

The Heir to Pictavia

Carin B. Logan

Written and printed in 2011

Also by this author:

Sgeulachd Castle (2003)

The Short Grioghal (2005)

The Beauty of Braemore (2007)

The Stained Family Tree (2007-2008)

The Marlets' Nest (2008)

The Quarterer & the Lengor (2009)

Thank you to Hanne and Inge
As ever, for my wife

Thursday, December 17th

‘Where’s the Artful Dodger?’

‘Don’t call him that,’ Lauren immediately bites back.

She tilts her head to the left. She would do that when sulking as a child, or when she was annoyed with me as a teenager. She’s far beyond that stage now. But she’s still up to the same tricks.

‘Well, can I come in?’ she asks irritably, both her hands ostentatiously at her side.

Did she come over especially to start an argument? After all this time, that would really top it off.

‘Where is he?’ I repeat calmly, my hand still on the door.

She throws her hands in the air.

‘At home! My God!’

‘Where’s home?’ I question her.

I will not have that electric eel in my house. I don’t care that it’s nearly eleven p.m., but I will not have him in.

‘Home, my home, England! Marc’s still there. Gee, grow up, Ron.’

I let her in and watch her march through the corridor, towing a wee case behind her. She hasn’t changed a bit. Her juvenile impatience hasn’t decreased in the least and the tantrums she could throw as a toddler are still dangerously close. She drops the case and enters the toilet next to the staircase. I sigh and walk into the living room, uncertain of what to expect. All I know is that I’m not in the mood for this at all. She had better not expect me to make up with him just because it’s getting on for Christmas. Moreover, why would this Christmas be any different from the last two?

‘Can I get a drink?’ she asks and falls down in one of the couches.

‘What do you want?’

‘Uuuh, well, that will depend on whether I’m allowed to stay here or if you want me to drive up to Mum’s.’

‘Lauren, just for the record, you were always welcome here, and you still are. It was you who decided not to come over anymore.’

‘Not without reason,’ she fires back.

‘Fan-fucking-tastic,’ I mutter.

She did come over just to have an argument.

‘If I can stay,’ she says all haughtily, ‘I will have a glass of red wine.’

‘Great.’

Red wine, she didn’t drink that two years ago. But I go into the kitchen anyway and get a wine glass and the corkscrew.

‘Just pick a bottle,’ I tell her.

‘Any bottle?’

‘Aye, any bottle.’

It’s not like I’m keeping them for a special occasion. What do I have to celebrate except this glaring standstill?

I plant a glass on the table and accept the bottle she pompously chose herself. It’s a Bordeaux. My sister drinks Bordeaux.

‘You’re not going to join me?’

‘No, I think I’ll have a wee dram.’

Preferably one that will bite me in the throat and keep down any hostile fumes daring to swell up. I head for the cabinet and get out a bottle of Ardbeg. I find an Ardbeg is good for any occasion. Meanwhile she nestles herself in the seat and takes a sip of the wine. How long has she been drinking red wine?

‘So,’ she tries smilingly, ‘How’s work?’

My favourite subject next to that of Marc.

‘TJFNCC,’ I grumble.

She looks at me. She should still remember this. There must be a tiny bit of Glasgow left in her.

‘The job fucks...’

‘And no cunt...’

‘Cares,’ she completes the line, ‘I thought you liked working under... uh, DI Fraser.’

‘Lauren, sister of mine, I haven’t been working under DI Fraser for two and a half years.’

Which would be exactly one week before this fine mess started.

‘Really? Slept around? Maybe slept with Fraser’s wife... or sister?’ she asks sarcastically.

I down a good swallow. Why is she trying to wind me up? Because it’s working.

‘So, how come?’ she insists.

‘I don’t know,’ I reply in annoyance, ‘Hamilton got promoted to Super and reshuffled the station. I got transferred to Prebble.’

And I truly detest that lazy bastard. He's useless, he's a prick, he's arrogant and he seems to get fiendish pleasure from humiliating everyone around him, especially me.

'He's a FLUB?' Lauren smiles.

'That about sums it up,' I nod.

'A fat lazy useless bastard,' she laughs, 'That's been a while. But Hamilton, isn't that the son of the big boss, well, the bigger boss?'

'U-huh.'

