

A Song of Homeland

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Also by this author:

In this series:

The Aviary (2013)

The Memory of Pine (2014)

The Rampart Inside (2016)

Sgeulachd Castle (2003)

The Short Grioghal (2005)

The Beauty of Braemore (2007)

The Quarterer & the Lengor (2009)

The Heir to Pictavia (2011)

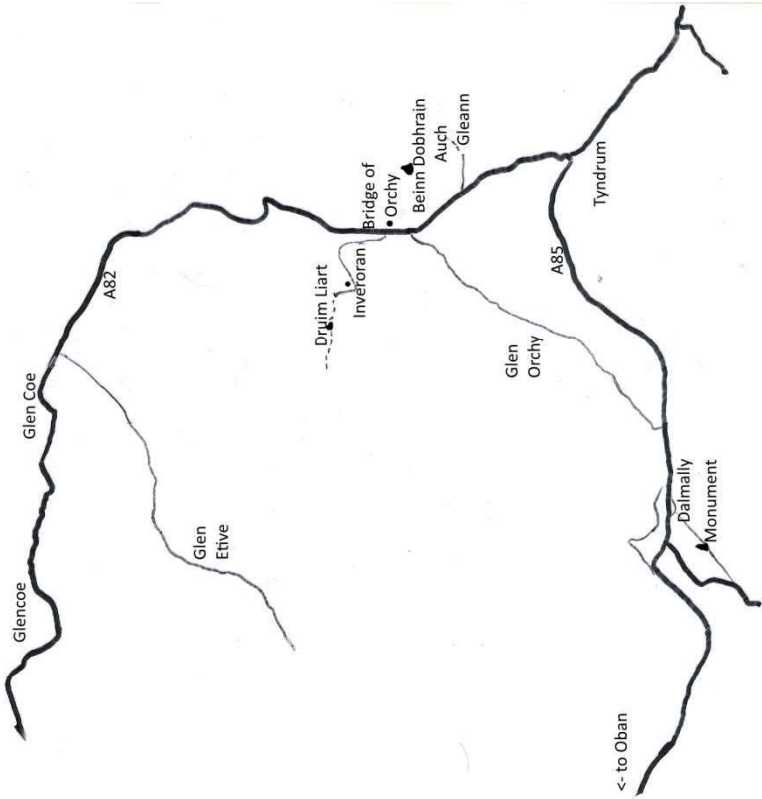
Trilogy:

The Stained Family Tree (2008)

The Marlets' Nest (2008)

The Road to the Isles (2012)

For my wife
With a big thank you to Carol



Alisdair Dalziel

‘What’s that prick doing here?’ Sinclair complains irritably.

Malcolm is sure “that prick” actually heard Sinclair’s rude comment, but Alasdair Dalziel wouldn’t be the fearsome QC if the insult did not simply bounce off him and slap Sinclair back in the face. He calmly waits for Tom to let him into Andrew’s office. Sinclair’s foul mood only gets worse.

‘He has some nerve, showing his...’

‘Constable!’ Chris cuts him short decisively.

Malcolm is simply astounded by the nerve Sinclair has. It was only yesterday when he was transferred from Lewis, where he had been stationed since shortly after Anderson’s murder last year. That it was his very own godfather, who had condoned the move to the Outer Hebrides, should have been a clear sign to “cocky” DC Sinclair. When the young DC failed to tone down his supercilious attitude, DCI Cameron called on his peer in Edinburgh: if Andrew could “instill some humility” into his godson. It’s only his second day in Edinburgh, yet Sinclair is already behaving like a spoilt brat. He is angry, frustrated, and acts like the case he was handed this morning was designed as some sort of retaliation against himself. Malcolm’s not on the case, but all he has seen today is Sinclair trying to brush it aside. In fact, he plainly told Chris, when she arrived at Greyfriars Kirkyard as well. When a uniformed officer led her to a vandalised grave, Sinclair simply dismissed it as a practical joke. Detective Inspector MacAskill was lectured by a newly arrived Detective Constable that it was nothing worth investigating. Chris, however, was not so easily put off. There was blood on the grave and a note was tied to it: some Gaelic words. Chris asked forensics to check out if the blood is human. Sinclair feels positive it is not. He says it will be sheep blood. Chris still ordered him to go through CCTV of the area to see if he can find the perpetrator. He’s been on it the entire day, moaning, complaining, grinding his teeth. Malcolm knows he’s been dragging his feet too. Because Sinclair feels sure the blood is not human, he feels that looking at the CCTV is clearly a waste of time. He will not be bothered. It’s as if it’s beneath him. Malcolm is simply astounded. When he started in CID, he thought he was more confident than now, but he would never have dared to dismiss a case that easily.

‘Ma’am,’ Sinclair replies sheepishly.

‘Go home, Constable,’ Chris orders, ‘And make sure you have managed to switch on a more functional mood when you return tomorrow.’

