

## The Scottish Adventure (1991)

*And what an adventure it was... "The Scottish Adventure" was first conceived in late 1990, when two schoolfriends asked me to write a story set in the future in which they were living in wedded bliss with whichever teenage boy they happened to fancy at the time. I agreed to write a short tale set in 2003 based around a week's camping trip from Glasgow, not envisioning the 92,000 word, 160 page magnum opus I would have churned out by Day 4 of said holiday. What follows is a selection of some of the more dramatic (if far fetched) episodes of TSA. (As many of the people in the story are "real," I have removed surnames or any other reference that might identify them to the casual reader – those of you lucky enough to be included know who you are!)*

### Chicken Run

*Poultry goes psycho...*

Seeing that the children were not particularly fascinated with the sheep, their parents asked if they'd like to go into the farm shop and buy some feed for the chickens. This suggestion was greeted with enthusiasm, so off they went.

Amanda and Catherine stayed to browse round the shop, while Gemma and Sophie took the children round to see the chickens. Antony and Fleur were rather afraid of the strange noises they made, but the others were fascinated.

They threw the feed into the cage and watched the chickens fight for it. What they didn't see was that there was a hole in the fence through which the smaller chickens could get out!

Chickens are not normally aggressive, but, angered by the fact that they hadn't got any of the food and that the farmer wouldn't let the farm's cockerel fertilise their eggs, three hens squeezed through the hole and launched an attack on the group!

Fleur screamed in terror as one flew up in the air, beating her face with its wings. Another began trying to peck Napoleon's leg. He kicked out at it. Gemma scooped Antony into her arms, trying to shield him from the third chicken.

All the commotion had alerted the farmer. He looked out of the farmhouse window and saw what was going on. He grabbed a pitchfork and rushed outside.

He drove the pitchfork through the heart of the first chicken, killing it instantly. Blood gushed from the wound.

Seeing its fellow chicken lying dead on the ground, the second one flew at the farmer, and the others watched in horror as it flew for his face and gouged his eye with its sharp beak.

This was when Gemma, the vegetarian, took action. She grabbed the pitchfork, which the farmer had dropped, and hacked it to pieces. The head went flying through the air and landed in the sheep's pen. The mutilated body dropped to the ground.

The third chicken, sensing that it too was destined for this fate, flapped its wings and flew into the air, flew away from the farm, to live the life of a wild chicken in the woods.

The danger over, Gemma turned her attention to the children. Except for a few minor cuts, they seemed OK.

Sophie ran into the farmhouse to telephone for an ambulance for the farmer. His eye was bleeding where the chicken's sharp beak had pierced it, but it had not gone far enough to penetrate the brain, or the farmer would have almost certainly been dead.

Amanda and Catherine ran from the shop to the others. They had seen the farmer running past the shop with the pitchfork, but had mercifully not been able to see the fight. "What happened?"

"Chickens," Gemma said breathlessly.

Catherine and Amanda saw the bodies on the ground. "Yeah, what happened to them?"

"They attacked us."

"What did they do? Peck you?"

"I know it sounds hard to believe, but I think they were trying to kill us."

"What?!!!"

Catherine saw the farmer lying on the ground. "What happened to your eye?"

"Chicken," he said.

Amanda and Catherine looked at the bodies, and then back at the farmer, then gasped.

The ambulance arrived a few moments later, and the ambulancemen didn't believe the chicken story, as Gemma and co. had expected. They said it was more likely that the farmer had accidentally

stabbed himself in the eye with the pitchfork. At this the farmer flew into a rage, and accused them of calling him senile. They hurriedly loaded him into the ambulance and drove off.

“I think we’d better go home now,” said Catherine.

Once back, they relayed their story to the others, who were inclined to be sceptical, except Peter who said: “Wow! Forget “The Birds”! This is the real thing! “Attack of the Killer Chickens!” I like it!”

“I believe we’re having roast chicken for lunch,” said Katherine pleasantly.

“Oh yum,” said Napoleon. “I don’t like chickens. Those ones wanted to kill me.”

“Yes dear,” said Catherine, who though that Napoleon had an overactive imagination. “Do you want to help me cook it?”

“Yes please,” he said, and they went off into the kitchen together.

### Black Magic Roulette

*Is something supernatural guiding the wheel?*

The children were put to bed as soon as they got back, and then it was time for another game of Roulette.

This time the counters were priced at £100. James, Catherine and Mairead refused to play, saying that they could not afford such high stakes. Val, however, who enjoyed it with more people, bought them five counters each.

