

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# White Male Heart

Ruaridh Nicoll

## About the Book

In the sublime wilderness of the Scottish Highlands, Aaron and Hugh have been friends for as long as they can remember, bound by an affinity for their natural surroundings and a shared alienation from the remote community in which they live.

Then a stranger – a woman escaping a broken love affair – moves to the area, driving an emotional wedge between the two young men. As the strain on their friendship builds, so the violence that is endemic in the land begins to infect them. Turning on their world, Aaron and Hugh vent their frustration, anger and despair in the only way they know...

Dark, visceral, beautifully written and with an irresistible, brooding sense of place, *White Male Heart* delves deep into the male psyche and heralds the arrival of an exceptional new literary voice.

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# WHITE MALE HEART



Ruaridh Nicoll

To my nephews and nieces, Archie, Tom, Ramsay, Murdo,  
Hugo, Kirsty and Iona, who each, in their own way, offer me  
a memory of my parents

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the people who helped me along the way. Here they are, roughly in order of appearance.

Peter Jinks encouraged me to write *White Male Heart* and read the manuscript. Antony Harwood, my agent, added impetus through understanding and has proved the finest of comrades ever since. Bella Bathurst listened, read and advised.

Pat and Beth Wilson offered sanctuary in the Highlands for nearly thirteen months. Gill Devonport, Fiona Price, Ronnie, Dina and Kenny Ross, Sascha Burns and Sarah-Jane Fraser saw me through. Dave Gordon advised on steak, butchery and literature.

Norman MacLeod, Lizzie Francke, Euan Ferguson and Clare Longrigg offered liberally from their wide knowledge of culture. Kamal Ahmed added perspective. Alison Bell introduced me to Iomhar and Ruaraig Maciver, the foundrymen at the Beltane Studios in Peebles who showed me how to cast bronze. Duncan MacLeod checked the Gaelic. Carl Eastwood provided a thought I filched. Alex Linklater offered incentive and helpful bit-work.

When a five-week court case broke the writing of this book Camilla Nicholls, Siobhain Butterworth, Pat Burge and Rose Alexander made sure it didn't break my spirit. They have my respect and profound gratitude. For the same reason my thanks to the editors and management of the newspaper involved.

Simon Taylor, my editor at Transworld, not only offered his belief in *White Male Heart* but has also, through wise and insightful reading, made it a better book. His many colleagues have also proved reassuringly good to have on my side.

My love to Angus, Rosie, Hamish, Penny, Katie and Andy.  
To Alison, my life.



# PART ONE



## PROLOGUE

*Mac Seruant's fingers lay across the open page of a book, the text forgotten as he gazed out over the rock and shale landscape beyond his window. Behind him, beyond the kitchen wall, a car had arrived, the noise of its dying engine momentarily replaced by an ethereal church music before that, too, was killed. Mac smiled, his fingers flexing as he closed the book and reached over to adjust the lid on a vast stockpot that stood simmering on the range. He stepped back and opened a drawer, lifting out a thin, curved knife, a hacksaw and a cloth. Then he reached up and extinguished the lantern above his head, moving through the cottage as shadow, re-emerging as flesh only when he opened the front door and greeted his guest.*

*The visitor, a tall boy barely into his twenties, stood beside his truck, eyes almost translucent and deep-set in a narrow skull topped by dirty blond hair. His joints appeared to have been pushed out of shape by the confines of the pick-up's cab and he was stretching, shifting them back to order. Mac nodded and looked away across the surrounding landscape, a casual reconnaissance that slid across the floor of the corrie, then followed the shadow of a burn up to where its waters fell between buttresses that rose to the peaks of soaring cliffs that enclosed the cottage on three sides. He was listening for a break in the silence and, once reassured that they were alone, left the doorway and walked quickly along a path that led in to the edge of the mountain, the boy following close behind.*

*They walked without speaking, following the thin trail as it crested a small rise and dropped away into a hollow where a wooden hut stood thrust into the cliff edge, its rusting corrugated roof hanging out, leached minerals*

*leaving luminous lines in the grooves. Mac stopped at the hut's gate, pulled a set of keys from his pocket and opened the padlock. He placed his hand where someone, long before, had written, 'My Son, if Sinners entice thee, consent thou not,' and pushed his way in. A shroud hung on the right of the old mineshaft and Mac pulled it aside for the boy, who walked forward, hesitating in the staleness of the room while Mac struck a match and fired up a lantern that hung from the roof.*