He grinds his teeth again.

‘Ma’am,’ he nods as he gets up.

He lingers momentarily. The man simply cannot help himself.

‘I assure you: this is a waste of time. It’s someone getting back at me. It’s a waste of time. I’m sorry but it is. Someone’s idea of a bad joke.’

Malcolm knows that Fitch – who used to be Sinclair’s Sarge in Glasgow – warned him Sinclair thinks he’s the star in his own universe, but if Sinclair thinks someone is retaliating, he must feel he did something wrong in the first place. To believe someone would do something as outrageous as that, is simply beyond Malcolm.

‘Well,’ Chris replies calmly, ‘When we have confirmation that the blood is non-human, we may reconsider. For now, I expect to see some action on your part.’

Sinclair hesitates, briefly considers some vocal protest, but then wisely decides to shut up and walk away. Chris sighs.

‘John warned me he thinks ... Never mind. I’m not repeating John’s exact words.’

‘Pity,’ Malcolm retorts smilingly.

‘Did it include the word “arse”?’ he teasingly asks.

‘Among others,’ she confirms light-heartedly.

The pleasantries rush out of the room. Dalziel is here at the station, talking to Andrew. He is not the man to turn up without a very good reason.

‘I won’t use Sinclair’s words, but what *is* Dalziel doing here?’ Malcolm wonders.

‘It cannot be good news. Dalziel wouldn’t just meet with the DCI like that.’

Chris and Andrew are on personal names as well, but like Andrew, Chris does not easily have her work environment breached by a private touch. It makes it easy for Malcolm too.

‘Do you think he is worried his brother still has a trump card?’

Chris has led a pretty successful search into Alasdair Dalziel’s murderous brother. Malcolm feels sure she did not leave a stone unturned.

'I don't know. I don't know if the DCI would ask us to stay a bit longer if it were to do with that. No, I don't think so.'

Andrew did ask them to stay. Malcolm cannot be sure, but he thinks the request came shortly after a phone call. A phone call from Dalziel? Tom joins Chris and Malcolm.

'This is something else,' Chris mutters.

Malcolm looks at Tom. He's usually home by now. Tom looks around to check if no one else is close. Then he comes a bit closer.

'Andy told me not to bother with dinner this evening. He got a phone call and then told me we'd not make it home early this evening. He asked me to ask you to stay a bit longer as well.'

Chris takes a deep breath.

'I don't like this one bit.'

Andrew and Dalziel are still talking. Andrew doesn't ask for tea, not even a glass of water. They are just talking. Worse, Andrew's face looks graver by the second.

Suddenly Dalziel gets up. So does Andrew. When Dalziel opens the door, they hear him say: 'I'll see you tomorrow morning, Chief Inspector.'

'Thank you, thank you for your help.'

Dalziel simply nods, looks at Malcolm, Chris and Tom and nods again. Then he leaves, a briefcase in his hands, a stern look on his face. It's not as if Malcolm knows Dalziel any differently, but he could swear there's a different tone of sombreness to his presence. Tom approaches Andrew's office. Andrew momentarily stares into a void. Then he finds Tom looking at him.

'Get Chris and Malcolm inside,' he urges.

Personal names, Andrew does not utter those easily at the station. They enter the office.

'Get a chair. I will call Fitch.'

He puts the phone on speakers.

'Sir?'

'Fitch,' Andrew replies.

'Right,' it sounds.

On the contrary, it doesn't sound right at all.

'I'm here with Tom, Chris and Malcolm.'

Fitch groans.

'Sounds ominous, Andrew.'

'Fitch, don't get me wrong, but where are you?'

'I'm at the carpark of the supermarket. I was about to go shopping. My girlfriend is coming over tomorrow, you see, and I

am rather short on coffee, well, on the right sort of coffee, it seems.'

'He bought decaf, for God's sake,' Chris objects.

'Really,' Malcolm retorts coolly.

Chris and her coffee; it's about as sacrilegious as Fitch and his tea.

'Fitch, promise me that you will not return to the station right now,' Andrew continues.

'Why the hell would I return to the station?'

'Promise me, Fitch. Buy your coffee. Chris will need it. You may need to get some extra tea bags as well.'

Fitch groans.

'Andrew, what the hell is going on?'

Malcolm is relieved to hear he's not the only one who would like to know just exactly what is happening.

'Dalziel just came over. He uh..., he was called by Nic this morning.'

Nic, calling Dalziel? Nic calling anyone?

'He was in court that moment, so he only heard her message around noon. It seems Nic was arrested this morning.'

Tom spontaneously brings his hand in front of his opened mouth. Malcolm cannot believe what he just heard. Nic, arrested?

'What? I thought you were with her this morning.'

