

# **The Rampart Inside**

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In this series:

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Trilogy:

The Stained Family Tree (2008)

The Marlets' Nest (2008)

The Road to the Isles (2012)

For my wife



## DI Chris MacAskill

‘She’s giving up, I think,’ Malcolm blurts out.

No, that’s not true. Malcolm doesn’t think so; he knows so. Five months the Inspector took it all in her stride: the hostility, the disrespect, the disdain for the “Black Cuillin”. Five months she endured one of her own DS’s repeatedly and not so accidentally spilling her coffee over her desk, papers and even clothes. She didn’t let it get to her. Andrew had given her a chance and she wasn’t going to waste it. Until Tom demonstrated just exactly how much control he has over DCI MacIain.

Tom’s mutiny astounded both Malcolm and Andrew. Malcolm never would have believed Tom could have challenged his man. If Andrew did not listen to the station’s request, Tom would openly force his hand. The Inspector’s temporary contract cannot be transferred into a permanent one. Nobody wants her. She can just run back to London once again, like she did four and a half years ago. London is nothing but praise of her anyway. London can take her back. She was promoted over there. They seem to like her over there. Let them have her.

Malcolm doesn’t want her to leave though. He likes working for DI MacAskill. Like Andrew, she’s tolerant of his quick and rash way of thinking and gently steers him towards what he does best: finding all the pieces. It’s not just the dread he felt when Andrew was “temporarily” acting DCI and Malcolm worried about the working relationship with the new DI, it’s also the fact that the pieces he did find of the enigmatic DI Chris MacAskill make Malcolm respect her even more.

‘Hmm,’ Nic responds, her eyes glued to one of the files he brought with him, files he brought on Nic’s explicit request, files he gladly found.

“So are you going to let the others make up your mind or are you going to decide all by yourself how you feel about your boss?” Nic asked him exactly three weeks ago. Standing there on top of Ben A’an, with the sun setting over Loch Katrine, Malcolm felt like confrontation and revelation embraced one another. He was stripped bare and even cried. Nic let him come to his senses. Her quiet was reassuring, an unexpected ally after twenty-four years of smothered disquiet. As they sat there in total silence, a beautiful moon lit up the loch and outlined the mountains all around. He felt no need to climb any of them, but was content to be sitting there on top of a hill with no special status. Ben A’an lost its evil,

its dark and malignant superiority. Nic had lifted the clouds; Malcolm was free to start seeing for himself.

‘Nic?’

Nic was in a defiant mood at the ceremony over three weeks ago. Her innate sense of seclusion collided with the very essence of it all. She did not want to be put on parade, in full view of people she did not wish to see. She certainly did not want to witness the embarrassment concerning the Inspector. It took one look to trigger a stutter. The stutter led to a question. The question got a surprising answer. The ensuing bitterness made Malcolm’s stomach turn. He is relieved Nic persuaded him to gather all the pieces, instead of the few odd ones that generated the misconception about DI MacAskill.

“Isn’t that... Oh, my God, that’s...” Fitch stuttered.

“Yes, that’s Black Cuillin,” Donnie confirmed.

It initially surprised Malcolm Donnie knew the Inspector, as she had left Fort William before Donnie joined the police. He thought maybe his father had mentioned her. DI Munro had done much more than that though. When Len shot daggers at the Inspector and asked what she was doing back in Scotland, it wasn’t Malcolm answering. No, it was Donnie informing Fitch and Len that Black Cuillin had been forced onto Andrew, which was news to Malcolm. Fitch didn’t say anything, but simply stared at her. Len on the other hand, turned to Nic and told her she should try to convince her friend to get rid of “that vile creature” as fast as possible.

Maybe it was nerves about his sitting in front of all his colleagues, discomfort with the lack of support the past months, but Malcolm simply blurted it out.

“Why?”

Thinking back, it still looks surreal. While the Superintendent stood there talking about Andrew’s many fine qualities, Len and Donnie launched into a tirade against DI MacAskill. How she was a second Anderson – both father and daughter – who had openly cheated on her husband and had ultimately driven him to suicide by refusing to divorce him. That this husband was a well-liked PC in Fort William made his death and her involvement in it spread like wildfire among the force. Every police officer in Scotland blames her for the death of PC Chris Hoy, nicknamed Red Cuillin. According to Donnie, Anderson Senior took her under his wings, while Len was positive she was a personal friend of Amanda Anderson. Donnie concluded by blaming the fraught relationship

between his father and brother on the Inspector. Since “Red’s” funeral the pair have barely been on speaking terms. It was all down to “Black”: the strained relationship between father and son, Donnie’s ludicrous choice to be police, PC Hoy’s death, the faults of the universe!

It did suddenly make sense why the rest of the station shunned Malcolm for getting on with DI MacAskill. Like it did when everyone, including Tom, collectively turned their backs when she congratulated him with his award. Len and Lyn ostentatiously turned around too. His brother wasn’t even there. Donnie may have deliberately neglected to inform his brother about the award, but Malcolm had. He had invited Calum, but he didn’t think Malcolm was worth taking the morning off for: the rhino who upset his best friend, and got along with a woman responsible for her husband’s death.