Gemma was quite obviously tired and didn’t concentrate, so lost all her counters in the first five minutes of the game. Mairead, Vicky and Paul soon joined her, and it was not long before only David, Simon and Val were left in the game.

Simon had played Roulette with his grandparents as a child, and later played for money in casinos with his friend Steven. David had spent much of the ‘60’s staying in hotels to be near location filming and had played on the casinos there. Val had considered playing Roulette “the thing to do” in his youth. So all three were experienced in the game, despite others believing that it was just “a question of luck.”

Doubling the stakes from the previous game they had had a couple of nights ago made the wins higher. Val had 36 counters, or £3600, David had 42 and Simon had 29.

This was when Val announced that they should make each counter worth a staggering £1000! This would not affect him or David, but Simon couldn’t risk losing that much money. So Gemma was horrified when he said:

“Yeah, OK, let’s do that.”

Everyone watched intently as the game went on. Val seemed to be on a winning streak and had soon won 18 more counters, most of them David’s. Subsequently he dropped out soon after, leaving Val and Simon to battle it out.

Suddenly it was more than a game. The two men could feel the eyes of everyone watching, boring into them. Val wanted to stop, bet stupidly, and let Simon win. But the part of him that loved competing would not let that happen.

Simon had 56 counters. Val had 51. Simon lifted up all his counters and placed them on the black. The others watched incredulously. Then Val did the same thing, but on the red.

The next spin would be the decider. It would mark the end of the game. Martin was about to spin the wheel when...

Suddenly, as if by magic, the whole table lifted up slightly, coming down with a tremendous jar that sent the wheel skidding off the table. Then all was quiet again.

Martin bent down to pick up the wheel, and then gasped. The others all turned to look at him. The wheel had been split in two perfect halves, right down the centre.

“Someone must have jugged the table,” said Val lamely.

But they all knew that this was not the answer. The table, real oak, was enormous and very heavy. It would have taken at least four people, standing up and pushing as hard as they could, to lift it even one centimetre. It was as if some supernatural force had descended to save Simon from losing all that money, or, as the case may have been, stopping him from winning it.

The room was silent. Then Peter said:

“I’m goin’ to bed. I’m tired.”

The others quickly followed his example.

### Eight Legged Freak

*Charlotte's Web it ain't.*

"Anyone bring a torch? It isn't half dark in here!" commented Vicky nervously.  
"What about toilet paper? I wouldn't mind betting that there isn't any here," said Gemma.  
"Yeah. I don't know why Val didn't argue with Axel about coming here. It really is disgusting!" Amanda said disdainfully.  
Gemma peered through the darkness into one of the toilet cubicles. "Wow!"  
"Is there paper?" asked Mairead.  
"Yeah, it's greaseproof, but that's better than nothing." Gemma walked into the cubicle and locked the door.

After they had all done their business in the toilets, the quartet proceeded to the little washroom, which had five or six sinks lined up against its walls.

Gemma flicked on the light. "Ah! Illumination!" She moved in front of the nearest sink. The others quickly arranged themselves round the other sinks, with Mairead furthest away from the door.

Amanda peered into the cracked mirror and got out her electric toothbrush. She was about to switch it on when Mairead, standing next to her, gave a loud scream. Everyone turned towards the girl to see what the cause of it was.

"What ever is wrong, Mairead?" cried Vicky.

"Over there...in the corner...a...s-spider!"

"Is that all?" Amanda asked, relieved.

"It's a...black widow!" the girl shrieked.

"But can't they...kill people?" said Gemma in a hushed tone.

"Yes," Amanda informed her. "Let's get out of here, quietly so not to disturb it."

But the spider had moved up in front of the door, which meant that to get out...

"We'll have to go past it!" Mairead wailed.

Gemma shushed her. "Shut up! You'll scare it!"

"What are we going to do?"

The four girls crept away from the door and backed up against the far wall, waiting to see what the spider would do next. Then...

"Aren't you girls ready yet?" called Val cheerfully as he swung open the door. He saw their shocked faces and knew that something was wrong. Then he noticed the spider.

It was crouched on the floor, about three inches away from his left foot, angrily waving two of its legs in the air. It was going to strike.

Val saw that the next few moments could be his last. He swiftly pulled his cigarette lighter out of his pocket, leaned his left arm down and flicked the catch just as the spider reared up to attack her prey.

Val stared with grim satisfaction as the spider was burned to a crisp. "There, I always said that smoking was good for you." He turned to the amazed girls. "Shall we go?"