'I dropped her off a bit before eight and left for Edinburgh straight away. Apparently it happened less than fifteen minutes later. She was arrested for stalking and harassing a police officer.'

'Nic? What the fuck!'

What police officer? Nic stalking anyone? It's only a good year since Nic started managing any sort of social relationship at all. Malcolm simply cannot imagine Nic "stalking" anyone at all, let alone a police officer.

'She was booked as Veronika – with a 'k' – MacIntyre,' Andrew continues.

'Nic never went by that name,' Fitch objects.

No, in a dark past, she went by the name Veronica MacNicoll. Malcolm remembers though, that Nic's mother is a MacIntyre. So was this a case of mistaken identity, or is there more to it?

'No,' Andrew agrees, 'But the arresting officer charged her with police harassment under that name.'

'What the fuck!' Fitch cries out.

Malcolm hopes he parked his car sufficiently far from the entrance. Any time soon Fitch might start a scene.

‘And why can I *not* return to the station to check what’s going on?’

‘Because Dalziel said Nic’s arrest constituted a grave act of police brutality.’

Fitch is momentarily looking for words, but they can all hear he’s fuming. Andrew’s cheekbones too speak louder than words. But nobody else is saying anything either. Malcolm couldn’t think of a single thing to say anyway. All that he can think is that Nic’s been beaten up by a police officer who mistook her for a Veronika MacIntyre. How did that happen?

Andrew is trying to regain composure, but it takes at least a minute before he starts speaking again.

‘Dalziel said Nic did not look good. Her face was bruised as if she had been pushed against the wall, her left hand was bleeding and she was limping. He even said she had difficulty breathing.’

‘Right, Andrew, give me the name of that cunt. I’m going to have a serious...’

‘John,’ Chris intervenes, ‘You are *not* going back to the station. We are all going to calm down and see what we are going to do about this. Clearly something is going on and...’

‘Chris, this is Nic we are talking about!’

‘Yes, and do you think Nic would want you to beat up someone on her behalf? There’s a reason why she called Dalziel and not you.’

It’s good to see someone is still in control, because nobody else is, not even Andrew.

‘Nic’s... Fuck it, Chris,’ Fitch concedes angrily.

He hits what Malcolm assumes is the steering wheel.

‘Fuck it. Andrew, who did this?’

Andrew takes a deep breath. He then looks at Chris. It’s as if he hopes for the best.

‘DI MacTaggart,’ it sounds.

There are all waiting for Fitch to explode. Instead there’s speechlessness. He doesn’t say anything for a full eight seconds.

‘MacT... MacTaggart?’

There’s a pause again.

‘Andrew, are you sure about that?’

‘Funny,’ Andrew remarks laconically, ‘Dalziel seemed to have a similar disbelief. But since he sat with this DI MacTaggart in the same room with Nic, and MacTaggart repeated the accusation in Dalziel’s presence, it would seem it is MacTaggart.’

Fitch’s confusion is clear.

‘MacTaggart? The... We call him the Number Cruncher. He couldn’t even... There’s this running joke at the station that he got his own ballpoint pen because he can’t lift the ones we use at the station. This... Fuck it, Andrew. I’m not getting any of this.’

‘I suggest we get to the bottom of it then.’

Police brutality

Chris leaves for Glasgow at once. Although she made Fitch promise to wait for her at his place, Malcolm thinks she’d rather not take too much risk, so she doesn’t pass by her own place first. Malcolm thinks there’s already a second toothbrush in Fitch’s bathroom anyway. Since they got together, they seem to have taken gigantic leaps.

Malcolm drives to his own apartment first and then picks up Andrew and Tom, who are already waiting by the side of the road: Tom looking out for Malcolm; Andrew holding his phone to his ear. Apart from a few ‘Lyns’, Andrew hardly gets a word in edgeways. He finally concludes the call with a ‘We’ll be there as soon as possible, Lyn. We’re already on our way.’ He puts his phone away and stares outside. Tom leans forwards and puts his hand on his man’s shoulder. It takes a few heavy breaths before Andrew can respond. He touches Tom’s hand in return. Malcolm would like to hope it’s not as bad as Dalziel made them think, but Dalziel is hardly known for his exaggerating skills. On the contrary, minimalistic is how Malcolm would describe the man. If Dalziel says Nic did not look good, Nic won’t look good.

‘Lyn’s hysterical,’ Andrew finally says, ‘Nic’s refusing to go to hospital. She doesn’t say anything. Len has just arrived there.’

Malcolm would like to think Len could maybe reason with Nic, but if Nic hasn’t said anything to Lyn, Len won’t be able to get to her either. Andrew maybe could. If Nic was lucid enough *not* to call Andrew this morning, she might not have switched off completely.

‘I doubt it will make much of a difference with Nic, but maybe he can calm down his sister,’ Andrew mutters as if he read Malcolm’s mind.

He clenches his teeth a few times and then takes a deep breath.