The Inspector and Malcolm both felt so unwelcome, they were desperate to leave. But the Inspector tried to stop him.

“Sergeant, feel free to ignore my advice, but take it from someone who has experience in that area: it is much harder to come back after running away than staying in the first place.”

It was then Nic stepped out of nowhere, as if she simply shook off her cloak of invisibility. She asked Malcolm if he could get them a coffee and a tea, not just something to drink, but a coffee and a tea. She knew the Inspector. Andrew and Nic must have talked about her. They hadn’t met before though. Malcolm watched them shake hands. He watched Nic and the Inspector talk, watched Andrew and Fitch watching Nic and the Inspector talk. It was the strangest thing. It was the boldest thing. Malcolm was sure both Lyn and Len deliberately kept their backs turned to this amazing manifestation of exceptional characters. Tom merely glanced at it. Still, Malcolm thinks it’s Nic’s blatant support of the Inspector that made him rebel against Andrew.

By the time he returned with the coffee and tea, Nic asked him to write down her number for the Inspector.

“Any time,” she stressed, as they shook hands again.

Malcolm doesn’t know if the Inspector already called Nic. She should. There are two weeks left before her contract runs out. It’s only too obvious Andrew and Malcolm are alone against the rest of the team, or even the station.

The only upside is that Nic didn’t wait for the Inspector to call her. Malcolm doesn’t know if Nic started talking to him because she wanted his help, or if she genuinely cared. He thinks

she cared too. She said she was sorry his brother wasn't there. He replied it had always been like that. Malcolm can still remember her pressing her lips together, repeatedly.

That entire day was surreal really.

'I know,' Nic finally replies, as she turns another paper, 'She's pushing everyone away: you, Andrew, and Fitch.'

Fitch. If watching Nic and the Inspector had been the oddest exhibition, Fitch's blatant disregard of what seemed to be universal police code stunned everyone and possibly Fitch and the Inspector the most. Malcolm and Nic were still trying to break the silence, when Fitch suddenly walked towards the Inspector. Next the incorrigible charmer started flirting with someone above his rank. And she let him. Malcolm cannot grasp what possessed either of them to behave like that in the face of such adversity. They knew exactly what everybody thought, yet they openly flirted. They even went out that weekend, and the weekend after that. Nic took Malcolm to Ben A'an, but Fitch and the Inspector went far higher. The Inspector had a smile bridging her entire face the following Monday. Even the next Monday she was still sheer happiness. Not so this Monday. The smile was gone.

Nic still has eyes only for the files. She's been reading them from the moment he picked her up in Glasgow. Did she know what her question would lead to? Did she ask solely to get to these files and help the Inspector? Malcolm bared his soul to her. He revealed his innermost secret, his oldest memory, stored in the deepest vault of his mind. It was just one question.

"So what exactly did happen on Ben A'an when you were five?"

## **Glencoe**

They are heading for Glencoe, Nic's old place. It has been restored and improved beyond recognition, or so Malcolm has been told by Tom, when they were still on speaking terms. Malcolm's refusal to ostracise the common enemy last week came at a price. If Andrew gives in to his long-term partner, Malcolm doesn't know what he'll do. The Inspector isn't welcome anywhere in Scotland. Moreover, like Nic said, she's pushing Malcolm away as well.

Unless they can change the tide, Nic and him. When Nic asked him to "puzzle" the pieces together, Malcolm had no idea he



would be digging up several files. There are five main files, and two “side-files”, the latter judged “accidental deaths”. He collected four of the heavy ones already. The missing one is in London and a mere Edinburgh Sergeant has no authority to request a file. The first side-file is a mere report he could get through the system. The last and most recent file is on the accidental death of PC Hoy. Malcolm only has the general report, but he will be diving into the archives for the full details tomorrow. This evening Nic and he will be doing some preliminary research. They will be visiting Dun Deardail, where PC Hoy met his untimely demise.

He hadn’t even heard of this dun even though he worked in Fort William for several months. According to the map, it’s opposite Ben Nevis, a hill dwarfed by Scotland’s highest peak. The Inspector heard of it, as she sent her estranged husband to it. Her letter wasn’t in the report, but it read she sent him up there. She sent him to his death.

The Inspector worked in Fort William for several years, but when she was promoted to Sergeant, she moved to Edinburgh. PC Hoy stayed in Fort William. Edinburgh is where the first three files are. She worked in London, where the fourth file is. The fifth one is Glasgow. The Inspector hasn’t been welcome in Glasgow since Hoy’s death. But a personal acquaintance of hers accessed the file Malcolm picked up earlier today.

‘DI Anderson was the last to access Declan Dalziel’s file,’ he hears himself saying.