'Huh, gave it to him on a platter, didn't they?' she frowns.

'He's decent,' I disagree, 'Just because he's the son of the Chief Superintendent, doesn't mean his promotion wasn't right. I certainly prefer him over the likes of Prebble. Just a fucking shame that I had to be reallocated to Prebble's department.'

I can't imagine the DCI is all that happy with him either. He can't assign anything even remotely important to Prebble because he's too lazy to do anything. Prebble's always trying to cut corners and making other people do all the work. The DCI has taken more than one case out of his hands. Just a fucking shame those working under Prebble have to suffer as well.

But no more. If God and Hamilton agree, I will soon have another transfer, hopefully as far away from Prebble as humanly possible, and if that means leaving Maryhill, I will sincerely miss working there, but anything's better than staying close to Prebble.

'I guess you are not working on the gangland murders then,' she smiles.

And this evening has been particularly violent.

'No,' I confirm, 'But we weren't on duty this evening anyway. Still...'

With at least three dead most of the station will be working on the latest spate of violence. I bet officers from our team will be seconded to the team working on that case. The fact that I'm Prebble's right hand – and left as well – isn't promising. That it's already eleven p.m. and several hours after the shootings could be a very decent indication too that I won't be assisting the others tomorrow.

'Maybe for the best,' Lauren says, 'I mean, working on such a case... Really, that's dangerous, Ron.'

'Better than cleaning up Prebble's mess.'

'Speaking of a mess,' she starts.

Now we're getting to it. I take another sip and look at how Lauren is getting armed and ready.

'We saw Linda last Sunday,' she shoots.

And what am I to say now?

'OK, and how is she?'

'Fine, fine.'

I finish my all too wee dram and consider taking another one. Three swallows was really a wee dram. When I look up from my glass I find Lauren staring at me.

'Marc and I are getting married next summer.'

Well, that was an accident waiting to happen. But I guess she didn't come to get my blessing nor to walk her down the aisle. As if I would wilfully hand her over to that invertebrate.

'Fine,' I state matter-of-factly.

'We... I would like you to be there, Ron.'

I grind my teeth. It's my sister; it's my baby sister. But just thinking of that spineless creature she is going marry makes my blood boil. I know I have to be there for Lauren, but I'm afraid that the first time I see Marc again I will punch him in the face. Moreover, I have to face the rest of the Thatchers as well, and I honestly don't know whom I dread seeing again most.

'Well?' she asks.

'Well what,' I grumble.

'Our wedding, Ron. I'm going to marry Marc. I mean, we've been together for nearly seven years. We've been through a lot. We still love each other a lot. We want to marry each other.'

I bite my teeth repeatedly and I feel I'm actually clenching my fists. Does Lauren know what he did? Did he have the fucking nerve to own up to what he did in the company of his fine brother?

'He has no spine,' I manage to say at last.

'Is that all you have to say? Ron, I want you to apologise to Marc and make up. I want...'

'What? That'll be the day. Like hell I will. He fucking owes me an apology!'

'Ron! For God's sake. I don't understand you anymore, you know. I mean, it should be Marc not wanting to see you, not the other way around.'

'Ah, aye,' I nod increasingly angry.

'You slept with his sister, Ron!' she shouts.

'Well, he's sleeping with mine. What's the fucking problem?'

'Did you sleep with Linda just to get back at Marc?'

‘No!’

‘Really? Because you ruthlessly slept with Linda!’

‘I did not ruthlessly sleep with Linda!’

God, next she’s going to accuse me yet again of raping Linda.

‘Ron, you abused her.’

‘I did not...’

I get up and walk a few steps away from her.

‘I did not abuse her. She even made the first move,’ I try to say as calmly as possible.

No matter how childish that may sound.

‘Ron, she had just found out that her husband was going to have a baby with her best friend. She was in a very vulnerable position and you took advantage of her.’

‘I did not take... Fuck.’

I’m heading back to the cabinet. But instead of opening it to get the bottle out, my hands grab the board and try to squeeze it tight. I guess I will not be having that second dram. Why do I always have to be the only adult? Why can’t she have grown up too?

