

The Memory of Pine

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Also by this author:

In this series:

The Aviary (2013)

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



The Lost Valley

‘Andrew is missing.’

It’s a bit past eight am and Malcolm is still in bed, barely awake, a phone glued to his ear. After a rather intense weekend, he had counted on sleeping in and starting his week off by doing absolutely nothing. No work, certainly no walk, just doing something that includes creature comforts. A week without boots, a week without people wearing boots. Malcolm’s aversion to the outdoors may have lessened, but one full day in the great wide open trudging along a supposedly beautiful glen with daunting mountain walls will do him for the rest of the year. Next year, he’ll mind the company as well. Tom, his brother’s girlfriend and even Lyn did just fine, and Malcolm was even quite pleased with himself when he arrived at the bottom of the Lost Valley without major accidents. But then the others poured down from all sides. His “unstable” brother and his twenty-year-older boss, Andrew, descended from the back of the Valley after bagging Bidean nam Bian. Calum was totally beaten and even let Jane drive the car back to the cottage, but Andrew was still sheer vigour. Len is a more trained Munro-bagger and after adding another Munro at the other end of the Lost Valley – some Munro called Stop Corrie something – Len came down Beinn Fhada as if he had just climbed the stairs to the first floor and back. Nic of course, is in a league of her own. She must know that route by heart, so to make it a bit more challenging, she carried wee Neil, all the way up Bidean nam Bian and then the Stop Corrie something, to come down via Beinn Fhada with Len. So much for Malcolm’s satisfaction of making it unharmed.

‘Malcolm, do you hear what I’m saying?’ Calum urges him, ‘Andrew is missing.’

Andrew isn’t missing. He’s on holiday. He and Tom are spending the entire week in some Highland glen they’ve been visiting for over a dozen years already. Tom had told Malcolm it was an attractive wee place in the middle of a quiet glen, but when Malcolm arrived there Saturday morning, he failed to see its unique appeal. Glen Orchy looked like any other pine-filled glen, except that it looked even more remote than, well, whatever glen Malcolm has seen in pictures. As if he’d voluntarily undertake a journey across a glen.

The inside of the cottage itself was nice. It did. Malcolm can only assume that scramblers and rambles alike must appreciate

the wood burning stove, the spacious living room with adjoining kitchen, the lot. It was what it advertised to be. Lyn and Tom definitely managed to make a fine meal after the long trek, even though the kitchen table was a bit tight for all of them. Malcolm didn't know if he was pleased or in fact annoyed that Nic freely opted to sit at the coffee table, and what's more, that nobody seemed to object. Andrew happily joined her and they silently had their meal when the others were endlessly chattering about what a fantastic day it had been. Malcolm didn't know if he'd call it fantastic. It had highs and lows. It's just that all the lows always seem to involve Nic.

'Malcolm!' his brothers shouts in his ear.

'Yes!'

'Do you hear what I'm saying?'

'Yes.'

Malcolm is just not registering it. Andrew is not missing. He's upstairs in one of the twin bedrooms, with Tom. Next door are Nic and Lyn. Downstairs, in the master bedroom next to the living room Calum is staying with Jane and the baby. At least, they are until this morning. They're returning to Glasgow today. Calum has to get back, because his shift starts this afternoon. So Andrew and Tom are moving downstairs. Both couples can have a floor each for the rest of the week. God knows Nic and Lyn need a floor to themselves.

Malcolm shouldn't have spent the night in the cottage Saturday night. But he had had too much to drink. So they made the sofa bed for him in the living room. Malcolm doesn't sleep in strange rooms. He likes the sanctity of his own room, or at least a private bedroom, not a living room where the fire is still glowing, the clock is ticking on the wall and people can burst in at any odd time. It stopped him from falling asleep. It made him hear every sound, his brother's snoring, Neil's crying, and to top it all off, Nic and Lyn's making love again. Malcolm swears he could hear them. The frustration of not being able to sleep more than thirty minutes uninterruptedly culminated in lashing out at the first person to enter the kitchen in the morning. Of course it had to be Nic, Nic and Andrew.

Malcolm asked whether it would have killed her to abstain for just the one night. She took a deep breath, turned to Andrew and asked him to please seek "counselling for Trauma-bairn". Andrew merely replied that the budget was rather tight. He doubted the police could afford special therapy anyway.