Nic probably won’t even register it. She’s focussed on the three new files only. When they met two weeks ago, there was just the one file on Deirdre Hoy, PC Hoy’s elder sister. Malcolm already hinted there might be more, all on members of one particular family: the Dalziels. In police circles, the name is quite notorious. Even Nic had heard of it, which says something. She said they should start with the Hoyes, brother and sister.

Malcolm doesn’t know how this will work. Nic seems to be processing the files with analytical precision, but he doesn’t know how she administers data. Is she like Andrew, who likes to get a general oversight of all facts? Malcolm can throw him a million facts or details, but Andrew rarely seems to lose the plot. Malcolm doesn’t have that quality. He has this urgent need to devour as much data as possible until it leaves him with serious indigestion. Sheer exhaustion usually generates illumination. It bugs him he always has to go through this phase of disorganisation, but luckily he’s had the fortune to be working with the likes of Andrew, and

now Inspector MacAskill. They let him dabble and madly collect data.

‘When was that?’ she asks, without looking up.

‘When was what?’

‘When did Anderson look into Declan Dalziel’s file?’

‘Five years ago, nearly five years ago. A week after Hoy’s death.’

‘So right before Chris left for London.’

If they assume Anderson and her one-year-older colleague got along.

‘Do you think Len is right and Inspector MacAskill and Inspector Anderson knew each other personally?’

‘They knew each other all right. Doesn’t mean Chris actually liked either of the Andersons.’

‘Everybody else seems to think so,’ Malcolm shrugs.

‘Like all of you fucking police think Chris is a vile creature,’ she fires in return.

‘I don’t think she is,’ he confesses.

Not now and not when he didn’t know anything about PC Hoy. Maybe he momentarily wavered when he learnt the “truth”. But Nic put him straight. He would still like to understand her share in her husband’s death though.

‘No, not you,’ Nic agrees.

‘I think Andrew is on her side as well.’

Andrew had probably imagined his first weeks as proper DCI a bit smoother. First there was the mess made by the second DI’s team, which made Andrew spent more time in court than at the station. Then Tom started the rebellion in his own team. The past ten days it was Andrew, the Inspector and Malcolm spending every evening together, trying to do the work of all mutineers. With the trial collapsing only today, Andrew is free to handle the mutiny how he sees fit now. Will Malcolm see a more determined DCI next week? What will happen to DI MacAskill then?

‘I think it’s best if we leave Andrew out of this, right?’

‘He needs to know this, Nic. He needs to know before he makes a decision.’

‘He will. But give him a break. Give me a chance to inform him of all of ...’

She puts the back of her fingers on one of the files.

‘This,’ she stresses.

She continues reading again. Malcolm clenches his teeth. He wishes he knew what she expects from him.

‘Give me a chance to read through these, Malcolm. You’re ahead of me.’

‘No, I’m not,’ he counters.

He doesn’t understand any of it: the cases, the mistakes made, the blinkers everyone seems to be wearing. But Malcolm leaves her. Mainly because he doesn’t understand Nic either.

They’ve nearly reached Glencoe. As they’re driving past Nic’s Lost Valley, Malcolm thought she would relish the view of the Munros or the Three Sisters soaking up the first sunshine of the day after a rather dark and moody day, but her eyes are fixed on the files. He doesn’t know if he should mention it or leave her be, rather grumpy and hyper-focussed.

He drives past, moving along the Pass of Glencoe, squeezed between terrifying rocks on both ends of the road. He cannot believe anyone would think it’s fun to traverse them just for the sake of it. Ben A’an was sufficiently out of his comfort zone to protest to any sort of madness that has idiotic labels such as Graham or Corbett, let alone Munro. It screams lunacy.

Malcolm parks the car in front of Nic’s old place.

‘Nic, we’re here.’

She looks up, closes the file, collects everything and gets out. Before Malcolm can wonder if this time she does lock the door, she gets a key out. She opens the front door.

There are no more shelves of paper, but the hallway is open and inviting. Malcolm watches her enter the living room to the right. He gets out too and opens the boot. Nic’s holdall is far too voluminous for just a single weekend. This looks like she packed for a fortnight instead. She returns and wordlessly grabs her gear. Malcolm takes a deep breath. He can’t help himself.

‘You packed a lot,’ he tries.

‘Hmm,’ is all she cares to say about the matter, before marching up the stairs.

He slowly enters the house as well. He can barely recognise it. There’s a new bathroom downstairs, right next to the staircase. Malcolm knows there are two guestrooms upstairs. Nic and Lyn have their own en-suite master bedroom.

‘Your room is the one to the front of the house,’ he hears.

Malcolm wipes his shoes and mounts the stairs as well. As he turns around the corner, he catches Nic moving clothes in the wardrobe. He’s starting to feel uncomfortable about the matter. Lyn can’t be best pleased that Malcolm of all people is one of their first guests. Maybe they even had a row about it.

He walks into the last room. The beds are both made, separate and made. Apparently the beds can be zipped together to create a king-size version.

‘We need to get going, Malcolm. I’ll get my rucksack ready,’ he hears.