All I know is that I did not take advantage of Linda. I did not. I know she had just found out and all. We talked about it. I talked about my transfer and my disgust about it. She talked about her ex and her best friend. I remember the total admiration for her when she told me how she had returned home to talk to her husband about her feeling that their marriage had failed, but instead she found her husband holding hands with her best friend at the kitchen table. Instead of total hysteria, she let the picture sink in, asked her “friend” if the baby was his, went upstairs and phoned her solicitor to inform him she wanted an urgent divorce as her husband was having a baby with another woman. So cool, so calm; how could anyone take advantage of such a strong woman? I was all awe for her. I still am when I think of it. Linda and I talked for hours. We both decided there and then that we were not going to be the victims in either case. She was not going to be the poor, betrayed and humiliated wife and best friend; I was not going to be whining about working under that bastard of a Prebble. We were both going to get on with life and see what we could make of the next day. I did not take advantage of her. We slept together. That was all.

That was not all. I would have been happy to see Linda again. If it hadn’t been for the mess that started right after, and

lasted the rest of that miserable day, and keeps dragging on today.

‘Then why did you have to make matters worse by telling Marc that it didn’t mean a thing?’

I turn around. I thought I had had my share of beating when it came to Linda, but this knocks me down yet again.

‘I did what?’

‘Well, you told Marc and Hugh that it didn’t really mean anything, you and Linda, that it was just a bit of fun,’ she repeats in complete earnest.

I can’t believe what I’m hearing. She actually believes what she’s saying.

‘So let me get this straight: Marc says that...’

‘Hugh said it,’ she corrects me.

My initial disappointment is swiftly caught up by swelling anger.

‘Even better, so when the brother of your spineless boyfriend...’

‘He...’

I shut her up with just a raised finger. The fact that she immediately swallows her defence means she hasn’t forgotten that my patience is wearing thin.

‘So when the brother of that spineless boyfriend of yours tell you that your brother raped his sister, you simply believe him.’

‘Well...’

She’s wavering. It’s a trifle late to realise that the holy bible isn’t coming out of their mouths.

‘You did, didn’t you? You simply believed them.’

‘Well...’

‘I’m your brother!’ I lash out at her, ‘I fucking raised you since you were four! I took care of you. I was the one who taught you how to ride a bike, who picked you up from school, who helped you with your homework... I was always there for you! And this is how you repay me? That drunken lot accuses me of being a rapist and you believe them without even questioning things? You phone me and tell me I raped Linda? You set up Mum against me? Well, thanks a lot!’

She jumps up.

‘Ron... No... I mean.’

‘You mean what?’

What could she possibly say to make this look any better? The first time I met Marc all those years ago, I believed she was

going to give him at least a notion of a spine, but it seems that Lauren has gone from what I thought to be a reasonably independent young woman to a wobbling carbon copy of that Artful Dodger.

‘Well, I... I mean, when Marc and Hugh came back from the party, they were really upset. So I asked them and Marc said that you and Linda had slept together.’

‘So? That’s nobody’s business but Linda’s and mine. I can assure you when we were kissing and making out I did not have your boyfriend on my mind.’

‘Aye, but then Hugh said that you had told him it hadn’t really meant anything to you.’

The last shred of my patience is going up in smoke. I can’t believe she would do this to me. I can’t believe she did this to me. She’s still doing it.

‘Hugh told you I had said it didn’t mean anything. Since when do I so carelessly sleep around?’

‘Aye, I know, I know. But I mean, they were upset, Ron. They were really upset. I mean, I had never seen Marc in such a state. Why would they be so upset if they didn’t think you had abused their sister?’

I turn around again and jerk open the drawer. I get a file out, march at her and throw it next to her.

‘That is why they were so fucking upset!’

She looks up, at the menace standing next to her. If this won’t let the cat out of the bag, nothing else will.

‘What’s this?’

She slowly takes the files. The dismay on opening it is instant. But when I see the pictures a storm is raging through my body again.

‘That is why your dear boyfriend and that twat of a brother were so upset!’

She tries to say something, but can’t utter a single word for now.

‘That is why they were so upset, Lauren,’ I try to calm down again, ‘Because they had just beaten me up.’

She starts crying as she holds the different pictures in front of her. They are not pretty. Bruce took them right before we left the hospital; the cuts and bruises were rather horrific. But we had them taken so we could use them against Marc and Hugh... until Lauren phoned to accuse me of abusing, no, raping Linda. That shut me up. Until now.