‘Tom, could you phone Chris, and ask them to wait outside? I don’t want Fitch going in without... I think Nic is expecting both Fitch and me.’

They don’t say anything anymore until they arrive on the outskirts of Glasgow some fifty minutes later. Malcolm has never been here, but he needn’t guess which house he should try to park close to. He recognises Lyn’s car, Len’s car is parked right behind it on the driveway and Fitch conveniently positioned his 4x4 behind Len’s on the street. Fitch gets out as soon as he watches Malcolm drive closer. He takes out his phone. It’s only been a month since Malcolm has last seen Fitch, but the latter now sports a full beard. It’s probably the tension, but the picture makes Tom spontaneously giggle.

‘Sorry,’ he apologises, ‘I’m sorry. I’m...’

Andrew undoes his seatbelt.

‘Not the right time, Tom,’ he speaks sternly and gets out.

‘I know,’ Tom moans.

Before Tom and Malcolm can even leave the car, Len already opens the front door. Fitch and Chris are waiting all the same. Andrew and Fitch exchange looks, as if they mutely agree on how to handle this situation. Then they nod.

‘Just one more thing, Fitch,’ Andrew says, ‘Dalziel expects to meet Nic at our station tomorrow morning. Don’t ask me what it’s about, but I hope she’s going to sue that...’

Andrews doesn’t finish his sentence, probably for lack of a suitable word for the one who brought them all to the same place.

‘She can stay at my place, Andrew. Chris can drive her to Edinburgh.’

They both nod a few more times, seemingly trying to muster enough courage to go inside. Len is still waiting by the front door.

‘Not a moment too soon,’ Malcolm hears as they approach.

He points at the staircase.

‘What did she tell you already?’ Fitch asks.

‘Nothing, absolutely nothing. She’s sitting there, just sitting there. Except when I told her I was calling the police, then I got a brief look, a forbidding one. It’s... What is going on?’

‘It was one of us who did this to her, Len,’ Fitch admits.

He doesn’t wait and jumps up the stairs.

‘Fitch!’ Len shouts.

He turns around, Andrew immediately behind him.

‘Brace yourself. You are not going to like it.’

Fitch’s hand taps the bar a few times.

'Fuck it,' he curses and disappears upstairs.

Lyn immediately screams for the entire house to hear.

'Look at my Nic! Who did this? Who did this to my Nic?'

Len invites Chris, Tom and Malcolm inside the living room, but walks on, leading them through the kitchen towards the back door. Then he points at a cupboard opposite the door. There's blood on it, several smears vertically painted on the cupboard. Fingers covered in blood; a bloodied hand pushed against the cupboard; a body falling down. Tom emphatically brings his hands in front of his mouth again. Malcolm actually feels like doing the same.

'What happened here? Who beat up Nic? Why?'

'We don't know why this happened, Len,' Chris tries, 'All we know is that this morning, shortly after Andrew dropped her off, she was arrested for police harassment...'

'Excuse me?'

'... by a police officer who thought she was Veronika MacIntyre...,' Chris continues.

'What?'

'A police officer called DI MacTaggart.'

'MacTaggart?' Len exclaims in disbelief.

Another one to be dumbstruck.

'MacTaggart?' Len repeats the name.

'Yes,' Malcolm confirms, 'MacTaggart, he did this to Nic.'

Malcolm points at the blood on the cupboard. What is it with this reverence for this MacTaggart? What is so special about him that everyone who knows him seems to find it implausible he is capable of such a thing?

'MacTaggart? He's... No offence, Tom, but if you were to put your little finger on MacTaggart's chest, he would fall backwards. The man's physical ... And he's... The man's... The man's...'

Len looks totally confused.

'I don't understand any of this. Nic's... I mean, MacTaggart is the embodiment of self-possession. To have done that to Nic... He must have been beside himself. What the hell made him do that?'

The screaming upstairs died down. Next they hear footsteps running on the first floor.

'That's progress,' Len mutters and returns to the living room.

'If only they could convince Nic to go to hospital,' he adds.

But before he can sit down, Lyn comes running down the stairs, a small suitcase in her hand.

‘Lennie, will you look after the hens tomorrow? We’re going to hospital and then we’re staying over at Fitch’s.’

Len’s rather surprised by the sudden change of heart upstairs. Malcolm though, is trying not to get distracted by the thought of the hens. His brother told him all about how he and Len got the henhouse in the garden and fenced off an area for the poultry. Malcolm knows Calum saw it as a chance to atone for his actions and hoped it would soften Nic’s attitude. He’s been trying really hard. Malcolm finds it all a bit too forceful, though. Maybe something did break last month. He doesn’t know. All he knows is that his brother is trying to amend things, and Malcolm just can’t handle it right now.

‘They managed to convince her already?’ Len asks in surprise.