### Mountain Rescue

*On the summit of Ben Vorlich, danger awaits.*

Meanwhile, just as Napoleon was throwing down the train, the mountain climbers – Val, Simon, Paul, Mairead – and Axel and Christian who had decided to come along, were gazing up anxiously at the mountain.

"It's bigger than I thought," commented Simon.

"Yeah...and it looks hard to climb, too." Mairead sounded worried.

"You can always go see Vicky if you're too chicken," said Christian scornfully. Mairead swallowed hard and stuck her nose in the air. "No, I'm coming!"

"Right," said Val. "I'll lead the way. Axel...you're quite good at climbing...you go at the back to catch anyone who falls. Only joking!" He saw their anxious faces.

"Well, it wasn't funny!" Simon argued.

"OK, I'm sorry. Now, shall we get up this mountain or not?" He passed round a safety rope. "Tie this to yourselves. Make sure everything's secure."

Ten minutes later Val was satisfied. "Come on! Mountain ho! And off we go!" He reached up and drove the ice pick into the hard mountain, and then pulled himself up by it, waiting while the others did the same.

They had been travelling upward in this fashion for about half an hour when Val suddenly said: "Oh no, I don't believe it."

"What?" the others chorused from below.

"Guess who I can see up ahead? James plus his new beau."

"I'm coming up to have a look!" said Mairead, who was behind him. Val swiftly pulled her up. James and his friend were about twelve feet away where the mountain went straight for a bit and she could see both of them clearly.

"The man he's with! I think I know who it is!"

"Who?" Val asked, surprised.

"His name is Peter. He went to our old school – he was in my English class."

"Are you sure it's him?"

"Yeah...pretty sure."

Soon all six climbers were up on the large ledge having a good ogle at Peter. Axel and Christian laughed because he wasn't very good at mountain climbing – he kept slipping over and sliding a little – each slide taking him closer to them. It wasn't until he was about five feet away that they realised the danger. Val was just about to signal to him to keep away when Peter attempted to run back up the ledge. He slipped and went over hard, the force of the blow causing him to slide backwards...straight towards Val and co. standing dangerously near to the edge of the ledge!!!!

Val and Axel both threw themselves to the side, jerking the others attached to the rope with them. Peter went sailing past and his body went over the edge of the ledge, with only his hands keeping him from toppling over to certain death.

Christian, nearest to him, reached over and grabbed one of his hands. This action threw Axel, who was at the end of the rope, over the ledge, so that the other climbers had to brace themselves not to slide over also. Christian grabbed Peter's other hand and pulled him over the ledge back onto the mountain. Val then stood up and gave a great tug on the rope, pulling Axel back up to safety. Team effort had saved a man's life.

### Christian and the Lions

*Don't put them in the ring together...*

Inside, there was seating space for about 2000 people on the flaky red painted seats, but less than 300 were actually there. The centre of the tent was a sawdusted floor, and there was a big ladder with a trapeze tied near the top of it.

Napoleon wriggled in his seat. "I don't think much of this, Mum," he said loudly.

"Shhh! It hasn't even started yet," she replied, embarrassed.

"It's not very popular," commented Mairead.

"Probably 'cos it's crap," sulked Napoleon.

"Hey! You wanted to come, and let's have less of that language!" scolded Val.

At this point the ringmaster entered the ring to half-hearted applause from the audience. "Hello ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls! And have we got a show for you today!"

Vicky peered closely at the man. "Hmmm...he's not bad looking."

"Nah...look at the size of that nose!" giggled Amanda.

The man carried on: "And first up on our star-studded bill, are Arlotta and her amazing Palomino horses!"

Amanda turned sharply to Val. "I thought there weren't going to be any animals in it! That's what that man said!"

"They'll say anything if they get money out of it," said Gemma gloomily.

"Well, it's disgraceful! I'm getting out now!" Amanda made as if to stand up, but Val pulled her back down again.

"Don't be stupid. Just stay here and bear it!"

Amanda scowled but obeyed, and turned back to Arlotta and her horses.

Arlotta was probably in her early forties, but was well made up and wearing a skimpy silver-studded leotard. She received a few wolf-whistles from some of the younger male audience.

Her work was pretty routine – she did handstands and things on the horses’ backs, and then stood in the middle of the ring cracking a whip at the animals. Amanda and Gemma scowled at this, and refused to applaud when the act finished.

