacDonald’s direction.

‘No, sorry, Sir. I may have been there a few times, but that’s about it.’

‘Any of your colleagues a keen scrambler?’

‘None who could compete with a proper mountaineer, Sir.’

‘I’ve been there a couple of times,’ Pete says in-between attempting to finish off the entire packet of biscuits himself, ‘You know, for my health. Trying to keep fit.’

And failing miserably, Malcolm would like to add.

‘And?’ MacIain questions him.

‘And what, Boss?’

‘It’s Sir, Constable. How well do you know the place?’

‘It’s a very nice place. Peaceful.’

Malcolm is taking a deep breath. There’s been a murder and Pete’s trying his best to describe the scenery. But the DI is patiently waiting.

‘Well, that’s all I know basically. If you want to know every last detail about the place, you’d have to talk to Nic.’

‘Nic.’

First the nonsense, then the name. The man’s a joke, an April fool. Neither MacIain nor Malcolm is laughing though.

‘Nic, either at home or walking in the Valley. Knows every nook and cranny.’

Pete actually managed to finish the biscuits. Malcolm had two with MacIain not eating a single biscuit. But Pete ate the whole packet. Crumbs are playing hide and seek in his beard. He’s bloody building an emergency supply of food.

‘Does Nic have a full name?’

‘Oh, wow, sorry, I don’t know. All I know is that there’s no one who knows that place better than Nic. Not even those Munro baggers could beat Nic over there. I’m sure of that.’

He pours himself more tea. MacIain calmly puts his cup down. Tom doesn’t need a lot of information to do research, but Nic of Glencoe won’t do for sure.

‘How do you know Nic?’ Malcolm asks.

‘From the pub. Nic’s there on a daily basis. Well, nearly every day.’

‘Drinking?’

‘Nooo, having lunch.’

‘And you don’t know Nic’s last name? Would the landlord know Nic’s full name?’

‘No one does. It’s just Nic.’

‘Nic’s local?’

‘Was here when I was transferred to this place. Why?’

Is he doing it on purpose or does the man simply excel at getting on MacIain’s nerves. Even Malcolm is finding it very hard to grasp the infinity of his cluelessness.

‘What does Nic do for a living, Constable, except for having lunch and walking in the Valley?’

‘No idea. There’s delivery vans at the place every other day, you know, FedEx. I think they could move their headquarters to Nic’s place since they’re there so often. But I don’t know what Nic does. I think it has to do with papers. Yes, it’s to do with papers. Lots of them. I’ve seen mountains of papers there.’

Papers. How did Pete ever get to be police?

‘You’ve been inside Nic’s place, Pete?’

‘Yes, on the rare occasion. After we had met in the Valley. Nic knows all about the place, so if you want to know what route to take... I sure liked the advice I got.’

‘So you’ve been inside the place, but have no idea what Nic’s doing for a living?’

‘No, why?’

‘Delivery vans all of the time. Makes it look a bit dodgy, Pete.’

It’s a good thing Malcolm’s brother can’t hear him right now or he could expect another dressing-down.

‘Oh, no, Serg. It’s all legal vans. Told you. FedEx is there most often. They could tell you. No, Nic’s decent. Trust me. The Valley is just an outlet.’

‘What for?’

‘I don’t know,’ Pete shrugs innocently.

MacIain is taking a deep breath.

'Why don't you take us to Nic, Constable, and we'll take it from there. I want to be in that Valley before the sun rises, so we'll see if he can help.'

'She,' Pete quickly corrects the DI and swallows the remainder of his tea.

'Excuse me?' Malcolm asks.

'What?' Pete blurts out.

'Nic's a woman?'

'Yes, well, sort of. You know what I mean,' he blinks.

No, Malcolm doesn't, but he refrains from asking. It would only lead to more futile conversation. MacIain has already made up his mind that the best way forward is to take it from Nic's place. He takes his walking boots from his bag. Of course MacIain came prepared. He puts them on and picks up his rucksack.

'Sir, do I have to...'

MacIain's face tells Malcolm he doesn't even need to bother asking. MacIain turns around and marches out of the room.

'I hate scramblers, male and female,' Malcolm grumbles and follows MacIain.

Nic

Pete's car is a jungle of papers, empty packets of crisps and foils once covering chocolate bars. The DI is gritting his teeth, but says nothing. Instead he silently endures Pete's humming until they reach a small cottage at the edge of the village.

'This is Nic's place.'