Malcolm's frustration only grew. Ever since Andrew and Nic met April last year, he's been defending her. When Malcolm thought she was the prime suspect in the murder case last year, Andrew protected her. He even saved her life in the Lost Valley. Malcolm still feels that if Nic hadn't been such an innocent victim, she could have been the perfect murderer. The two couples have been seeing each other regularly ever since. It's been exactly a year now and they celebrate it by going on holiday together. One full week in a tranquil glen with nothing else to do but explore pine forests and watch deer pop up at dusk, that combined with Tom and Lyn chattering and Andrew and Nic silently observing. Malcolm has seen them. When Calum retired to bed – he was simply drained from the trip to his Munro – Tom and Lyn were happily talking about nothing important, and Andrew and Nic were quietly sitting there. He thought it was especially Nic's silence that was all-pervading.

'Malcolm, for God's sake. Say something!'

'Yes.'

'Malcolm, Andrew is missing.'

No, he's not.

'Uh, Andrew...'

'Tom is in shreds and Nic is frantically looking for her friend.'

If Malcolm had a friend like Nic, he'd need a moment to himself once in a while. No, he'd need long periods of complete separation. No, Malcolm and Nic could never be friends. He can't handle Nic. He can't understand anything about her, not about her reasoning, her motives, her rationale. She's unbreakable code. Len tried to reason with him and argued that Malcolm should realise she has a social disability. Which annoyed Malcolm even more. So what exactly is the difference between his brother calling him a rhino and Len calling Nic socially disabled? It means Nic can get away with her persistent ignorance and Malcolm has to grow up. But there's only so much Nic one can handle, that Malcolm is sure of. Even for a patient life-saver like Andrew.

'He's not missing. He's just gone for a walk.'

If not from her persistent taciturnity, then surely from her lustful actions in the bedroom next door. It's not because Tom won't hear that Andrew is deaf as well. The man just needed a moment to himself. If he can't even have that on his own holiday.

'You get your lazy arse out of bed and get over here right now,' Calum bites at him, 'Lyn phoned her brother and since she's already back inside, Len obviously didn't need any convincing.'

Malcolm sighs and finally throws the sheets aside. So much for a lazy Monday morning. So much for his day without boot-loving individuals.

‘Malcolm?’

‘Yes, yes, I’m on my way. Just let me take a shower and I’ll be on my way.’

By the time he’s out of the shower, he will have received a message Andrew is back already. The man will probably be annoyed by all the commotion about his temporary absence. If one cannot even get a moment of peace and quiet on one’s own holiday.

‘Malcolm?’

‘Yes.’

‘Come prepared.’

‘Meaning?’

‘Bring your boots this time.’

Explosion

There wasn’t a message on his mobile phone by the time he got out of the shower. He still hasn’t received a call even though he just passed Stirling. So Malcolm can only assume Andrew still isn’t back. But Andrew isn’t missing. Andrew wouldn’t go missing. He just wouldn’t. DI MacLain doesn’t do missing. He finds people gone missing.

To kill time or lull confusion, Malcolm turns on the radio and lands in the middle of an update on an explosion, an explosion in Scotland, in the Highlands, close to a railway track in a forest he has never heard of. Crannach. It could be anywhere. It takes Malcolm about as long as this morning’s telephone conversation to understand a bomb has truly detonated, in Scotland. Not some foreign country, or London, but Scotland, the Highlands at that. Maybe Malcolm is still sleeping and having a long and elaborate dream. He can’t yet figure out what is the more unlikely scenario: a bomb detonating in the Highlands of Scotland or Andrew missing.

The bomb exploded right next to the railway line between Glasgow and Fort William at five am this morning. After a while Malcolm hears it is the stretch between Bridge of Orchy and Rannoch. Bridge of Orchy is the village closest to the cottage where Andrew and Tom are staying. If Andrew heard about the

explosion when he got up this morning, maybe he just went over to Bridge of Orchy to take a look and maybe offer his services. The explosion must have occurred before he was up. Maybe he was awake because Nic and Lyn were making love again. Maybe he had even gone downstairs already and was taking a breather outside. Maybe he even heard the explosion. Or he just heard the news on the television and let his police instincts get the better of him and drove off. DI MacIain is always prepared. One moment he is Andrew; the next he is DI MacIain.