Malcolm thinks they are still well in time, but leaves his gear between the two beds and descends the staircase as well. This house looks nothing like the version that nearly burnt down a year and a half ago. He walks along the corridor and enters the fully-equipped kitchen. Nic doesn’t cook. Unless that changed.

‘You brought everything?’ she asks, as she’s filling a flask.

‘Two bottles of water, two sandwiches, as requested.’

‘Torch and trekking poles?’

‘I even have boots in the boot,’ he smiles.

There’s a faint smile back. She zips her rucksack shut, walks via the living room where she picks up a notebook and the report on PC Hoy, and waits by the door, holding a key in her hand.

‘Glad to see you lock the door this time.’

## **Fitch**

Fort William is busy at this time of day and it seems the queue at the roundabout has not got any smaller during Malcolm’s absence. It’s Friday and everybody is driving in and out of town. Nic is scrutinising the outside world. In that regard she’s still the same mystery to Malcolm. Unless she’ll tell him, he won’t know. Unless he asks, she won’t tell him.

‘You okay?’

‘Aye, too many cars. Not my thing.’

‘I’m afraid walking from Glencoe to Fort William is not really my thing,’ he replies.

‘Pity,’ she teases, ‘It’s a nice track from the Devil’s Staircase to Kinlochleven.’

‘There’s a reason why it’s called the Devil’s Staircase,’ he retorts.

Malcolm takes a deep breath.

‘Speaking of the devil, uh, who knows about our plans?’

Nic always has a back-up. Whether it’s some outrageous, unpronounceable Munro, or a simple landmark as Ben A’an, Nic will not waver. Someone knows he and Nic are heading to Dun Deardail. If it’s not Andrew, who is it?

‘No one, yet. I still need to make that phone call.’

She’s not telling though. The fact is that right now, no one knows what they are up to. No one knows Malcolm has been digging into the Inspector’s past and present. The moment Nic phones, all that will change. Her circle of acquaintances is rather limited and Malcolm is worried anyone in her phonebook knows just exactly what happened at Dun Deardail five years ago. How long will it take before someone will try to stop them?

They are already heading towards the Ben Nevis carpark, when she finally reveals the name.

‘Fitch.’

‘Fitch?’ he spontaneously bursts out, ‘Fitch?’

Didn’t Nic just say the Inspector was pushing Fitch away as well?

‘But, but Fitch and the Inspector were...?’

Dating, is that the right word for what was going on between them?

‘Can you think of anyone better, Malcolm?’ she returns the question.

‘But they... I know they... sort of dated.’

‘I know. He told me all about it. They went to bed with each other, several times. And then Chris walked out on Fitch. Which left Fitch in quite a state.’

He parks the car. At least something’s stationary, because his thoughts certainly are not. What exactly does she mean with “left Fitch in quite a state”? Malcolm knows she has odd reasoning, but he really doesn’t feel they should make matters worse for Fitch.

‘But how can we phone Fitch? Surely he will know what happened at Dun Deardail?’

‘He will. Especially since he and Hoy were mates.’

Nic might as well have slapped him in the face.

‘Excuse me?’

‘Fitch and Hoy were mates. They used to go scrambling together, with Munro, Doug Munro,’ she states matter-of-factly.

She gets out of the car. Malcolm jumps out as well.

‘But Nic, then we cannot call Fitch. Not when...’

Why did Fitch start talking to the Inspector in the first place, since she’s responsible for the death of his mate? Why did he take her out? Why did he sleep with her, the wife of a mate of his? Does Malcolm really know people this badly? He doesn’t understand Fitch’s reasoning at all.

Let alone Nic’s.

'I'll repeat myself, Malcolm? Can you think of anyone else?'

'Well, well, how about Andrew?'

She stops.

'Andrew? He's been having the worst weeks of his career. Do you really want to involve him in a case that involves his personal nemesis?'

No, not really. But Andrew is by the far the best detective Malcolm can think of. If Inspector MacAskill has not figured out what happened after all these years, Andrew is the most qualified person to help them figure things out.

'Well, he is implicated, isn't he? Dalziel, I mean,' Malcolm tries.

'His name is in all four files, all five of them. But since your collective hatred of the man got you lot exactly nowhere, it's maybe time you took a fresh look at it and start anew. I don't think Andrew is the best man for that job right now. He would put the man behind bars for running a red light, let alone for... Moreover, Andrew and Tom need to sort something out. I don't want to bother him with this. I want to take this off his plate.'

That's rather generous of Nic, but unfortunately that does leave out the most obvious name in Nic's wee book of names.

'And Lyn?'

'No.'

No explanation, just a radical no. First the large holdall and now a firm rejection. Something's not right between this hawk and her beloved swan.

'Len?'

'Len hates Chris, as you know full well.'

He nods. His tirade still lingers in his ear. Which leaves only one last name.

'Calum?'

She looks him straight in the eyes.

'Your brother?'