Pete's a barrel of useless information.

'Does Nic own a car, Constable Boyle?'

A licence plate will surely give MacIain Nic's full details.

'No, told you, Nic doesn't leave this place.'

'How does she get to the Valley?' Malcolm questions Pete.

'On foot.'

'That's a fair distance, Constable Boyle.'

'Nic's a keen walker. When she's off, she's often gone all night.'

MacIain is taking another deep breath.

'Well, at least she'll know her way into the Valley in darkness,' he sighs.

‘Oh, yes, Boss... Sir. You can count on that. She won’t let you down.’

Pete knocks on the door, but obviously there’s no answer. It’s five in the bloody morning. Who would hear that?

‘Hold on. The back door’s always open. I’ll wake her up.’

Pete goes around the back and half a minute later he opens the front door. There’s a staircase to the left and Pete enthusiastically climbs it.

‘Nic! Nic! It’s me, Pete. I’m coming up.’

Malcolm and MacIain are taking in the hallway. Pete didn’t lie about the paper.

‘My God,’ Malcolm exclaims, ‘This is an arsonist’s wet dream, dry dream, Valhalla.’

‘I never took you for a Viking, Sergeant,’ MacIain mutters and steps a few yards further inside.

The hallway is full of shelves of paper filled right up to the ceiling. Light a match and this place will burn like a torch.

Meanwhile, upstairs Nic is awake, but she is having none of it, no matter how Pete is pleading with her. Then again, Malcolm can’t but sympathise. He wouldn’t wish for any woman to be woken up by the likes of sweaty Pete. What a nightmare that would be: having Pete suddenly stand by your bedside. She could of course close her backdoor instead of leaving it open for any odd creature to enter at his own will.

Cardboard wrappings at the bottom of the staircase draw MacIain’s attention. He throws one quick look at them and walks outside. He’s phoning, Tom no doubt. The package was addressed to N.N. Nic N. living in Glencoe; that’s less than the bare minimum.

Upstairs the argumentation doesn’t cease. Pete’s still trying to convince Nic. She’s bluntly refusing to be part of this insane undertaking.

MacIain returns.

‘She’s Glaswegian,’ Malcolm quietly informs his DI.

‘U-huh,’ he concurs.

‘The accent is rather a give-away,’ Malcolm mutters dryly.

‘Just so.’

MacIain is slowly taking in the hallway without invading Nic’s privacy. Malcolm would like to enter the rest of the house, firmly believing that if one leaves the backdoor open, one shouldn’t complain if guests inspect the kitchen and/or living room.

‘Oh, for fuck’s sake, Pete,’ they suddenly hear.

Somebody comes thundering down the stairs. A few seconds later Malcolm realises what Pete meant. An angry individual, dressed in pyjamas, with closely cropped, dark hair, in her mid- to late thirties is standing on the bottom stair. She’s still smaller than Malcolm, but about the same height as MacIain now.

‘Look, Mr...’

‘DI Andrew MacIain, Ms Nic...’

‘Nic.’

‘Nic who?’

‘Nic Nic.’

‘Ah, I thought the NN stood for Nomen Nescio.’

That seems to please Nic.

‘Ms Nic.’

‘I don’t particularly insist on formality, MacIain.’

‘Fine by me, Nic.’

‘Look, MacIain, I’m sorry for your predicament, but I can’t do this. I have work to do. Moreover, I’m not a people person. I’m not... I just can’t do this.’

Pete’s pleading with her again.

‘No, Pete, just get out and let me be. For fuck’s sake.’

Spoken like a true Glaswegian.

‘Then who’s going to show us around, Nic? No one knows that place like you do.’

‘That may well be, but I didn’t come to Glen Coe to be a fucking tourist guide. Why don’t you show them around? You know the Lost Valley well enough.’

‘Not like you do, Nic.’

‘Whatever.’

She literally escorts Pete off the staircase.

‘MacIain, I’m sure you’ll find Pete will do. He can take you there. Now if you would kindly leave my house, I’d like to get back to bed.’

MacIain’s mobile goes off. He calmly pushes a few buttons.

‘Nic.’

He shows her the screen, but doesn’t say anything. She clenches her teeth and slowly looks up. There’s no gloating; MacIain doesn’t do gloating. There’s not a muscle on his face that could betray any hint of his feelings. But Tom must have found her name. God, that man is good.

‘Now if I don’t mention this to anyone, can we start again, Nic?’