*Around them stood the debris of another age. Rotted floorboards were covered with plywood, which in turn had softened and given way. The walls were covered with shelves, some holding lumps of magnesium and zinc ore, others disintegrating tools, tins, magazines and manuals. The boy lifted an old medallion, a St Christopher, from where it dangled on a hook, studied the image and spun it by its chain around his hand until it fell snug into his fist. He settled himself on a pile of straw bales stacked in the corner and watched as Mac carried the lantern to the far side of the room and hung it on the wall close to an ore-sifting tray on which the knife, hacksaw and cloth were laid out.*

*Mac picked up a long stick and used it to spring a hidden trapdoor in the roof, revealing a dark creature hanging by its haunches from a winch in the eaves. A glandular stench spilled out as he climbed into the attic and lowered the beast to the sifting tray and, as if comforted by the smell, the boy began to speak, slowly at first, as if trying to order the recriminations in his mind. As his words emerged Aaron Harding was gazing into the creature's visible eye. Mac swung himself down to the floor and began to work. He rolled the beast onto its back and picked up the knife, cut into the flesh and snapped off the lower extremes of the four legs. He sliced the skin of the stomach in a smooth bow until the creature's genitals came away in his hand,*

*then skewered them to a hook on the wall. Despite the chill he was sweating. Aaron's voice grew more confident.*

*Mac moved along the carcass, running thick fingers across the coarse hair, searching out the gash in the beast's neck, feeling for the stickiness of its blood. He drove the knife deep into the animal's throat, slicing through the oesophagus and the jugular. The flesh was still tender, and Mac allowed the weight of the beast's head to tear the muscle. With a final slice he took the cut to the spine, picked up the hacksaw and cut down, the deep cord sound of splintering nerve filling the room. The head fell, caught on a small stretch of skin, and fell again. Aaron paused. The beast's eye was now covered in a film of dirt, and all at once Mac was turning, looking at the wall behind Aaron's head: another visitor was approaching.*

*Aaron listened to the sound of the distant motor as Mac returned to the sifting tray to check the block running through the beast's haunches. He picked up the severed head, lifted it into the rafters and tucked it away before he winched the beast up so that it hung. Back on the floor he pushed the tray to one side and left a bucket under the severed stump of the creature's neck. The sound of the vehicle grew louder, and Aaron stood up.*

*Mac's perspiration cooled and he wiped his sleeve across his forehead, his skin reflecting the light of the lantern. Outwardly, he showed little sign that he had heard the car approach the junction, only his brow moved when it failed to pass on. It had turned and was heading up towards the cottage.*

*He reached for the lantern, tightened the wick and killed the flame. Navigating in the darkness with ease, he pulled aside the curtain that covered the entrance, allowing a brief sliver of moonlight to flicker across Aaron's face, revealing troubled eyes. He slipped his hand through the gate and fastened the padlock, glancing up as the headlights showed. Then he turned and walked back into*

*the room, adjusting the shroud and sitting down on the straw to wait.*

*Together, they heard the car rumble over the wooden bridge that brought it into the corrie's basin, then up to the cottage itself. Doors opened and shut, the sound of voices carrying across the small rise. The visitors knocked on the cottage door and, after a moment's pause, shouted from within. A drop of blood fell from the beast's neck into the bucket and Aaron flinched. There was silence and then their names were yelled from the top of the rise, the voice now recognizable. Mac began to get to his feet but Aaron reached out to stop him. Feeling the hand on his arm, Mac sat back, listening, as the shouting grew frustrated. A woman's voice mingled with the calls, attempting to soothe. It was the first time he had heard it, its tone deep, gentle and southern.*

*The visitors returned to the cottage, but Mac and Aaron remained in the dark, waiting as comrades for the vigil to end and the visitors to leave. Passing minutes existed only in the occasional drip of blood from the severed neck, and later, when time began to weigh, Aaron returned to his monologue. Now, though, he whispered, silent again only when the cottage door opened and shut, the car started and left.*

*Aaron stood while Mac refired the lantern, and when the light came up he looked down at the palm of his hand to find the St Christopher had bitten deep. Unravelling the chain, he returned the medallion to its hook and pulled a shark's tooth from his pocket, which he began to roll between finger and thumb. Mac, who had been studying the boy as he adjusted the lantern, turned away and picked up the hacksaw. He swung the animal's belly towards him and cut deep into its sternum, the wet gristle falling away as the blade tore in. Aaron shifted to the door-frame and leaned against it as he finished his story, his words coming slowly now. At last he fell silent. The bone separated and*