She grinds her teeth. They got along so well. It's Malcolm's fault. He shouldn't have told her about Ben A'an.

'Nic, what happened all those years ago is not Calum's fault.'

'Of course it is not. But what he's doing now is all his choice, his and his alone. Fuck, Malcolm, your brother is not superior to you. You all have your flaws, but don't, for one second, believe that you're less than him. On the fucking contrary.'

She never ceases to stun Malcolm. Where does this respect come from? After all he's done to her?

Nic takes out her phone.

‘The man doesn’t even want us in the same square mile, let alone on the same path. Why on earth would I call him and say we’re taking another walk together.’

If Malcolm had thought his brother not showing up for the ceremony had been a bad blow, Calum hit him with a sledgehammer a week later. Malcolm wasn’t welcome at his nephew’s first birthday party, because his presence would upset Lyn. He even advised Malcolm to stay away from Nic. Calum added he clearly hadn’t changed. Nothing had changed indeed, nothing since that day twenty-four years ago. Maybe last year’s reconciliation was nothing but a brief interlude of pretence.

‘I had quite enough of shite after our first scramble,’ she curses.

Maybe a tiny bit did change. Nic phoned Malcolm, from the birthday party at that. He could hear his brother’s laughter, Lyn talking, Jane cheering. Nic bothered enough about Malcolm to call him and ask how he was doing. Fine, she did ask about DI MacAskill and said that they should meet, but she also asked about him. For Nic, Malcolm is not less than his elder brother.

‘Fitch, just to let you know Malcolm and I are walking up and down Dun Deardail right now. We should be back by... mm, midnight basically.’

She doesn’t leave Fitch a moment to reflect. Malcolm watches her put the phone back in her trouser pocket. She turns around.

‘Malcolm, put your boots on. We need to get going.’

Whether Fitch is at home or still at the police station in Glasgow, it will take him hours to get here. Depending on his frame of mind, he might decide to come to Glencoe, however. That’s a big leap, though. Surely Fitch would not wish to invade Nic’s privacy.

Then again, Nic does seem to know all about Fitch and the Inspector.

Malcolm takes his boots out and sits down to put them on.

‘Nic, does Lyn know you and I are, uh, doing this?’

She looks at her watch.

‘Not yet.’

He waits patiently.

‘But she will when she gets home from her evening out with your brother.’

She left a note. Nic left a note. Malcolm does not want this. But before he can protest, a 4x4 speeds onto the car park. Malcolm

is still fastening his laces, when the car veers in their direction and abruptly brakes in front of them. Fitch jumps out and launches himself at Malcolm.

‘What do you think you’re doing, Harpic?’

He grabs Malcolm by the collar. Nic immediately intervenes.

‘Stop it, Fitch.’

He’s still holding onto his collar. It is not comfortable. Malcolm’s sure he will have to fasten his laces again. He was not done yet.

‘Nic, he cannot do this. He wants you to go to the place where RC committed suicide. You...’

‘Fitch, I asked him.’

He lets go at once.

‘But... But why?’

‘I asked Malcolm to look into Chris’ background. I asked him.’

He’s stunned. So is Malcolm.

‘But... But why would you do that? She will... She... She won’t talk. She asked for time. You know that.’

‘Fitch, we cannot wait. We could not wait. I asked Malcolm three weeks ago. We have two weeks left.’

Two weeks before her six-month contract expires. Malcolm knows his colleagues are already jubilant, but with Nic at his side, they won’t give up without one last fight. Does Nic think Fitch will join them?

‘But...’

Fitch looks pretty lost right now.

Doug calmly leaves the car as well and slowly approaches the three of them. Malcolm is still trying to understand what’s going on. How could Fitch be here already? Why is Doug with him?

‘She will not want this. She may not want this!’

‘Fitch, she has no one else. In two weeks’ time, she will be without a job and if she’s lucky, she will be able to return to England.’

‘You don’t know that. Andrew... You can talk to Andrew.’

‘Fitch, Tom switched sides. He’s on Lyn’s side.’

Malcolm doesn’t know what Andrew will do. Andrew needs Tom, both at work and especially at home. But Malcolm doubts Andrew will take kindly to blackmail, even by his long-term lover. Malcolm still thinks Andrew would be a valuable asset in this clandestine investigation, but Dalziel’s involvement will trigger too much bitterness. Andrew might well lose his cool indeed.



'No, no,' Fitch whines slowly.

Malcolm fastens his laces again. Doug waits for him to get up.

'It's just Malcolm and Andrew against the entire station. Unless we find a reason, no one will support her. Why do you think she ran away? Because you are sleeping with a lost cause.'

He grinds his teeth. Nic pulls at Fitch's sleeve and he follows her.

Doug and Malcolm shakes hands.

'I, uh, I hadn't expected to see either of you here,' Malcolm admits.

'Hmm, you may not have, but Nic did. Nic was our back-up. She knew full well where we were.'

'She knew you were...'

'We have been doing this ever since RC died. We climb the Ben for him, with him. Fitch and I were at his funeral and then we climbed the Ben, to his memory.'