Next up were the clowns. Napoleon leaned right over the rail and laughed hilariously as they performed, then informed the adults that: “I could’ve done better.” The adults, having tired of clowns somewhere around the age of twelve, simply smiled tiredly at him and said: “Yes dear, I’m sure you could.”

After the clowns came the trapeze artists, and all the female members of the audience were entranced as they came on, because the male performer looked like a young Kevin Costner. They all pretended not to notice the slim female with the nauseating smile that he carried on his shoulder. They both shinnied quickly up the ladder and onto the trapeze, where the man hooked his legs around the thin bar that was the trapeze and held the lady upside-down beneath him. They received an above-average flood of applause.

Then into the ring skipped a tall young man holding a unicycle. Amanda’s eyes lit up. Unicycles were her favourite things. It was almost enough to make her forget the horses.

He proceeded to cycle round the ring, and then gripped the unicycle with his legs and turned it round so that he was cycling backwards. A young boy of about ten dashed onto the stage with a taller unicycle, got onto it and then began to juggle three tennis-sized balls. An assistant dashed on with the same for the man, and then they juggled between one another.

After they had bowed and cycled off, the ringmaster came into the ring’s centre. “Interval time now, people, but stay with us for the second half, it promises fun, fiction and fantasy!”

Val yawned and turned to the others. “Well, what do we think of it so far?”

“It’s OK,” said Napoleon.

“Well, I think it’s been very good,” chirped Vicky happily.

“It had its moments.” Simon sounded very serious.

Val rose to his feet. “Anyone want an ice cream or a drink?” There was a positive reply to this. Val looked at the raised hands. “I think I’ll need someone to help me carry that lot! Simon, Paul, will you come?”

The two men nodded and followed Val to the refreshment kiosk. The others turned their attention to the circus ring. Three stagehands were rushing about constructing a metal cage which totally enclosed the ring.

Amanda scowled. “Oh no! They’re doing that thing with the lions! That is so cruel the way they whip them!”

“Bondage,” giggled Mairead.

Amanda gave her a scathing look. “Shut up!”

“Sorry...I was only joking.”

“Don’t start, you two,” said Catherine wearily.

Val, Paul and Simon returned to their seats. “That looks interesting,” Paul commented on seeing the ring.

“Interesting! That’s where they hurt the lions!” cried Gemma.

“I’m sure they won’t be too brutal,” reassured Simon.

Then the lights darkened and the ringmaster danced into the centre of the ring. “And now, ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls – put your hands together for Bill Buffo and his amazing dancing lions!”

Two stagehands rushed on with little pouffles for the animals to stand on, then rushed off again as Buffo entered, followed by the lions.

He looked a very vicious man, broad with lots of black hair and cracking a ferocious looking whip. The lions cowered before him. They were thin, undernourished things with cuts from the whip.

Amanda and Gemma looked horrified. Most of the women in the audience began whispering to their husbands about “animal cruelty,” but they could only sit back and watch the show.

A crack of the whip sent them onto their pouffles, and when one male lion hesitated he received a lash across the back. Then the lions raised their front legs and growled softly. The act proceeded in a similar manner for about ten minutes.

Amanda turned to Val, shocked. “I’ve never seen such a thing in my life! I’m complaining to the manager as soon as the show’s finished!”

“OK, but keep your voice down!” Val hissed, turning his attention back to the ring. The cage had been taken down and the ringmaster was back. “And now, everyone, for the Roller Skating Troupe...acclaimed the best in all Scotland!”

But the magic had gone. The audience gave a few feeble claps at the next few acts, and then in ran the ringmaster. "I'm sorry, people, but I regret that that is the end of our show. I hope that you enjoyed it."

Amanda and Gemma booed him and refused to applaud. The party got up to leave.

"I am going to complain," said Amanda defiantly.

Val ushered her quickly out of the tent. "Really, we haven't got the time...the kids will be wanting their lunch and..."

But Amanda was not to be deterred. She spotted Buffo going towards his caravan next to the animal pens, and shot after him. Gemma, after a moment's hesitation, followed.

They caught up with him just as he was about to climb the step to the caravan's door. "What do youse want?" he growled.

"We want to speak to you about the way you handled those animals," said Amanda sternly.

"They're mine, an' I'll treat 'em how I like."

"No, you won't. There's a law," Gemma told him.

"We're going to complain to the manager," said Amanda.

Buffo's face darkened at this and he began walking in the direction of the animal pens. "C'mere. I want to show youse something."