‘How... Did...’

She looks up. She shakes her head, crying.

‘Linda left first. I knew she had planned to see her youngest brother, Nick, so after she had taken a shower she left. She seemed all fine, really fine. That’s why I can’t understand why she would be so upset less than twenty-fours later. I showered as well and decided to go back to your graduation party. But as soon as I came out of the B&B, I had a fist in my face. I never had any time to respond. They were waiting for me.’

‘No, oh, no.’

‘Ah, aye.’

‘Marc too?’

‘Ah, aye.’

Although I’ve never stopped thinking that it was Hugh, who struck first. Marc simply lacks the spine.

‘But why? Why would he do this?’

‘Why? Because they were drunk. Because they’re twats.’

I remember that Marc had been bleating all evening about the fact that his youngest brother wasn’t there. Linda said it was hardly surprising. She seemed to be more on Nick’s side, but except to say that Nick had a right to be happy for once, she didn’t explain things. Hugh on the other hand, is a professional prick by nature, I think. He may have been annoyed that his wife wasn’t there, the way he arrogantly vented his frustration on just about everyone was a fine testimony to his ugly personality. Linda and I observed both of them getting increasingly drunk. Linda was embarrassed by their behaviour; I simply felt Dad’s legacy weighing down on me.

‘They’re... Marc...’

Another bucket load rolls down.

‘He’s never said anything about this,’ she sobs, ‘He’s never even tried. He should have told me this. He lied to me.’

And that wants to marry my sister. I don’t believe you have to share every inch of your life, but I do believe that beating up the other one’s brother would be on my list of things to tell.

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’

‘Why? Are you serious now? Because you said, no, you yelled at me that I had abused Linda. Hugh shouted that I had raped his sister and you agreed. So I really took that as a warning: you file a complaint against Marc and Hugh and you will be sued for rape. I’m a police officer, Lauren. I know how this works. And the last thing I want is an alleged rape hanging over

me. I did not rape Linda. But you said she was upset. So aye, I backed down.'

'Linda... I mean, she was upset. But... But that might have been after I told her that it hadn't meant anything to you.'

'Oh, come on,' I protest, throwing my hands in the air.

Little wonder Linda never called me back. After we had gone to bed with each other, she told me she wanted to get through her divorce first, which I thought was fair enough. But in-between Lauren's and my mother's phone calls, I received a text message from Linda, stating that she refused to be anyone's victim, certainly not mine. That makes perfect sense now. It was quite disturbing back then. I thought the entire Thatcher clan had finished me off. Except for Nick. Who knows what he could still do to me.

'It looks bad,' Lauren sobs, still looking at the pictures.

It does. But it's too late now. I've shown her the pictures.

'It was bad,' I confirm, 'I had a broken nose, two missing teeth, two black eyes and a couple of bruised ribs. They actually had to kick me when I was already down. And aye, they kicked me together.'

'Noooo.'

'So forgive me if I don't want to see your boyfriend. Aye, I slept with his sister, but Linda and I were both consenting adults.'

I find it quite amazing how easy I say Linda's name.

In fact, I would do it again. I would watch out when I left the B&B though. On second thoughts, I wouldn't let her go that easily anymore. Nick could wait another few hours.

'Marc should have told me this. He should...'

She looks up.

'He owes you an apology.'

'I'm not going for anything less,' I mutter.

But I'd like a lot more.

I assemble the pictures and put them back in the file, but I keep lingering in front of Lauren. She saw Linda last Sunday.

'So...'

My mobile goes off. It's never good when the phone rings well past eleven. It's Constable; that's even less good.

'Aye, Constable, what's going on?'

'I'm sorry to call you at this late hour, Boss,' I hear.

I don't know why he calls me Boss. I know he's just out of uniform, but even then he should know that Sergeants are called

either Serg or proper names. But Prebble insists on his stupid nicknames, so Constable keeps calling me Boss. True, I prefer Boss, but even so.

‘Aye, what is it, Constable?’

‘We have a suspicious death, Boss. To be honest, I don’t know if it’s suspicious or not. I would like you to come and take a look, Boss. All the others are on the gangland murders, so that’s why they called us in.’