Then again, Andrew's private time with Tom is sacred. As DI MacIain, Tom forces Andrew to be his boss, but in his private time he's Tom's man. Malcolm has had the privilege on several occasions to witness just how much Andrew enjoys being Tom's man. A smile will even break through. Andrew never smiles at work.

The updates resume. There are no casualties so far. The railway track seems to have suffered minimal damage with only debris landing on the tracks. The explosive device detonated in the heart of the Crannach forest. The motive for the bombing is unclear, but there is no doubt that the explosion was planned and deliberate.

No casualties and the line is spared. So what's the purpose? A sick prank? A test? A bombing gone wrong? Are they sure there are no casualties? The sole purpose of a bomb is destruction. It must have deliberately wanted to destroy something. Or maybe the bomber was so inadequate he failed to hit his target. Malcolm is thinking of which station will investigate this odd case. Tyndrum is part of the Trossachs, Bridge of Orchy is part of Oban and Glencoe is firmly part of Fort William. All towns are on the edges of a big police area. So what does Crannach belong to?

Malcolm hates not knowing so he calls his former DC Donnie Munro, with whom he was briefly working in Fort William. If he's not on the case, then it's Oban. The Trossachs he rules out.

'Hello?' Malcolm hears an agitated voice.

'Donnie, it's Malcolm Drummond.'

They didn't use titles over there. Malcolm never got used to that.

'Malcolm, hi.'

'How are things over there?'

'Disastrous. It's a disaster. It's... Oh, my God, this is bad.'

Donnie is outside. So Crannach is part of Fort William. Malcolm should look at the map again. He could have sworn Fort William didn't extend as far south.

'You're at the scene of the explosion?'

'Yes, yes, I am. I'm working in Oban now.'

'Oh, I see.'

'Dad thought it would be a good idea to have some more working experience in another station.'

DI Munro probably thought his son couldn't stay under his wings forever. Donnie makes the oddest of police officers. He's notoriously distracted, his thoughts are everywhere and his heart, his heart is not in policing. But he so desperately wants his father to get over the disappointment that his big brother does not want to take his place. Malcolm met Donnie's brother, Doug. Like Nic, Doug loves the outdoors; unlike Nic, Doug is very easy to talk to. It was he, who first hinted that there was more to private DI MacIain than the composed and hardworking police officer.

'And you? You are still working for DI MacIain in Edinburgh?'

'Yes, well... Right now I'm going to look for DI MacIain in Glen Orchy.'

'You're looking for DI MacIain in Glen Orchy?'

'Yes, I was called out of bed this morning to hear he's missing.'

'Oh, oh, that's... Oh, that's bad.'

If cluelessness were an Olympic discipline, Donnie would have no rival.

'He was on holiday in Glen Orchy.'

'In the cottage in Glen Orchy?'

'You know the cottage?'

'Yes, I passed it a few times already. DI MacIain was staying there? Oh, that's very bad. What could have happened to him? It's such a peaceful place.'

Andrew certainly thinks so. Nic was amazingly at ease as well. Malcolm thought she would try to convince Andrew of the superior attraction of the glen she lived in for over a decade, but instead the pair of them were planning an early Sunday morning walk, to some pine reserve in Glen Orchy. Tom told Malcolm his man was particularly fond of that place. Maybe Andrew went over there again this morning and preferred to be on his own this time. Once with and then a second time without Nic. The entire glen is patchy when it comes to mobile coverage, so maybe he just can't be

reached as he's climbing his way up to the forest, the name of which Malcolm can't pronounce.

'Munro, put that branch down!' Malcolm hears shouting.

'Got to go. I'll phone you back.'

Donnie quickly hangs up. He'll phone Malcolm back. Why would he do that?