The girls followed him. He walked up to the cage containing the largest lion, which shuffled away from him, and stood in front of it, fingers round the bars. "Look at 'im. Does he look badly treated?"

The girls were not impressed. "Yes, and we're still complaining," said Amanda.

He moved his fingers round to the quick release lock on the bars. "Me and this lion...we've got one thing in common...don't like people snooping. Still gonna complain?"

"Yes." Amanda raised her voice and tried to give it a touch of authority. Buffo gave an evil grin and pressed his fingers on the lock. Too late the girls realised what he had been planning all along.

The cage door swung open. Buffo picked up his whip, lying beside the cage, and flicked it at the lion, forcing it out into the open.

Amanda and Gemma looked around desperately. Most of the crowds had gone and there was no one nearby to witness the scene.

Axel and Christian shambled back from the pub, slightly drunk. They approached the big top of the circus.

"Not many people about," grunted Christian.

"Nah." Suddenly Axel noticed the sign. "Hey! "Animal pens"! 'Spect they've got a few big cats. Want ta have a look?"

The lion, encouraged by Buffo, was about to pounce on the girls when Axel and Christian came towards the pen. This confused the lion, and it stopped dead in its tracks.

"Get outta here, or you'll be lion meat too," Buffo snarled at them.

Neither of the two men were cowards, but when faced with possible death they were at a loss of what to do.

"Help us, Axel...or we'll be killed!" cried Amanda.

This made up their minds. Axel and Christian simultaneously jumped on Buffo, knocking him to the ground. He dropped the whip. The lion bounded past the pen and towards the sideshows, to the screams of the people. Axel held Buffo down while Christian grabbed the whip and chased after the lion.

"Nice pussy...get back," he crooned, with tentative flicks of the whip. The lion gave a large growl, which startled him, making him give the whip a huge crack. The lion backed away. Christian repeated the action, forcing the lion back to the pens, past the fallen Buffo, and back into its own cage. He quickly locked the door.

### The River Wild

*More outdoor mayhem, this time of the watery kind.*

The crew had been kitted up in wetsuits and been given their windsurfing boards. Christian, Axel and Chad-Christian were experienced windsurfers and were already tiny specks in the distance and Peter was trying to keep up with them. Shelley was struggling with the sail a little way away.

Amanda, who had gone windsurfing in the summer in the early Nineties, was trying to explain the rudiments of the sport to Simon and Gemma, who had never been before.

“What you have to do, see, is very simple. You tilt the sail towards the front of the board to go towards the wind and push it away from you when you want to go faster, and tilt it to the back of the board away from the wind and pull the sail towards you when you want to go slower. And to turn round you just step around the board.”

“What happens if you fall off and the sail hits you on the head?” asked Gemma worriedly.

“Well, that doesn’t often happen, because you usually fall off when you’re pushing the sail away so you land either on the sail or on the opposite side of the board to it. But if the sail looks like it’s going to whack you one, just put your hands up to protect your head.”

“But what happens if you don’t have time and it hits you? Does it hurt?” she persisted.

“Well, obviously, but it’s happened to me a few times and it isn’t that bad. Now will you stop worrying? I’ll keep an eye out for you two, OK?” With that Amanda clambered onto the board and began to sail away from Gemma and Simon. “Just copy me, and you’ll be fine, OK?”

Amanda watched, smiling, as Simon zipped past her on his board. “Quite easy this, when the wind isn’t too strong, isn’t it?” he yelled, just as a gust blew him off the board. He clambered back on and sat on the edge of it.

“Where’s Gemma?” Amanda called.

“I don’t know, she was with me till a while ago.”

“Well, she’s not up the lake, because she’s got a pink sail, and there aren’t any down there,” mused Amanda.

“Yeah. Where can she be?” Simon hailed Peter, who was passing him at that moment. “Hey Peter, have you seen Gemma?”

“Uh...yeah, she’s down by the cutting, y’know that becomes the Ness in a while? I think she got stuck in the bushes.” He sailed on.

“Oh yes, there she is.” Simon inclined his head towards the cutting. “I’m going to help her.”

“You’d better paddle lying on the board. It’ll be quicker. Want any help?” asked his sister.

“No thanks. I think I can manage to save my wife by myself.” With that he paddled off.

Amanda grinned as he flailed in the water. A little tired from the strenuous windsurfing, she sat down on her board for a few minutes, watching Simon. Chad-Christian windsurfed up to her side. “Hiya.”

“Hi.”

“Where’s your brother got to?”