I will not be working on the gangland murders tomorrow. Instead I will have Prebble breathing down my neck again. The only advantage is that the Super asked me to show the new one around and take Constable under my wings until something worked out. Since it was on the Super’s request, Prebble’s been giving me a bit more leeway since last Monday. I can manage a few more weeks, but only that. I sincerely hope the Super won’t keep me waiting for several months.

‘Aye, that’s fine, Constable. Where is it?’

‘Kersland Street.’

‘Who’s there already?’

‘Just a few uniformed officers, Boss.’

I sigh.

‘They’ve already called in the doctor, but I think they are having a hard time tracking someone down who isn’t already working on the other case.’

‘I don’t care about that. Moreover, pronouncing life extinct doesn’t take ages. The murders happened at seven. How long does it take to pronounce one dead?’

I drop the file on the table again.

‘I’ll try them myself, Boss.’

‘Good, I’m on my way.’

I put the phone back in my trouser pocket and look at my sister, who is still crying in the seat.

‘I have to go,’ I tell her.

‘Someone died?’ she asks softly.

‘Aye, someone died.’

She wipes the tears from her face and tries to put on a brave face. But she’s no longer a ten-year-old. I can’t hide that I’m very disappointed in her.

I grab my glass of whisky, take it into the kitchen and fill it with tap water. I finish it in one go, fill it again and drink it a second time. It was only a very wee dram, and I think my rage

burnt most of the alcohol. I still take a third glass of water. Then I return to the living room.

‘Can I stay here tonight?’ she asks tearfully.

‘Preferably, aye. In that state of mind I don’t want you to drive anywhere.’

She gets up and hugs me.

‘Thank you, Ron.’

I sigh. She will have to give me some time to get over this.

‘I have to go now, Lauren.’

She nods. I walk out of the living room, grab my coat and leave the house. My car is right in front. Thank goodness, I did not have that second whisky.

I’ve hardly driven a mile when the phone goes off again. It’s Constable again. Odd.

‘Aye?’

Constable scrapes his voice.

‘Good evening, Sir, I’m sorry to call you at this late hour.’

‘Huh?’

‘This is DC Constable speaking and...’

‘Constable, what is the matter with you?’

‘Boss?’

‘Who else? You called me, didn’t you?’

‘No... Oh, oh, Lord.’

I’m going to have to kick this over-politeness out of him. Aye, I want officers to be polite, but Constable has a knack of going overboard. I don’t need to be handled with velvet gloves.

‘Constable, what is this?’

‘Im sorry to say, Boss, but Cinioid Elphin is dead.’

‘Hey? Who?’

‘Cinioid Elphin, Boss.’

‘Who’s he?’

‘He’s... He’s the suspicious death, Boss.’

‘And I’m supposed to know him?’

‘He has your phone number on a sticker on his desk.’

‘Hey?’

I have never heard of a Cinioid Elphin. A name like that would surely ring a bell had I met him before.

‘I’m on my way, Constable. I’ll be there in less than ten minutes.’

Cinioid Elphin; my sister Lauren; Linda Thatcher: one name and two faces. I have no idea who this Cinioid Elphin is, but no matter how intriguing right now, I’m sure there is a perfectly

logical explanation as to why he has my phone number. I don't hand out my personal phone number to every Jack, John or Jimme, but someone might have passed it on. When it comes to Lauren, her behaviour is neither intriguing nor logical; it's simply disappointing. I have never ever given her any motive to treat me this disrespectfully. Is that what they teach young lassies south of the border: to betray one's own kin? Then there's Linda. I have never met anyone both so compassionate and level-headed at the same time. She was funny, down-to-earth, rational, and incredibly attractive. Why would anyone decide to cheat on her? Certainly not because of her qualities between the sheets. Could I phone her? Would she talk to me? Would she let me explain what really happened? I don't have a clue how she's been since. For all I know, she could be in a new relationship already. She could be married with children by now. Even the very thought is devastating. Maybe I had better ask Lauren first. She owes me that much.

I drive into a street of red sandstone houses. Two police cars and several uniforms in front of one particular house lead me to the scene. I park my car behind one of the police cars and head closer. There is a young woman being comforted by a PC. A young man with glazy eyes sits on the stairs in front of the house.

'Students,' I mutter.

We have a dead student. This could go from suicide to accidental death to – rather rarely – murder.

'Sergeant Skene,' I hear behind me and turn around.