Malcolm reaches Tyndrum. There is a sign on his left reading "Help wanted. No vacancies", a promising message for the dozens of backpackers traditionally roaming the A82 between Tyndrum Lower, The Real Food Café and The Green Welly. Today's worse, however. It's here the railway line from the south splits up. The train in the station of Tyndrum Lower continues to Oban. A crowd of stranded passengers appears on the main road from the direction of Upper Tyndrum, where the line to Fort William is abruptly put out of service. Some are thumbing a lift, but Malcolm could only take them as far as Bridge of Orchy. No doubt the train carried a lot of happy rambblers and scramblers intent on a grand day out. Malcolm doesn't want to hear about it. He finds it even harder to be enthusiastic about it. So he prefers not to pretend at all.

Malcolm takes a right to continue along the A82. It's not long before he can spot the dozens of backpackers tickling the lower flanks of the mountains to his right. Malcolm knows the conical one is Beinn Dorain. He also knows Nic already climbed that one "as well". She may not be living in the great outdoors anymore, but even from her new home on the outskirts of Glasgow, she found a way to keep her boots on.

Malcolm takes a left onto the B8074. It's a single track road that winds its way next to the river Orchy, playfully carving an existence over gold-speckled boulders and underneath fairy tale-like trees. About halfway lies the cottage, a place Andrew and Tom have kept to themselves for the past fourteen years, a place they are now willing to share with Nic and Lyn.

Malcolm drives slowly. Last Sunday, on his way back to Edinburgh, he nearly drove his car into some rental car with joyriders who thought the quiet track was more deserted than it really is. Some idiots use the passing places as overnight camping spaces too. It makes driving unpleasant. When he drove Tom, Andrew and Len back to the cottage after the walk to the Lost Valley, Len called Glen Orchy an attractive glen. While Malcolm was concentrating on the endless curves, Tom was talking about his man's pine reserve – "It's not my pine reserve, Tom" – and

how Andrew and Nic were going to climb up to it the next day. They were going to visit the other one today. Malcolm then wondered where Andrew could still muster the energy. He didn't doubt Nic's qualities. Sure, she felt a bit sore in the shoulders after carrying wee Neil over two Munros, but her legs would still have been able to carry her all the way from the Lost Valley to Glen Orchy. They were all sheer awe for Nic. It was a good thing Malcolm was driving.

Today however, Nic is neither the expert scrambler nor the child-friendly tourist guide, but an amateur sleuth tracing Hansel and Gretel breadcrumbs Andrew must have left her. Her shoulders must be better, because her backpack is so voluminous it could hide wee Neil this time. If it weren't for the fact Calum repeated Andrew's name several times, Malcolm could've solved this missing person case at once.

Nic's walking to the left side of the road, in the grass, her trousers wet up to her knees. If Nic thinks this is how an investigation is conducted, she's dearly mistaken. Even more, this isn't a detective's game. Andrew doesn't do games. As his friend, Nic should know Andrew abhors games.

Malcolm stops and opens the window.

'Nic!'

She looks up. Her eyes try to focus.

'Did you see Andrew?' she asks.

'Where?' he blurts out, but then rapidly corrects himself, 'Oh, no, sorry.'

She clenches her teeth. Then she puts her head down again and continues walking, scrutinising the ground, looking for invisible breadcrumbs the birds must have had for breakfast by now.

'No news then,' Malcolm mumbles, closes the window and drives off again.

It's not like Malcolm needs Nic for valuable information.

It's still a tricky little stretch driving up to the cottage. Then there's the blind summit Malcolm particularly dislikes. It's here he nearly collided with the idiots. It was a good thing the driver removed his grin before Malcolm could get his badge out.

He finally sees the sign at the side of the road. Nic covered more distance than Malcolm would have given her. She still has at least the same distance to do if she insists on walking all the way up to the A82.

He takes a sharp left, announces his presence by driving over the cattle grid and slowly rolls his car over the gently curving driveway, at the end of which Calum is throwing his luggage in the boot of his car. His brother can't stay much longer.

Andrew's car is parked right next to the back of the cottage. He logically did not drive to Bridge of Orchy. He could still have gone for a walk though.

Malcolm takes the path leading to the main house, whose owners are currently on holiday. Unless they'd come racing back, Malcolm won't hinder anyone. He parks his car in such a manner even Len's car won't block him, or he'd really have to try.

In his rearview mirror Malcolm sees Calum slamming the boot shut and marching toward Malcolm. Surely he will not get a lecture already. He did make it here before Lyn's brother. Maybe Len cannot make it at all. Like Calum, Len has to work today. Malcolm's sure there's enough crime in Glasgow to keep any Detective Sergeant at his post.