“He’s gone to get Gemma out of the bushes by the cutting. She keeps getting stuck there.”

Chad-Christian gasped. “Oh no! Has he read the notice?”

“What? What notice?”

“There’s a sign by the base that says that there’s a waterfall behind the cutting, and you should try to keep away from it!” They both turned to look at Simon. “Oh no! He’s gone into the cutting to try to get her out from behind! He’ll be killed if he falls down that waterfall!” Amanda and Chad-Christian looked at one another for a moment, then jumped into the water and swam frantically towards the cutting.

Simon hadn’t seen the waterfall. It was hidden from sight by some shrubbery. He had wedged the board into the shrubbery, got off it and tried to push Gemma out of the bushes, but he kept losing his footing, so he put his feet into the foot-holds on the board, and pushed at the back of the bushes from there. It was at this point that Amanda and Chad swam up to the cutting, shouting “Get out of there, it’s a waterfall!” Simon turned his head as they came and took a firmer grip on the branch above his head, pushing the board back slightly and dislodging the foliage round it, revealing the waterfall in all its glory.

With the shrubbery gone, there was nothing to keep the board in place, so the water which led to the fall was tugging on it. Simon couldn’t get his feet out of the foot-holds in the board, and kept his grip on the branch, consequently he was being stretched out by the two forces.

Chad-Christian and Amanda got off their boards and rushed through the shallow water of the cutting, watched by the bemused Gemma. They reached Simon, holding onto the branch, and Chad motioned for Simon to take his hands. Simon let go of the branch with one hand, and gripped Chad-Christian’s own hand, then let go of the branch completely. Chad hurriedly yanked Simon backwards, away from the waterfall, and the board swung round, knocked Simon in the head, then pulled away and thundered down the waterfall, to be chopped to pieces by the raging water at the bottom.

## Man Hunt

*The killer kitties return...or do they?*

The sounds of the moors were not only present when they had just turned really dark, as the crew soon discovered. Hoots and scrabbling noises woke them well before five, and few could get back to sleep again, thinking of the wildcats. When the crew were roused by the ever-alert Val at 8.30, none were pleased to see his smiling face poking round the flap of the tent.

Amanda grudgingly got dressed and came out of the tent. Val and most of the others were already gathered round a smoky campfire. She glanced around at them quickly. "Are the others getting ready?"

"Yeah, except for Christian. He's been gone for hours," replied Axel airily.

"Where is he, then?" asked Shelley.

"Gone to get breakfast."

"Where from?" inquired Amanda with dread, feeling that she already knew the answer.

"Out in the woods, of course. What did you think, that there were shops around here or something?"

The crew gasped – the men were merely surprised that Christian had gone, Shelley was worried about his welfare, and most of the females were indignant that he might be hurting the wildlife. "You should have stopped him!" cried Shelley.

"Why? There aren't really wildcats out there, you know."

"But he'll probably be killing all the little rabbits and things!" Gemma squawked indignantly.

Val shrugged. "Yeah, but we've got to eat something. The wildcats would only have got 'em sooner or later anyway."

"What if they get Christian?!!!" Shelley cried.

Axel frowned. "Yeah...bit dangerous that...I mean, he's on his own, and if he gets any rabbits the scent of them will attract the cats..."

Shelley opened her eyes wide in terror. "Stop it, Axel!" groaned Simon. "He's just teasing you."

But Val looked worried. "He's got a point, though. Christian must have been gone two hours...I know he said he was going to have a good explore, but this is ridiculous."

"We must go and find him!" cried Shelley.

Val held up a hand. "Hang on. Us men" – Val could at times be very faithful to his sex – "we'll go and look, OK?" Val glanced quickly round at the others. "Axel, Peter, Simon, you three come. Where's Chad-Christian?"

"He's still in bed. I'll go and get him," said Shelley, racing off in the direction of his tent.

Christian was enjoying himself greatly. He had trekked up the moor until he came across a small river, where a forest looks dark and forbidding on the other side. Not wanting to risk getting wet, and not liking the looks of the forest anyway, he had gone all the way back past the campsite, being careful not to be noticed by the others lest they should announce that they were leaving, and back the same way the crew had come, only veering further to the right so that he soon came across a small wood which they had not come across before. At the moment the crew were organising a search party, he was halfway up a tree with the blade of his penknife out, preparing to throw it an unsuspecting rabbit passing by.

"We don't know which way he went though, do we?" Chad complained.