*Mac used a wooden stave to hold the animal's chest cavity apart so that its very core was visible. Inside, the beast's lungs hung down, like the wings of a diving angel, and he thrust his hand between them, pulled out the heart and held it in his palm. The muscle surface had been torn by the passage of a bullet, causing Mac to smile. He looked up at Aaron. 'So, you think it's love?' he asked.*

## ONE

*Some weeks earlier*

'SHOW A LITTLE chutzpah,' whispered Hugh, and the Arab tensed. The boy straightened from where he was lying beside the mare's ear and ran his hand along the arched neck all the way back to the picked-up tail behind. On command Sandancer the Conveyancer struck out for the games at a skittish trot. Hugh pulled on the reins so that she veered away from the road and towards a grassy strip that ran between the floodplain's thick reeds and the riverbank. He could feel Sandancer cheered beneath him, the warmth of the autumn sun offering both horse and rider an easy joy.

'Chutzpah,' Hugh shouted suddenly, and Sandancer side-stepped into a canter.

Hugh inhaled. The sound of the hoofs and the glow of the day made him feel as if he were gliding over the turning world. His gaze fell on the shadow that horse and rider threw across the passing reeds and he placed himself at the centre of that fast-shifting darkness, looking up at his figure moving across the marshland on top of his Arab charger: the speed gave him a sense of power, as if he were freed from the dreary millpond of youth and launched into wild rapids of life. In shadow Sandancer's shape seemed magical, her legs blurring into a perfect gallop, muscles bunching then stretching out with fluid ease. Hugh considered his own reflection and saw no less a creature: young, vibrant, in his prime. In the shadow he could see man and beast push forward, arms outstretched, grasping

for the future. 'Nothing can stop me,' he whispered to himself.

With Sandancer at full gallop he balanced himself carefully on the balls of his feet, keeping his posture perfect by studying the shadow. He allowed the surroundings to pass ignored, mere beauty insignificant compared with the heroism in the shadow's dark flash. In the rhythm of his heart came the beating of the hoofs and the inhalation of cool Highland air, all in concert. Then the shadow changed. Hugh watched the darkness rise from the reeds, cross the grass and flicker back at him from the waters of the Kyle. He looked up and saw that Sandancer's forelegs no longer moved but were thrust out ahead. Then they hit water and he felt himself smash into the pommel of the saddle. He was flicked forward, his arms around the mare's neck.

The first surge of pain convinced him to dismount and he considered slipping forward but then he heard Sandancer's thrashing legs and instead rolled off her, adopting a foetal position as the water took his weight. For a while he floated, knees pulled in, chest and face upward, the sky revolving above his head. There seemed to be peace in the pain. The thought worried him and he struggled, finding that if he splashed hard enough the pain receded and he could avoid drowning. His feet hit gravel.

He climbed out to waist height, body bent over, hands clenched between his legs. Swivelling, he looked out over the waters of the Kyle for any other debris from the crash and was shocked to see, standing on a submerged sandbank a short distance off, a pearl-fisherman clad in black from his head to where he disappeared into the water. Hugh, feeling foolish, smiled as best he could, lifting one hand in a wave, but the man stood motionless, a hightide mark on his coat where the wave had hit. Hugh returned his hand to between his legs and turned slowly back to shore.



Sandancer had also hauled herself out of the water and stood cropping the grass at the river's edge as Hugh staggered up the bank. The horse seemed unconcerned but one slug pupil in an unblinking eye followed his approach, fuelling Hugh's irritation. When he was beside her he made to kick her in the shins, only to be bitten in return. They struggled for a moment before Hugh gave way and Sandancer resumed eating. With a sigh Hugh pulled himself up into the wet saddle, water bubbling out from where he gingerly settled his weight. He looked back at the fisherman. The man had resumed his search for the freshwater oysters. With water dripping down his neck, Hugh glanced at their shadow. Christ, what must I look like? he thought, and pulled on the reins.

They travelled at walking pace now, moving along the edge of the big river, passing islands thick with birch, rowan and pine, crossing a shingle-bottomed tributary that flowed into the Kyle in an easy sweep, then trotting across the floodplain, apathetic cattle moving off in front of them. The village of Huil passed on his right, wood-smoke drifting from its small houses, and Hugh eased Sandancer into a canter. They made fast time into the south glen.

They crossed a road, stopping to let a fish lorry from the west roar past, then followed a track through a soundless pine and larch plantation. In the warmth of the sun Hugh's thoughts grew thick and lethargic, and it was only when the trees fell away that a breeze stirred him. He looked away over the sunwashed hillside, the heather a purple blaze, and found his eyes drawn to the unfolding north, a landscape he had known for ever. At first his attention fell on the three great mountains to the north-west, the cliff-edged glens, peaks and jagged corries a kingdom in itself, and he would have studied them for longer, had not a flicker of movement at the point where road and river cut one of the ridges drawn his eye. A car caught the sunlight

from the furthest extreme of the glen, so distant that it snagged Hugh's gaze only once and was lost.