'Ah, doctor,' I greet him, 'Aren't you having a busy night?'

'You have a very impatient constable,' he replies, 'I was already on my way when I was asked to make a move on.'

'Ah, well, maybe he knows you need a push,' I smile.

'Hmmm.'

We enter the house and find Constable waiting for us.

'Ground floor, Boss,' he informs us and shows the way.

I have entered several student rooms before and I've never seen one as tidy as this. There are things out of place though. At least I have the feeling some things are out of place. There is a small pool of blood right next to the office chair and then a trail of blood leading to the bathroom, where a young man is lying in the shower, dressed. His wrist is cut; his clothes are soaking wet; a knife is lying next to his right hand; a small trickle of blood is clotting on his wrist, a really thin one, with only one or two drops making it down the shower floor.

‘Hmmm,’ the police duty doctor groans as he bends down, ‘Why can’t they be in a chair more often, instead of down on the ground?’

‘Gravity?’

‘Funny.’

He does some checks and then officially pronounces the young lad dead.

‘That’s me done here,’ he states, ‘I hope the city goes to bed now, because I would like to catch some sleep as well.’

I turn to Constable.

‘Any pictures taken already?’

‘No, but they should be here any minute, Boss.’

I nod.

‘Do you know him?’

I shake my head.

‘So what do we know about him?’

‘Ciniod Elphin, student at Glasgow University. That’s about all, Boss.’

‘Who’s the crying lass?’

‘Uh, Mairie O’Connel, she found the body.’

‘Did you take a statement yet?’

‘No.’

He looks at my face.

‘I’ll get on with it right now.’

Although I doubt he will get much out of her at this stage. The drunken lad might even be worse. Thursday evenings are fantastic times to find sober students.

I crouch down, careful not to smudge a drop of blood, and observe the body while putting on gloves.

His left wrist is completely sliced open. That just about rules out an accident. He’s also in the shower, with the knife lying next to him. It has all the appearance of a suicide. Still...

‘Weasley!’

I turn around and watch Prebble come closer. He takes in the scene for exactly three seconds.

‘You’re going to be in a lot of trouble if you can’t control your pet, Weasley! I do not want to be called out of bed for what is obviously a suicide! Write a report and file it.’

He turns around and starts to walk away.

‘We don’t know if it’s a suicide, Sir.’

He stops and turns back to me.

‘Weasley, just because he’s a fucking redhead like you, doesn’t make the case any more interesting. Students commit suicide. We have a regular number a year.’

And Prebble would know all about statistics, wouldn’t he? We probably still have that extra number to make the statistics before we exceed the official quota.

‘Write a fucking report and put it on my desk. By tomorrow evening I want this mess cleaned up. And keep your fucking pet on a leash.’

He turns around again and stomps out of the bathroom.

‘Out of my way,’ I hear him growl at some unlucky bastard.

I sigh. A suicide, file this as a suicide. I can at least take a look, right?

‘Can I take the pictures now, Serg?’

Two men stand in the doorway. I bet they heard Prebble’s usual tone of speech.

I get up, take a few steps back and sit down on the toilet lid. One takes pictures of the lad, while the other waits. Then he photographs the trail of blood leading out of the bathroom into the main room. The trail runs on the wrong side of the door. If the lad walked from the living room to the bathroom, it should have been on his left or at most the middle of the doorway. But it’s not, unless he walked backwards.

‘Make sure you get that trail on a picture: door versus blood trail, and then blood trail in comparison with the body.’

He nods and I follow the line of blood and stop at the office chair with next to it a wee pool of blood. Why is there so little blood? I go back to the body and closely observe the wrist. There is one cut, a deep cut, but it’s just one neat and deadly cut. There should have been a pond of blood underneath that chair. Why did it bleed so little that he actually had to have the shower running? And why is there no blood on the walls? I find it rather unlikely he would not have used both hands to turn on the taps. Suicide leaves reason out of the frame. There is too much of it here though: a chair, a fine trail and a clean shower.

Moreover, who turned the tap off again? Certainly not the lad himself.

‘Is there anything else you want us to bag, Serg?’

He’s holding a plastic bag with the knife. Why is the knife in the bathroom if he cut himself in the other room? Why did he take it with him, when there is just one cut?

‘Serg?’