"Yeah, it was up the way we didn't come," indicated Axel, yawning. "It was about half-six he went...woke me up and told me about it...then I saw him goin' off that way...now I'm tired."

Val gazed at him grimly. "Look, you don't have to come if you're too tired." He gave a pathetic grin.

"Alright, I wasn't trying to get out of it, just making a point...though I don't see why we should bother. He'll be back."

"Well, apart from anything else, the girls are rather keen to get out of here I feel, and we should be moving on anyway, so we need to find him so that we can get going."

"Yeah, let's go then." Axel led the little party away from the campsite and up towards the direction of the river.

It was almost ten o'clock. The tents had all been packed up and the crew were ready to leave. They kept glancing at their watches, all worried about the others now. Christian wouldn't be three-and-a-half hours searching for food!



There was a rustling in the bushes ahead and the crew all turned to look. It was their menfolk, back from their hunt.

Val was shaking his head. "We couldn't find him. I suppose he hasn't come back here?"

"No," replied Gemma.

"He must have gone the other way," said Peter.

"But he didn't! He went up the way we've just came! I saw him!" cried Axel.

Shelley burst into tears. "Then the wildcats must have got 'im! It's the only explanation!"

Val hastened to reassure her. "Come now, of course they didn't. They'd never attack a human anyway. We'll go and look the other way, anyway. He could have come back and gone past the campsite."

"But we'd have seen 'im!" fretted Shelley.

"He could have come back without us noticing. Probably tried to avoid us to get out of packing up the tent, if I know Christian."

"And even if he's not up the other way, it doesn't mean he's been got by wildcats. He could have come out of the moor," said Amanda.

"Well, I'm comin' with yer! If Christian's out there I wanna be the first to see 'im!" the young girl cried.

Val allowed himself a small smile. "OK, Shelley. Let's go then."

The search party had been trudging along through the small wood Christian had found for nearly twenty minutes now and Shelley was getting frantic. "Where is he? He's gotter be 'ere somewhere!" she cried.

"We've probably missed him. He might have gone back to the camp by now. If we split into two groups we'd probably find him sooner if he hasn't," said Peter.

Val clapped his hands together. "Right. Good idea. You go with Simon and Chad-Christian, and the others can stick with me."

"OK," Peter began leading the members of his team to the left of the wood, leaving Val to take his little party to the left.

Axel glanced quickly across the mass of browns and greens and black and reds of the wood, and glimpsed something blue. Hurrying away from the other two, he swooped to pick the object up and found himself clutching Christian's jacket!!

Axel stared at it in horror. One arm of the jacket was in tatters and covered in blood, and the rest of the garment was in a pretty bad state, ripped up and covered with blood and leaves. And there was blood all over the ground on which the jacket had lain. A lot of blood.

"Ahhh! Val, get over here!" Axel cried. Val ran in the direction of his voice. "What is it, Axel?"

"Where's Shelley?"

"She's right here with me."

"Get her away from here! Don't let her see!" Axel spoke these words in a harsh whisper, hoping that only Val, nearer to him than Shelley, would hear. Shelley, however, was close enough to hear "don't let her see," and was curious. "Don't let me see what?"

Axel held the jacket behind his back as she drew level with him. "Uh...nothing."

"Axel...what is it?"

He sighed. "Now, this doesn't necessarily mean anything, but..."

"Show me!"

Axel sighed again. "Don't say I didn't warn you." He brought his hands round from behind his back.

Val dropped his head into his hands. "Oh God..."

Shelley stared at the object for a few minutes. "But...but...you said they wouldn't attack 'im!" Her voice rose to a hysterical pitch. "You lied!"

Val desperately tried to cool the situation. "So his jacket's here...that doesn't mean anything..." But it was plain that even Val thought that some great tragedy had befallen Christian.

Val, Axel and the violently weeping Shelley were re-joined by the other members of the crew, who had heard Shelley's cries from their part of the wood. They stared at the jacket in shocked surprise, no-one speaking.

"He's dead! Christian's dead!" Shelley howled. Val was holding the jacket and shaking his head. "Get her back to the camp, Chad," he said slowly. Chad nodded and dragged the girl away. Val turned to the others. "I'm going to look for...whatever. You guys had better get back to the camp as

well.”

“No way! I’ve got to find my buddy!” cried Axel.

“OK. But prepare yourself for what you might see,” Val replied grimly. Axel nodded. Simon was shuffling his feet uncomfortably. “I..uh...”

“It’s OK, Simon, it only needs the two of us,” said Val. “Catch you guys later.”