Malcolm is not getting any of this.

'RC,' he mutters mechanically.

'Red Cuillin,' Doug explains, 'It was his nickname. Was rather proud of it too.'

Malcolm knew that. What he doesn't know is why Nic would want Fitch to know what they're doing. Fitch's face is sheer perplexity. Nic is fighting off a colossal wave of panic trying to engulf Fitch. The Inspector walked out on him. He looks nothing like the smooth charmer he was at the ceremony.

Doug sighs. Did he even know about Fitch sleeping with the wife of his late friend? When he looks at Doug, he seems to be one step ahead of Malcolm again.

'Fitch told me about him and Chris, Chris MacAskill.'

Malcolm nods. He still can't understand why Fitch would have done any of this.

'RC would never hear a bad thing about Chris. He said he was the one being selfish, said it was his fault people were looking down on Chris. He loved her to pieces. But he shouldn't have asked her to marry him. Apparently his parents were angry with him for that.'

'Really?'

'U-huh. He wouldn't explain, but he said it was selfish of him, because he knew she had never loved him that way. He just wanted her for himself and, hmm, I think he hoped she would learn to love him like that. Chris cared about him, but not like lovers do. RC and I were out more often than the three of us. When

I was around, RC and I would go climbing. Fitch joined us maybe one in three times. Occasionally they would be talking about their other halves. Fitch and his ex, I don't think it ever was roses. "At least you have bairns," RC would say. "Well, let's switch wives for a while. See how that works," Fitch had joked. RC showed a picture of Chris then. Fitch later admitted that Chris was a very attractive woman indeed, and that he could understand why RC found it so hard to let her go. I saw his face at the funeral. Chris was a mess, but she made an impression on Fitch. Mind, Fitch would never have done anything when married, or when RC was alive. Actually, I'm surprised he talked to her at all, since there seems to be a rule among you lot not to talk to Chris.'

'Yes, there is,' Malcolm confirms.

Nic is still talking to Fitch, who is now turning to the sky, then burying his head in his hands.

'I have never witnessed anything as despicable as at RC's funeral. The entire Fort William police force were there; not a single officer from Edinburgh. Chris sat there grieving with RC's parents, together. At the end of the funeral every single police officer – apart from Old Anderson and Manda – offered his or her condolences to RC's parents and refused to even look at Chris. An entire station, every single man and woman, passing Chris without even looking at her.'

'And Fitch?'

'Chris left before we could. I'm sure he wouldn't have passed her. He's better than that.'

Doug presses his lips together. The image still infuriates him.

'I took Dad aside. He had nearly won me over to give it a try: working for the police. He had even persuaded RC to put in a good word. We had both felt so awkward about it that we hadn't been out climbing for the last six months before his death. I told Dad they were a bunch of self-centred twats for treating someone like that, let alone a colleague. He said Black had killed RC. I told him he knew nothing of either one of them. He had a soft spot for RC and because Anderson had tried to take Chris under his wings, Dad felt sure she was exactly the same. That was a load of shite. I knew Manda. The way RC talked about Chris, there was not the tiniest of resemblances. But Dad had made up his mind. I told him if that was how the police work, they could muddle on without him. I wouldn't lower myself to their level.'

Nic seems to be winning Fitch over. His hand rests on his mouth as he's listening to Nic. She is quite comfortable around

Fitch, even more so than she's ever been around his brother, or even Tom.

'Maybe it's because the Inspector didn't invite Hoy's girlfriend to the funeral.'

It is common knowledge Hoy wanted the divorce, because he had met someone. That someone was not at the funeral and Len viciously blamed that on the Inspector. She had not wanted Hoy's girlfriend at the funeral. Malcolm still remembers Fitch calmly replying Len shouldn't spread facts he could not substantiate. Len hadn't been at the funeral. None of them knew why.

'Huh! I don't know what that is about. I didn't know about the girlfriend, to be honest. It had been a while since we had last seen each other, but I do know that he had changed. Aye, that may well have had everything to do with the girlfriend, but I don't know... I don't think it's as black and white as you lot think it is. Or Black and Red for that matter.'

It isn't. There are several gaps in the story, or missing pieces Nic would say.

'But I shouldn't be venting my spleen with you, Malcolm. I've been told you've lost quite a lot of support for co-operating with Chris.'

Malcolm shrugs.

'I don't think I ever had that much support to begin with.'

Not as a kid, not as a student, and not even as an adult. Working for Andrew changed things, but it's a precarious position. He realised that much after Andrew's disappearance. The station's treatment of Inspector MacAskill took things one step further. Malcolm cannot begin to explain his relief to have Nic on his side.

## **Deirdre's Sorrow**

Fitch will join them. Doug asks to accompany them as well. He knew RC, probably better than any of them. Moreover, he knows Dun Deardail too. It seems too good an opportunity to waste. Their safety back-up is Fitch's father. How much stranger can things get?