He let his eye follow the river, the tributary he had crossed earlier, as it carried water from the mountains into a ribbon loch that sat above Huil, the great mass of water held back from spilling over the plain by a geological fault that had left a seam of thin, hard stone at its lowest end. Half-way along the loch, on the north shore beyond an island thick with Caledonian pine, a Victorian *faux*-castle stood in its gardens. To Hugh its imposing shape, with its outbuildings, gardens and wide-open policy woodlands was as familiar as the humble farmhouse he had left an hour or so before. This was Lochanthrain, which he had visited all his life. Unable to see his friend Aaron's pick-up, he used his knees to pressure Sandancer over the watershed. Huil and the field where the games were being held fell into view below.

Small figures, many recognizable even from a distance, circled a roped-off arena or paused at tents that stood on the outer perimeter. Other figures approached across a stone-arched bridge that led from the village or drove their cars down a rutted track. Hugh found himself watching the bulky, uniformed figures of the police sergeant, Simon Galvary, and his deputy, Morag MacPherson, known locally as Samson and Delilah, as they walked around the fair and passed into the car park. As they settled into their Metro and drove away, he saw Aaron's pick-up parked near the entrance, then spotted his friend fishing from a rock where the loch emptied through a series of waterfalls. He watched for a while, caught by the beauty of his friend's great circular rolling casts.

Hugh looked up the glen one last time then urged Sandancer down the hill. Aware that he was being watched, and knowing that any hope of a stylish appearance had been washed away by the river, the descent became a traverse. He crossed upstream of the games, climbing the

bank where the grassland broke up in rocky and wooded ground reaching up towards the loch. Sandancer picked her route along the fishing path, the sound of the waterfalls filling their ears, moisture hanging from the autumnal leaves of the birch and reflecting in the sun. Aaron was out of view, fishing from a small ledge overhanging a deep pool at the bottom of one of the bigger waterfalls. Hugh slid to the ground and tied Sandancer to a branch.

'Down here, cowboy,' came the voice from below, and at Hugh's reply thirty yards of nylon and hook whistled through the trees, hung in the air then rushed back out over the water. Sandancer shifted nervously and Hugh nuzzled her mouth with his hand before making his way down to the ledge.

Aaron stood, foot against a rock, looking carefully at the ripples in the gully below, easing the path of the fly through the dark water. He lifted long fingers from the line to push a fall of blond hair behind his ear, his eyes on the fly. He was dressed in a canvas jacket fading to the colour of earth, cutting a figure more squatter than squire. Hugh looked down into the river, following a patch of white froth with his eyes, losing it in the eddy, then catching it once more as it made its rush away to the next drop.

'You missed me,' said Hugh.

Aaron roll-cast, sending the line in a spiral close to the wall of rock before rushing it outwards to hover over the water, its fall causing barely a ripple. Hugh sat down and lit a cigarette.

'What happened to you?' At last Aaron had glanced towards him.

'Sandancer decided to take a swim. She dived into the Kyle at full gallop and I wasn't ready for it, nearly castrated myself on the saddle.'

Aaron cast again, small creases of amusement around his eyes.

Hugh allowed himself to be mesmerized by the waterfall. A salmon emerged fast and sleek, rising through the air before hitting the falling water and using its muscled length to power against the flow, its position secure for a heartbeat before it fell back, exhausted. He sucked the last drag from his cigarette and threw it into the river. The sun had reached around the rock and Hugh settled back in its warmth and let time drift by. He must have slept because when he came round Aaron had moved up to the base of the falls, letting his line take in the whole pool.

Hugh had been woken by the sound of a car approaching from the glen above, likely the one he had seen earlier. He sat up and looked upriver to where the road ran close to the edge of the gully. Aaron was doing the same. They both recognized the sound of the engine, the aggressive driving. Aaron threw a messy line but left it to float as a green BMW station-wagon rushed past, its windows reflecting a single strobe of light before it disappeared down the glen. Aaron was already reeling in his line as the salmon Hugh had seen earlier emerged once more in a streak of foam from the river by his feet. Reflexively Aaron punched outwards with his reel hand, catching the salmon half-way along its length and sending it twisting and spinning back into the flow of water. He looked at his fist in amazement, then shook it in triumph at Hugh. Both boys laughed and turned to scramble up to the path. They met at the top of the bank, and saw the BMW pass the entrance to the games then turn away up the Brae.