“You sure? I’d feel like I was letting you all down...”

“No, Simon. You go. And the rest of you. Your wife’ll be needing you anyway...and you too, Peter.”

“Sure,” his half-brother replied, walking away from him. When he and Simon were out of sight Axel turned to Val. “You really think the wildcats go him?”

“Well...there doesn’t really seem to be another explanation, does there? He must have come to some harm...”

“Where shall we look?”

“Further up that way” – Val pointed – “further away from the camp. We haven’t looked there yet.”

“But if the cat dragged him off to its lair to...eat, where’s the trail of blood?”

“It could have eaten him here...if it was a wildcat.”

“What if it’s still around?” Axel looked about him fearfully. “You hear that?”

“What?”

“That noise. Rustling in the undergrowth. It’s getting louder!”

Val turned and looked around him. “There’s something out there! Coming up behind us!”

Then suddenly, with no warning, the creature launched itself at him!!!

“Ooof!” the creature said, clambering off Val. “Good to see you guys! Are we ready to go?”

“C-C-Christian!” Val spluttered. “Where in the hell have you been?”

“Christian looked slightly bemused. “I went off to get some breakfast...like I said I would.”

“But you’ve been gone for hours!”

He gave a shy smile. “Yeah, well, I was having pretty good fun climbing the trees...I didn’t have a watch, you see. Then I fell out one...opened up the wound on my arm again but it’s fine now. My jacket was ruined...left it by the tree.”

Axel and Val exchanged glances. “We thought the wildcats had got you!” cried Axel.

Christian threw back his head and laughed. “What? That’s crazy!!!”

“Maybe, but the others have been pretty worried about you. Shelley was hysterical...they took her back to camp.”

*And finally...yes, I’m afraid I didn’t forget to include a comedy Scots farmer...ock aye the noo!*

They had not gone half a mile when they encountered their first hazard. An old Scottish farmer was herding his thousand-odd sheep down the road. Upon seeing the sheep, little Antony burst into a loud wail.

“Dun’ like sheep! Waaaaahhhhh!”

“Shhh, baby!” cried Gemma in desperation, but the damage had already been done. Marvin and Richard, dozing in their baby carriers, woke and joined in the noise. Two minutes later, Barry and Julie were crying too. This commotion scared the sheep, and they ran off wildly in all directions, bleating frustratedly to join in the noise.

The farmer ran round them, shouting instructions to his fat, lazy sheepdog.

“Here, boy! Get ‘em! Round ‘em up! No, I said get the sheep, not fertilise the grass! Come on!”

The dog barked at the sheep, scaring them even more. Some of them began making for the hills, where they would surely be lost!

At this point, Paul, who had been brought up on a farm, intervened. He got down on all fours in front of the straying sheep, and growled ferociously.

They hurriedly ran back to the road where they had started. Paul’s plan was working!

Napoleon and Ria quickly joined in. They thought it was a game.

It was not long before all the sheep had been rounded up, and were quiet and genial again. The babies had gone back to sleep.

The old farmer came up to Paul and congratulated him.

“Well done, young man, that were a good job you did there, ock aye the noo. These other folks, aye? I dinna ken!”

“Oh,” said Paul, not knowing what to make of this rugged old-timer. “Uh...thank you.”

“Don’ thank me, lad, yer near saved me life just then, ock aye the noo. Come up the farmhouse for some tea, ock aye?”

“Well,” he replied, “we really do need to be getting along, you see we’re going camping...”

“Ock aye, don’t ya worry about that. Come up the farm, I’ll show yer kiddies round, my missus ‘I give yer a cup ‘o tea, and then I’ll drive you a way up the road in me big van. Sound good?”

“Yes-s-s-s...,” he said, relenting, “but...”

Napoleon and Ria took charge.

“Oh please!”

“That’ll be fun! Have you got pigs?”

“Oh, let us go!”

“Have you got horses? Can we ride ‘em?”

The farmer winked at the two children. “Yus, weans, I’ve got horses, cows, pigs, goats...”

“No chickens?” asked Ria fearfully.

“Well, no, I did have some, but they turned nasty an’ one tried to peck me to death, so I cooked ‘em all for lunch, ock. I expect that sounds pretty stupid, ock aye?”

“No,” said Gemma, grinning, “in fact we had a similar experience ourselves.”

“Did yer now? Well they are dangerous, ock aye the noo. Come up to the farmhouse now, an’ I’ll show you me animals. Young feller, if you’d like to help me with the sheep? Thank ye.”