Calum waits until he gets out.

'Glad you could make it,' Malcolm hears.

'I was still half asleep, when you called,' he defends himself.

'Aye, I know. Over here, all alarm bells were going off at once.'

Malcolm gets his bag out. His boots are in plain sight, the same boots he wore plodding in and out of the Lost Valley. He still leaves them in the boot, however. Surely Malcolm is far more useful behind a computer, putting all the pieces together.

'So what's the story?'

'Jane was still feeding Neil in the kitchen. I was sitting next to her. Then Tom entered, looked around and went outside. He was calling for Andrew. Half a minute later Nic was down, and it was the look on her face that told me at once something was wrong.'

Why is it always Nic setting a chain of events in motion? Last year she unwittingly dragged over a dozen people to her Valley and had one ending up killed. Because of her, Calum and Lyn nearly died as well. There was absolutely nothing she could have done to prevent any of it, save perhaps her complete ignorance of the rest of the world. If she didn't realise the murderer had it in for her, why would she suddenly be the key signal to have everyone worry about Andrew? For all they know, Andrew told Nic he was going for a walk and she just failed to register it.

'Why's that?' he questions.

Calum takes his arm.

‘Listen to me, you rhino. I called you for two reasons. Firstly, this is your boss *and* friend who’s missing. Andrew has been there for you for the past years, so the least you can do is help. Tom’s a bundle of nerves and he could do with your support. If you’re going to be a rhino again, let me know right now and go home. I’ll call in sick then.’

The very idea!

‘No, no, go home. Of course I will help. That’s not what I meant.’

‘I know exactly what you meant. And that’s the second reason. You prove you’ve changed, Malcolm. Last year you were a complete idiot when you were blindly trying to pin the murder on Nic. You prove you’ve changed. Keep Nic on your side and help her find her friend.’

‘He’s my friend too.’

‘Not like Nic and Andrew. You don’t know the meaning of a real friend. Nic and Andrew are close, very close. They share things. They make plans together. They’re best friends. Tom doesn’t know where Andrew is. Nic doesn’t know either. You keep Nic on your side, because if you upset her, you won’t get anything out of her. And trust me, Malcolm, you need Nic on your side. You hear me, Malcolm?’

No, he doesn’t. Malcolm doesn’t need Nic to find Andrew. On the contrary, as long as she’s happily engaged getting her pants wet outside, Malcolm is sure they will get along just fine.

‘Yes, fine,’ he agrees.

‘You prove you’ve changed, Malcolm’, his brother repeats.

The cottage

Calum, Jane and Neil leave a minute later. Len is on his way and should arrive any time soon, so Malcolm should already start. He carries his luggage inside. The small hallway has two sets of boots, but not Andrew’s. His jacket is gone too. Malcolm hopes they at least thought of the possibility that Andrew went out for a walk, a walk that might have gone slightly or even horribly wrong. It may not even have gone wrong at all. The climb to Andrew’s favoured pine reserve is in the other direction Nic is taking and it’s still quite a while on foot to get to the start of it. Andrew would need hours to get there and back again. Malcolm increasingly favours the idea he told Nic about it and she just forgot. Maybe he

left a note that was blown away. It might even be lying underneath the very table, where Jane was feeding the baby.

‘Malcolm!’

Tom flings his arms around him.

‘I don’t know what to do. I don’t know what to do. Usually Andy tells me what to do, but now... I don’t know what to do.’

‘Listen, Tom, we’ll find your man. Okay?’

Calum wasn’t wrong about the bundle of nerves.

He takes Tom back into the main room, the first half of which is the kitchen where Lyn is waiting. Malcolm can’t tell if she’s actually pleased to see him. It’s a remarkable difference from last Saturday, when she was trying her hardest to make him feel welcome.

‘I saw Nic. She’s halfway up the road to Bridge of Orchy.’

Malcolm thinks she took the wrong direction. It doesn’t make sense to walk all the way north to Bridge of Orchy, when the one pine reserve and the second one as well, both start from the same point to the south of the cottage. It just doesn’t seem logical. But Lyn simply nods and takes a chair.