Lyn’s eyes are red from crying. She falls in her brother’s arms.

‘It was as if... No, she *was* waiting for Andrew and Fitch. They took one look at her, Fitch said, “Right, we’re taking you to hospital” and she tried to get up. They are bringing her down right now.’

She starts crying again.

‘She’s hurt all over.’

Len is trying to comfort her, while Lyn is sobbing she doesn’t understand any of it. Her brother’s inability to match the identity of the perpetrator with Nic’s condition is not making her feel any better. Then they hear three people descending the staircase. It mutes everyone. When they hear the occasional groan from Nic, with Fitch telling her she’s doing all right with every step she takes, Malcolm is bracing himself for what he is about to see.

‘Shoes,’ Lyn suddenly exclaims and rushes inside another room, to reappear twenty seconds later with Nic’s shoes.

Then she waits. They all wait for Nic to appear. Malcolm is trying to imagine how Nic not looking good looks like, but nothing could prepare him for the image he’s confronted with. Nic is being supported through the door. The right side of her face is one gigantic bruise; a gauze is covering her left hand; it is only too obvious she can barely walk for pain as both Fitch and Andrew are trying to keep her up. There’s a tear in her eye and Malcolm doubts it’s because she’s embarrassed. Malcolm doesn’t care who this MacTaggart is, but he’s a brute of a policeman. Nothing justifies him attacking Nic in this manner.

Lyn stoops in front of her lover and tries to put on one shoe. It’s plain for all to see Nic has serious difficulty lifting her leg.

She's short of breath and can't stand up straight. Tom stoops and while Lyn holds up Nic's other leg, he puts on the second shoe. Without another word spoken, Fitch and Andrew lead Nic outside, to the car, Lyn in their trail. Nobody is saying anything. Malcolm wishes Dalziel could have been a bit more elaborate when he claimed Nic didn't look good. This is far worse than not good. What possessed someone to attack Nic in such manner?

They hear a car door close. Malcolm, Chris, Tom and Len start looking at each other, wordlessly asking who will break the silence first. But then Andrew comes back inside, seething with anger.

'Nobody goes near that man. We are going to find out every last detail about him and when we do, we are feeding him to Dalziel. I don't want a shred of him left.'

A preliminary report

Malcolm drives Chris and Tom to Fitch's place. Len says he will first go to the station to see if he can find out what has happened. Tom starts digging up everything he can about DI MacTaggart while they are having something to eat. Chris had the foresight to pick up a ton of Bolognese sauce and several packages of spaghetti on her way to Fitch's home earlier this evening.

DI Ben MacTaggart is the same age as Nic: thirty-eight. In fact, he is exactly one day younger. He started his professional career as an accountant, but was handed a police badge after he single-handedly exposed the intricately designed fraud network of the multinational he was working for as a junior accountant. He may only have been a DC, but his expertise brought down several other companies linked to the firm which had previously employed him. Only a few years later he passed his Sergeant's exam and was promoted. His highly analytical mind and perfectionist work resulted in an extremely boring, but highly admirable career. There is not a single spot on his record. He is meticulous, hard-working, co-operative, appreciative, renowned for his calm at all times, and most of all, highly respected. When he agrees to bring a criminal to court, it is long after his colleagues – both lower and higher ranked – thought they had enough evidence. He leaves no stone unturned and doesn't move without at least triple-checking every last detail. No wonder Dalziel knew the man. He must know MacTaggart's cases are airtight.

Which begs the question: what happened that made MacTaggart behave so much out of character that he not only arrested the wrong person but subsequently also behaved in such a violent manner?

Tom passes on everything to Andrew. It doesn't take long before he gets a reply.

'I don't care. What he did to Nic is unforgivable.'

Not long after, Len returns, but when he hears Nic, Lyn, Andrew and Fitch will be back within the next half an hour, he merely says he'll have some food first and then inform everyone at the same time. Fair enough. Chris decides she will already prepare the next batch for Fitch and Andrew. Tom replies there's no way his man will finish half of that.

'John/Fitch will finish the rest,' it sounds in unison.

When Tom recounts MacTaggart's biography in the meantime, Len listens while eating, occasionally shaking his head in disbelief.

'That's the end of his career. Rightfully so, but that's the end of his career. Whoever designed this, is a callous monster,' is all Len still manages to say about it.

When the four others return around midnight, Lyn takes Nic to the guestroom at once. Her limp is even worse, with Malcolm detecting a pain in her right knee. She's bent forwards. Her face is grey, which is hardly surprising since she probably hasn't seen a bed in over twenty-four hours, let alone slept in one. Her bruise looks even worse than four hours ago, although Malcolm can detect a shine on it, probably because of some cream. Her left hand has a new gauze. Malcolm hopes Lyn packed fresh clothes for Nic, because there's blood on her shirt, her trousers... Nic declines food. Lyn wants to stay with Nic until she falls asleep, but might have some later. It's already past midnight.