'Right. All ready? Start walking and talking, Harpic.'

Malcolm is marching next to three seasoned walkers, two of whom just climbed "the Ben". Malcolm can bet his trekking poles that they didn't take the Mountain Path in memory of their late friend. Malcolm realises Nic can be remarkably patient with his

discomfort with uneven ground, but still it's safe to assume he will need all his concentration not to trip. The first hundred yards or so are still on concrete, but the small path to the right is already visible. Malcolm really doesn't feel like embarrassing himself yet again by falling face down.

'Uh, Nic, why don't you tell them what we know? I think I'd prefer to focus on putting one foot in front of the other.'

'Ah, you'll be all right, Harpic,' Fitch says, but doesn't insist all the same.

They all take a right turn onto the path. Malcolm can see the forest right ahead. He hopes it won't be as thick as the one in Glen Orchy. His hands tighten and his trekking pole swing in unison with his legs. Here he goes again.

'Right, what Malcolm found out so far, is pretty impressive. I'll start with what he discovered first. As you may know, Chris was raised on Skye. Her mother died giving birth to her. Her grandmother died during labour as well. I know both women died at home and they might have been saved had they been in hospital, but somehow I think Chris may have given having children some thought.'

'Aye, well, that certainly explains things.'

'Her father was in his mid-forties when he had Chris. He was, is an elder. This is projection and Chris may or may not confirm this, but Malcolm and I both think Chris spent a lot of time with the Hoys. Maybe she even spent most of her time there. Like I said, pure speculation. But what we do know is, and what a lot more people could have known had they made a bit of an effort, is that Chris and Hoy's sister were very, very close.'

'His sister?' Doug exclaims.

'Aye, Deirdre Hoy.'

It was the first name to pop up, when Malcolm ran a background check on DI Chris MacAskill. The then fourteen-year-old Inspector is mentioned several times in the file on Deirdre Hoy. It's only too obvious the adult Inspector didn't let go of that file.

'Didn't she disappear?' Fitch asks.

Malcolm is walking between Doug and Fitch, with the latter in front of him. He's wearing a rucksack three times the size of Malcolm's. It makes Malcolm slightly envious of the ease with which Fitch moves on uneven ground. Hands in his pockets, talking and walking, talking, walking *and* thinking.

‘Donnie said RC’s house contained a box full of stuff on his sister. It’s odd that he never mentioned her.’

‘That’s because it wasn’t Hoy looking for his sister. It was Chris. She never gave up looking.’

‘Shite.’

They enter the forest. Malcolm will have to focus now. It’s still light. It won’t be by the time they’re back.

‘Do you know anything about the disappearance?’ Nic asks.

‘No, I know she disappeared. That’s it.’

‘Me too.’

‘Deirdre Hoy was four years older than her brother. At the age of eighteen, she went to study in Edinburgh. She disappeared December eighteenth that same year. Nothing was ever found or heard. She disappeared without a trace. I’ll get to some of the suspects later, but let me start by telling what particularly pisses me off. It’ll be twenty years in a few months and not one of you lot discovered what Malcolm found within a single day.’

It was more than just a day. Well, at least it took him a few days to have everything confirmed.

‘Chris and Deirdre were best of friends, or better, Chris looked up to Deirdre as a big sister. There were letters in Deirdre’s room, weekly letters from Chris. That’s in the file. Her roommate confirmed that Deirdre talked a lot about Chris. When Malcolm visited that roommate she still remembered Deirdre, *and* Chris. Chris may have been four years her junior, but they were tight. Deirdre was fond of Chris. And vice versa. For her eighteenth birthday, Deirdre received sapphire earrings from her family. That roommate told Malcolm that Chris put in all her own money to help buy those earrings, earrings with Deirdre’s birthstone, earrings that Chris wore the night she disappeared.’

‘There’s a picture of Deirdre with those earrings in the file,’ Malcolm says, as they momentarily halt at a junction.

“Peat Track” it reads if they should continue right ahead; left and right are part of the West Highland Way. Malcolm thought the path they had just taken was also part of the West Highland Way. This is cheating, or at least confusing.

They turn left. The track is broad and open, not like in Glen Orchy, where saplings grew all over the path and the trees seemed eager to swallow those brave enough to face them. There is even space enough to walk next to one another.

‘So, are you seriously telling me all that is in a police file in Edinburgh and nobody made the link between the fourteen-year-old lass and the adult police officer?’ Doug asks critically.

‘Aye. Mental, isn’t it? Makes you wonder what they’re doing for a living.’

‘I know that. It’s excelling at being opinionated and prejudiced,’ Doug counters dryly.

‘Oy, some are not!’ Fitch shouts.

‘Huh, we may have the sole exceptions within the entire police present,’ Nic mutters, ‘Because when I think of some of their colleagues, I think they just abandoned reasoning when they signed their contract and were willingly brainwashed. A bit like bangers and mash.’

Even Fitch can’t subdue a smile.