There’s no note underneath the table. When he takes a quick look around, he can’t see any stray slips of paper hiding in a corner, close to the wood basket or under any of the sofas.

‘What are you doing?’ Lyn questions him.

‘Nothing. So, can you tell me when you noticed Andrew was...’

Andrew doesn’t go missing. It’s not something Andrew does. Andrew and missing are contradictory terms.

‘When I woke up this morning, Andy wasn’t in bed. I thought he might be in the bathroom downstairs, so I waited a while.’

‘That was when?’

‘Around seven. Fifteen minutes later I went downstairs to check, but the bathroom was empty. I went back upstairs, but Lyn and Nic’s door was shut, so... When the door is closed, we don’t enter.’

For fear of finding two consenting adults in a lustful position, no doubt.

‘So I went outside, but Andy wasn’t there. He’s not there. I don’t know where my Andy is. I don’t know how long he’s been missing. I don’t know when he got up.’

Lyn gets up again and puts her arm around Tom’s shoulder. She doesn’t say anything though. There isn’t much she can say at all.

'I take it Andrew didn't leave a note?'

'Do you think we'd have called you if Andrew left us a note?'
Lyn fires back at him.

'Just making sure.'

'No, he did not leave a note,' she grumbles.

'Where did you look already?'

Lyn sighs.

'Andrew is not in the bathroom, not in his bedroom, certainly not in ours and not in the bedroom downstairs. Nic searched the grounds intensively and she found nothing.'

'What about the main house?'

'No.'

'It was locked,' Tom speaks quietly, 'I didn't go inside.'

'Come on. Let's check first. You told me you had the key?'

'Why would Andrew be there?' Lyn critically asks.

'Maybe he went over there to make a phone call. Maybe he wanted to know more about the explosion north of Bridge of Orchy.'

He waits to see if they are in on the details.

'Maybe he didn't want to disturb anyone by phoning outside,' he suggests.

Glen Orchy and modern communication are cool lovers. The entire glen is a complete disaster to use a mobile phone and the grounds on which the cottage stands has only one tiny place where a mobile phone serves its purpose: on the patio at the front corner of the house, where a garden table is now holding two phones. Tom says they rarely make a call at all. There's wifi inside. Outside there are millions of midges as soon as the happy season starts.

But the main house has a landline.

'You don't seriously think Andrew is still there, do you?'

Tom turns to Lyn.

'Malcolm's right. We should exclude all the obvious possibilities first.'

Lyn nods.

'I'll stay inside, just in case.'

'In case of what?' Malcolm queries.

'In the impossible case that Andrew would call.'

'He took his phone with him?'

'Aye.'

Lyn really doesn't look pleased with his presence. Malcolm decides not to make matters worse by asking about a possible walk. Instead he and Tom leave together.

‘He won’t phone,’ Tom cries quietly, ‘My Andy won’t phone.’

‘Why not? If he took his phone with him.’

‘Because my Andy wouldn’t have left, Malcolm. Andy wouldn’t just leave.’

Malcolm secretly hopes Andrew is inside the main house, silently pondering the situation, totally oblivious of all the anxiety he has caused.

Tom hands him the key and Malcolm enters the house first. He calls out Andrew’s name. There’s no reply. There is no one by the phone and when Malcolm checks the log, the last call was made towards the end of March, when the owners were still here. Since the door was locked and the key was where it was supposed to be, it’s reasonable to assume, Andrew did not come here to phone, hide or watch television. The house is silent. So are Malcolm’s thoughts. He doesn’t know what to make of this. There must be a perfectly logical explanation for Andrew’s disappearance.

He and Tom leave the house again, Malcolm locks the door and he hands Tom the key. There’s an impressive shed opposite the house and Malcolm knows it’s full of wood they can freely use. They just have to go and collect it. Malcolm cannot remember if the basket was in the house.

‘How about the shed?’

Tom shakes his head.

‘Nic searched the place. She searched every square inch on these grounds.’

Tom clenches his teeth and walks back to the cottage, back to sceptical Lyn. Malcolm will have to tread carefully if he wants to convince her he’s no longer last year’s rhino. She and Malcolm’s brother are best friends. Lyn knows all about his stunts of the past. He must do better than that.