Andrew doesn't eat a lot indeed, but hands the rest of his plate to Fitch. Anger blocks Andrew's appetite; Fitch needs to urgently replenish his resources.

'Nic...' Andrew finally starts, 'She uh... told us what happened. She had just been checking on the hens when MacTaggart came out of nowhere. He immediately pushed her against the wall. When he addressed her as "Veronika MacIntyre", Nic wanted to protest. Maybe he thought she wanted to throw the egg she was holding in her left hand, I don't know. But he took her arm and swung it against the wall. The egg broke in her hand. She was lucky no bones were broken. It took a lot of time to get all the

dirt out of the wounds on her knuckles. He yelled she was under arrest for police harassment and immediately bound her hands behind her back. He wanted to take her inside, but Nic... She... Huh, she told him she did not give him permission to enter the house. He threw her inside. She landed with her lower ribs on the counter, then hit her right knee on the edge of the cupboard, but managed not to fall down by turning her back towards the other cupboard. She thinks she didn't hit her head. They didn't feel any bump, so they hope she's right. Her ribs are bruised, not broken. The skin on her knee is ripped open and the knee itself swollen.'

He grinds his teeth. Then he takes his mobile and shows a picture: a picture of Nic's chest, the pain screaming in large volumes. No wonder she can't stand up straight.

'Nobody in your station thought she needed medical attention. Her hand was bleeding, she could hardly breathe and she was limping. But MacTaggart told them she was all right and nobody bothered about her. What sort of station are you running over there?' Andrew accuses them.

So much for his respect for his Glasgow peers.

'They allowed her to wash her hands and gave her a cloth to stop the bleeding. That was it.'

He clenches his teeth again.

'She just... Nic, she asked if she could make her phone call, asked for a number in her mobile phone and then rang Dalziel. She reached his answering machine, left a message and was returned to her cell. She... She slept a few hours, forced herself to sleep. I wonder if anybody ever checked up on her during those hours she lay there, hurting. It was sheer pain waking her up.'

Andrew is absolutely livid. Malcolm wonders if there isn't a small part in Andrew that would like to retaliate physically. Malcolm still doesn't understand what is going on. Nothing makes any sense. If this had been a third party, anyone other than Tom or Nic, Andrew would have been angry, but still professional. It would make him a tad more reserved. Malcolm wonders what this will do to Andrew's normal routine.

'They wanted to keep her overnight to give her a morphine injection,' Fitch says, 'She objected, didn't want to spend the night in hospital. They gave her something else then. She insisted it couldn't make her drowsy.'

Fitch sighs.

'She's... She's already...'

He gets up.

‘She knows more than we do. Or at least she suspects something.’

‘John, Nic’s been through a lot today. Are you sure that’s what you were seeing?’

‘I don’t know!’ he shouts, looks around and grits his teeth, ‘Fuck it, I do know. Aye, she suspects something.’

Fitch surely cannot think Nic could have seen this coming.

‘Do you think she knows who this Veronika MacIntyre is?’ Len queries.

‘No,’ Andrew shakes his head, ‘But when I told Fitch I had received MacTaggart’s biography, she asked to be told as well. She was all quiet again after that.’

‘Aye,’ Fitch agrees.

‘I want his head,’ Andrew threatens, ‘His and whoever is behind this. I don’t care if he brought down a million criminals, but thugs like that don’t belong in the force.’

‘I’m going to fucking confront him tomorrow,’ Fitch states and firmly cuts Chris short when she wants to intervene, ‘Aye, I fucking will. I won’t go punching him, but I will expose the cunt for what he really is. Who the fuck does he think he is?’

‘I saw the tape of the interview,’ Len tries to defuse the situation.

Nobody’s asking if he made a copy. It wouldn’t have been legal anyway.

‘He was frustrated when he realised it was Dalziel defending Nic, but MacTaggart had a file in front of him, a proper file.’

MacTaggart was prepared. The attack may have come out of nowhere for the rest of them, but not for MacTaggart.

‘He accused her of stalking him, harassing him, making false allegations. He had dates and he asked for her alibi on each of those occasions. They were all Monday nights, every other fortnight.’

He looks at Andrew.

‘Aye, those Monday nights when you’re out with her, or at least when you drive her somewhere. Monday nights since the second half of September.’

This can hardly be a coincidence. Nic may not be called Veronika MacIntyre, but someone made sure she was out with Andrew when MacTaggart was stalked, or harassed, or whatever happened to him.

‘This has been going on for two months?’ Fitch fumes, ‘Why didn’t that wanker do something about it earlier, instead of just letting it blow up... in Nic’s face?’