‘My thoughts exactly. Mind, it doesn’t wear off the moment you resign. Donnie is still not back to normal. He wouldn’t have jumped to conclusions before he joined the police.’

‘Fresh air and loads of pines,’ Nic advises.

The ascent is steep enough to bring Ben Nevis into full view to the left, a huge rock of pale brown at the bottom, darker brown in the middle and grey at the top. The clouds are trying to tickle the summit.

‘Well, would you fucking look at that?’ Fitch complains, ‘Now it’s clear.’

Malcolm cannot believe Doug and Fitch just climbed Ben Nevis. Malcolm is sure his legs would wobble with fatigue and simply give way.

‘Anyway, that is what Malcom found out in the first days: that Deirdre went missing and that Chris was still looking into her disappearance. During her studies in Edinburgh, she talked to several people who knew Deirdre. I think she deliberately chose to be police, so she could return to Edinburgh. Within a few days of her transfer from Fort William to Edinburgh, she had her hands on Deirdre’s case file.’

‘Why do I get the sneaking sensation that things are going to turn even uglier, Nic?’

‘Because,’ Doug retorts, ‘Since even Chris could not solve the case, it has to be something rotten.’

‘You have no fucking idea. Now, Fitch, I know you are police, but if we are to get anywhere in this case, you are going to have to do what none in the force will be able to do.’

‘Aye, and that is?’

‘Start with a clean slate.’

He stops walking. It’s perfect for Malcolm to continue at a slower pace. It’s hard not to let their ease feel like an affront to his limited abilities.

‘Like how?’

‘Like from scratch. I don’t want to know about the “usual” suspects. The “usual” has been looked into, by you lot twenty years ago, by Chris for the past fifteen years. That angle has been approached again and again. It got you lot exactly nowhere.’

Malcolm halts by a fork. He’s reasonably sure they are supposed to take the right track, but he waits all the same. Doug decides to join Malcolm, while Fitch is standing right next to Nic, hands in his pockets, looking straight at her. She returns the stare. Nic can barely look Lyn in the eyes, let alone Len or even Calum. Malcolm did observe the same between Andrew and Nic last April, but that was one year after they had met. Fitch and Nic only exchanged their first words a few months ago. They seemed to have caught up fast.

‘She’s gained confidence,’ Doug mutters casually.

‘Fine,’ Fitch exclaims, ‘But remember I am not a top dog. I’m a dog with a bone. You tell me where to look for the bone and I’ll try to find it.’

‘Deal.’

No police officer can stay impartial when it comes to Dalziel. Malcolm doubts the very mention of that name won’t have Fitch’s bull spontaneously kick. But for now, Fitch is remarkably prepared to play along.

‘I’m serious, Nic. I’ll be completely open-minded, but I am not the one to tell you where to find the other angles.’

‘I’ll do my best.’

They shake hands.

‘Hmm, this should be novel: a breach with old-fashioned narrow-mindedness. Good luck for you too, Malcolm,’ Doug says, turns around and takes the right track of the fork.

## **The Dalziels**

It goes up steeper again. There’s an abundance of trees all around and water trickling to the right. The track is broad though. Darkness will begin to set in any time now. Soon no one else will be around. Then again, there are these moonwalkers.

‘Deirdre wasn’t the only person to go missing that eighteenth December,’ Nic continues, ‘Another student disappeared as well. This male student was the youngest of three brothers studying in Edinburgh, and the threesome were known as the “fearsome three”. They were serial philanderers. It was believed they competed with each other for female students. The other two brothers had no alibi for the night of the disappearance of Deirdre and their brother. But there was no proof they had anything to do with it either. Like Deirdre, he simply vanished.’

Nic deliberately does not mention his name yet.

‘Did they consider the idea that they ran away together?’ Fitch asks.

‘Aye, but that was quickly rejected. There was no indication in any of Deirdre’s behaviour she was capable of that. She was looking forward to spending Christmas with her family. She was a hard worker at university. The other one – I’ll get to his name later – I doubt eloping was his thing. He studied mathematics and he had – to all intents and purposes – a very calculated attitude towards life.’

‘Charming personality,’ Fitch concludes.

Nic slows down a bit, when she notices Malcolm has a hard time keeping up.

‘Just out of curiosity,’ Malcolm pants, ‘But how long have the pair of you been out and about today?’

‘Out? Nearly ten hours. Up? Thanks to our friendly hawk, since four this morning.’

They have to be joking. Malcolm wouldn’t wobble, he’d just keel over and need an airlift.

‘You climbed it via the Carn Mor *Jerrak* Arête?’

There they go again, speaking “scramble”.

‘The backside of the Ben,’ Doug explains.

‘Aye, we had preferred to start a wee bit later, but somebody specifically asked me to be back by five.’

‘Excuse me?’ Malcolm exclaims.

The design is rather premeditated.

‘Sorry, but I realised pretty early on that we would need an extra set of brains.’

‘How very considerate of informing the pair of us,’ Fitch fakes criticism.

‘Sorry,’ she apologises again.