Malcolm must blend his puzzling abilities with a sense of compassion Calum is blessed with, combined with divine inspiration Andrew is famous for. For the moment however, Malcolm simply wants to ask them if they’re sure Andrew isn’t on a walk, off to his pine reserve, which might sound a trifle heartless and doesn’t boast a lot of inspiration either. But that’s how Andrew, Tom and Malcolm function as a team. Malcolm does rational things, Andrew throws in countless new and, to Malcolm, totally erratic elements, and Tom is asked to find the needle in the haystack so Andrew can stitch everything together. Malcolm is never comfortable with the erratic element. He sees and shies

away from it. The problem is that Andrew is the erratic element this time.

Fitch

Tom is standing behind the kitchen window, waiting for Malcolm to get back inside and unfold his plan of action. Malcolm is still deliberating, when a car rapidly drives onto the terrain and brakes abruptly. It's a 4x4, and it's not Len behind the wheel. Malcolm remembers the man getting out of the driver's seat. He was one of the unlucky campers in the Lost Valley last year. He's a colleague of Len's. As soon as he saw Andrew last year, he grumbled about Edinburgh police. A few hours later he was accusing Andrew of trying to stitch up him and his Glasgow colleagues. Malcolm is astounded Len would have brought him of all people here: the embodiment of Glasgow-Edinburgh rivalry. He doesn't know why Len would invite anyone at all, when he knows full well Tom is desperately trying to keep his man in the closet.

Len's colleague opens the boot, hands Len two bags and shuts it. He gets behind the wheel again, reverses his car and speeds off, this time in a south-westerly direction. Maybe he's not here to help at all. Len grabs the two bags, greets Malcolm and passes him. He leaves the bags in the hallway and enters the kitchen. Two bags. Surely Len could not have packed that much.

Malcolm quickly joins the others. Tom has not quite recovered from the alien invasion.

'Who, who was that?'

Lyn is standing at the other end of the room, in the living room where she stares through the window, giving out onto the road.

'Fitch.'

'Fitch drove you? Why did he leave? Is he coming back?' Lyn fires at her brother.

'Aye, he's driving the second half of the road. Nic asked.'

Nic did what? She asked a question? All by her socially disabled self?

'But... But what is he...'

There's sheer panic on Tom's face. Len calmly addresses Tom.

'Fitch wanted to join. When he saw that I wanted to leave, he asked me why. So I told him. Fitch immediately went to Hay and Hay went to the DCI. We can both help.'

'He volunteered?' Lyn asks.

'Aye, he said he owes Andrew.'

'He accused him of trying to stitch you up,' Malcolm protests.

'Aye, and that's why he wants to help. He says he owes Andrew an apology. I could hardly say no. "Sorry, you're not wanted." Moreover, look, I know Fitch looks like bull in a china shop, but he's a good detective. He can help. He will help.'

Tom tries to nod.

'Did you tell him, about Tom and Andrew?'

Len turns to his sister.

'No, not yet. I, well, I didn't know how. I told him he didn't know everything about Andrew.'

'He'll have to...'

'I don't want him to make fun of my Andy,' Tom cries.

His feminine mannerisms make his hands wave incessantly. He's close to breaking down altogether.

'He won't, Tom,' Len insists, 'I promise you he won't. He has a big mouth, but he knows when to shut it.'

'I hope so, Lennie, not just for Tom's sake.'

'I told him about Nic too, Lyn,' Len continues.

He told Fitch what exactly: that her social disability prevents her from conversing in a normal way? That it's quite normal for her to completely ignore people, even when they are standing right in front of her? Or that she's just plain demanding to be around?

'Did she say anything?' Lyn asks.

Malcolm doubts Nic even noticed Fitch.

'She asked if we could already drive the other way, just to make sure. She gave us some other information too. I'll tell you more about it, when Fitch is back. With his heavy foot, that shouldn't be all that long.'

'Has she, has she seen something?' Tom dares ask.

Len shakes his head.

'But she had some useful information. Look, Tom, why don't you show me your room. Or did Malcolm already check?'

'No, we went to the main house.'

Tom takes a Kleenex and wipes the tears from his face.

'This isn't real. This can't be happening. I can't do this without Andy.'