‘He... MacTaggart seemed very sure of his case. That is, until Dalziel started talking. He calmly said he was astounded that the DI had decided to be less than thorough this time. His client had an alibi for each of those dates, and even more, if the Inspector would have bothered to verify her name, he would have known that his client went by the name Nic MacNicol, and had never gone by the name Veronika MacIntyre. It’s... It’s odd, but MacTaggart went all quiet then, not just... like Dalziel wiped the floor with him, but like he... I don’t know. It was like something hit him. Her name made him go all quiet.’

‘Maybe that’s when he finally realised who Nic really is,’ Tom suggests.

Malcolm feels sure most police officers know about Nic. Especially her considerable share in solving the twenty-year-old cold case of the disappearance of Deirdre Hoy made her all the more famous within police circles. Not that Nic wanted any credit for it, not then, and not now. She still hasn’t recovered from being “put on parade” after Andrew’s kidnapping. Did MacTaggart realise only then who she was? Did Nic herself make anything of it?

‘And Nic?’ Malcolm asks.

‘Nic never said anything. She had the flat of her right hand on the table and seemed to focus on her fingers the entire time. Only when Dalziel addressed MacTaggart did she briefly look at him. I don’t know how to describe the look on her face. I don’t know if she knows something. She certainly didn’t react to the name MacIntyre. But Nic... I don’t know how she would respond if she did know a woman by that name.’

‘She wouldn’t,’ Andrew retorts, ‘She’d just process it all inside.’

‘Then we need to find out more,’ Chris calmly suggests, and decisively turns to Andrew, ‘Andrew, no offence, but are you capable of handling this or will your personal feelings prevent you from leading this investigation objectively?’

Malcolm loves how Chris can do this. The boldness of the woman never ceases to amaze him. Respectful, but so delightfully critical and yet passionately neutral, this is DI MacAskill all the way.

‘You just watch me tomorrow, Chris.’

A shocking revelation

It was two am by the time Malcolm's head hit his pillow. Unlike Nic, whose medieval trait allows her to be up and running after a mere four hours of sleep, Malcom feels sure the five hours he had will need to be compensated by extra caffeine loaded with additional sugar, if he wants to be of any use today. The mad dreams didn't make it any better either. If he wasn't confronted with Nic's gigantic bruises on her face or chest, he was watching some doctor taking an endless amount of dirt out of her tiny hand, while the gash in her knee seemed to grow until it could swallow him whole. Malcolm hopes Nic managed to get some sleep last night. Then again, if Nic is in one of her moods, no one, not even Andrew, will be able to keep up with her. What exactly did Andrew and Fitch mean that she knows something already?

When Malcolm arrives at the station at eight, Andrew is already in his office. Chris is waiting for Sinclair to lecture him for being late. Last night they agreed that Chris would continue to work on the vandalised grave case with Sinclair. Malcolm and Andrew would sort of clandestinely work on Nic's case. Tom would work on both. Fitch is going to confront MacTaggart this morning and ask him about this supposed harassment and stalking and false allegations business. How MacTaggart is going to justify beating up Nic in front of one of her best friends is quite another matter. Chris urged her boyfriend not to do anything stupid. She reminded him that she didn't mind dating a Sergeant, but she would be very disappointed to be dating a Detective Sergeant under caution, let alone a demoted one. Malcolm doesn't know if he and Len shouldn't be going together, just to keep an eye on the other.

'Where's Nic?' Malcolm asks.

'In one of the interview rooms with Dalziel. Tom's standing by the door, keeping an eye on things for the DCI.'

That figures. Andrew is on the phone in his office.

'Dalziel been here long?' Malcolm yawns.

'He was already waiting for her by the time we got here at seven thirty.'

'Jesus, did Nic get some sleep at all?'

Did Chris get some sleep at all? After all, she had to drive the distance back to Edinburgh this morning.

'She slept some four hours again. Then the pain started taking over. John made her breakfast so she could take a painkiller. He'll be a right mess as well this evening.'

'He won't be the only one', Malcolm retorts dryly.

'I doubt the Chief Inspector slept a lot better,' Chris says, swinging her head in Andrew's direction.

Andrew's off the phone and he doesn't look happy. When he watches Tom approach, he spontaneously jumps up. Tom knocks on the door and opens it.

'Sir, I think Dalziel is about to leave. Um, I think he's saying goodbye.'

Andrew storms out. Chris and Malcolm quickly follow him and still catch Dalziel and Nic shaking hands.

'Thank you, Alisdair, for this.'

Nic takes the thin folder she had previously held under her left armpit. She's standing up straight again, but she's not moving an awful lot.

'If you need anything else, Nic, just let me know.'

'This is fine, Alisdair. I need to think about this first. Thank you for your help. I really appreciate this.'

Dalziel nods.

'Any time, Nic. You have my number.'

Dalziel turns around and leaves, passing a rather startled Sinclair. He stops to point at Dalziel, but when he sees Chris' face, refrains from releasing some daft comment.

'Nic?' Andrew asks heatedly, 'Nic, don't tell me you are considering not pressing charges?'

'I need to know more, Andrew,' she replies calmly.

Andrew, however, is not amused and stomps after Dalziel.

'What did you tell her? Did you convince her not to press charges? You...'

'Andrew!' Nic shouts loudly, a timely intervention before Andrew could hurl an insult at Dalziel.

Malcolm can tell using so much of her lung capacity hurts. Still she marches towards Andrew.

'Andrew, a word in private, please.'

He hesitates for a few moments, but then turns around, heading for his office.

'What is going on here?' Sinclair wonders out loud.

Chris leaves the corridor, Sinclair in her trail.

'Alisdair, I sincerely apologise for this,' Malcolm hears Nic say.

‘Nic, if someone did this to the ones I care about, I wouldn’t leave an ounce of him. Don’t be too hard on your friend. We’re not all blessed with your composure and compassion.’

She mumbles something, which actually produces a wee smile on Dalziel’s face, following which she turns around, revealing the massive bruise on the right side of her face. It looks even worse than yesterday. This must hurt so much, both inside and out. Even Malcolm wants Nic to press charges against MacTaggart, let alone Nic’s best friend. What does Nic want to know about MacTaggart before she will act, if she will at all?

Malcolm and Dalziel briefly make eye contact.

‘Sergeant,’ Dalziel greets and this time leaves properly.

Malcolm follows Nic and watches her enter Andrew’s office.

‘She doesn’t even knock on his door!’ Sinclair protests.

‘No, she doesn’t,’ Chris concurs.

Nic doesn’t seem too compassionate about Andrew’s lack of composure and mercilessly launches into him.

‘Who does she think she is? Why does the DCI let her bully him?’ Sinclair objects, ‘This isn’t normal.’

But Chris silences him and asks him why he’s late. Sinclair replies he made some phone calls this morning regarding yesterday’s “prank”. It seems Sinclair is still not taking this seriously.

‘And?’ Chris asks him sternly.

‘Nobody I know wants to confess to it, Ma’am,’ he sulks.

‘For the love...’

She throws a folder in front of him.

‘Put the pictures on the whiteboard and get a team of officers to do a house to house.’

‘Ma’am?’

‘Now, Constable!’ she orders him, ‘We’ve wasted enough time with your dallying.’

‘But we haven’t even heard from forensics!’ he continues to protest.

‘Constable, did I make myself clear?’ Chris urges.

Sinclair is pushing it. Malcolm would never have dared to openly question a DI only two days on the job.

Meanwhile, Nic is done lecturing Andrew. He’s on the phone now, to Dalziel no doubt. The call is short, but Malcolm doubts Dalziel would want to waste much breath on this anyway. Nic and Andrew are looking at each other. Then Malcolm can see Andrew say sorry to Nic.

‘So much for “watch me tomorrow”,’ Chris shakes her head.

Nic opens the door.

‘Chris, Malcolm, Tom, I don’t know if you want to hear this?’

Nobody hesitates.

‘Who does she think she is?’ they still hear someone grumble.

Tom takes the chair next to Nic, while Malcolm and Chris remain standing.

‘Fitch phoned me this morning,’ Andrew starts, ‘He, uh, he found a case file on his chair this morning, along with a letter. From MacTaggart. He wouldn’t tell me what’s in the letter, but wanted Nic to hear it first. The case file is all the data MacTaggart gathered about the events leading up to his... outburst.’

He’s weighing his words. He presses his lips together a few times and then dials a number, putting the phone on speakers.

‘Sir,’ it sounds.

‘Fitch, I’m here with Nic, Chris, Tom and Malcolm.’

‘Right.’

He’s driving. Is he bringing the file straight over to Edinburgh?

They’re waiting for Fitch to say something. Does he want to park his car first? What is he waiting for?

‘You already know, don’t you, Nic?’

Nic’s hand is on the folder she lay on Andrew’s desk. She doesn’t confirm anything, but her silence speaks volumes for Fitch.

‘Jesus, Nic, what made you think that?’

‘Andrew, the name MacTaggart,’ Nic addresses her friend, looking him straight in the eyes.

It means something when she does that. She will rarely confront someone this directly. Andrew looks at Nic, rather dumbfounded. Then something hits him.

‘You have to be kidding,’ he exclaims.

No, they have to be kidding. Malcolm sighs.

‘And for those who don’t know heraldry,’ he mumbles.

‘Son of the priest,’ Chris translates.

‘Son of the priest,’ Malcolm repeats.

Is that supposed to mean anything? Who is a priest?

But then Nic produces one paper: her own birth certificate. It shows her mother’s name: Holly MacIntyre. Instead though, Nic points her finger on her father’s name: Niall MacNicol – occupation – priest.

‘He was a priest; well, at least he was one at the time of my conception.’