‘Still, he must be up to something, to be down here at this time of day,’ said Hugh, expressing their shared disappointment.

They began to walk down the path towards the fair.

‘I was wondering if you’d got lost,’ said Aaron. ‘I couldn’t have handled this thing on my own.’ He stepped aside as Sandancer reached across to bite him. ‘You’re glue, horse, soon as I can convince Hugh to find sensible transport.’

Hugh lifted a hand and stroked the mare's long face.

They emerged from the wood by a cemetery. Hugh stopped to push open its rusting gates, led Sandancer in, then followed Aaron to the car park.

Aaron looked back as he approached. 'Best place for her,' he said. 'Among the dead.'

Hugh rested the saddle on the edge of the pick-up and hung the bridle from its pommel. He took the can of lager Aaron offered and leaned back against the car. 'You don't think that my being able to keep an animal without feeling an irresistible urge to kill it makes me a better person than you?' he asked.

'Not in this case.'

They looked out over the field. The arena consisted of an athletic track within which the big men, mostly from out of the area, tossed cabers, weights, and fought each other in the tug-of-war. A dog track had been cordoned off and a fishing competition was set up on another part of the field. At the river clay pigeons were being test-fired over the opposite bank.

'Citizens,' said Aaron.

Village ladies had laid out their cakes and pastries at stalls around the perimeter, ignored by the bulk of the crowd who clustered by the beer tent to be served by an ageing colonel or his assistant, a Danish student doing holiday work for the publican. The Colonel's laughter was audible across the park, punctuated by the squawk of a megaphone in the hands of the publican himself, Gus Houston. He had left his bar to run the games.

'Your father's standing alone,' said Aaron.

'I don't know why he comes to these things.' Hugh glanced across to where the old man stood, his two sheepdogs at his heel.

Many more people were milling around now than when Hugh had forded the river. Tourists wandered the stalls, peering at the Girl Guides' or the Women's Rural

Institute's, or even pausing at a small, malnourished-looking church display, before the minister's unsettling presence caused them to move on. Hugh looked again at his father, was about to walk over and speak to him, but as he pushed himself off the car a tourist stopped and took the farmer's picture. Jamie MacIntyre seemed to shudder at the impertinence and set off towards the car park, his two collies, For and Sev, trotting half a pace behind. Hugh leaned back again and looked down to see Aaron sitting with his feet out of the car, rubbing an oily rag over a shotgun on his knee.

'Any fuckable *Fräuleins*?' Aaron asked, looking up.

'Nothing I can see, but give me the glasses.'

He was passed a fancy pair of field-glasses Aaron had stolen from a visiting fisherman's Range Rover several months before and lifted them to his eyes. He moved from face to face until he came to rest on a young Germanic-looking girl, perhaps fifteen, who was standing with her parents.

Noticing him pause, Aaron sat up and rested the barrels of his gun on the toe of his boot.

'Too young,' Hugh said. 'Way too young.'

'Young's the best you're likely to get, comrade. Make like a greyhound, get there before the hare.'

Hugh told Aaron to shut up and keep cleaning the gun, and his friend smiled as he resumed rubbing the stock with oil. Hugh flicked across more people. 'Is Alison going to be here?' he asked.

'Christ, I hope not.'

At last Hugh settled on two girls, not yet in their twenties, who were petting a whippet held by a third. One was leaning over and, through the beautifully tooled lenses, Hugh could see right down her front. 'Corn-fed and milky-white,' he said, not taking his eyes from her breasts. 'Aaron, there's a lovely pair of—'

'I don't think I want to know.'

Hugh dropped the glasses so that they hung on their cord. 'Hello, Dad,' he said.

'Mr MacIntyre,' said Aaron pleasantly. 'Don't look at me, I was just cleaning my gun.'

'I don't doubt it.' Hugh's father looked down at the field. 'But if you must examine the women in such an obvious manner, I think it perhaps better that you do it when you're not rubbing down a shotgun. People might worry.'

The boys laughed and Aaron slipped the gun behind the seat of the pick-up.

'What happened to you?' said the old man, looking at his son.

Hugh told him the story of Sandancer's leap into the Kyle.

'It's time you got rid of that animal. Ridiculous at your age, not having a car.'

'Too true,' said Aaron.

Hugh changed the subject. He asked what his father was doing there.

The older man grimaced. 'I'm going now. In fact I came over to tell you that I'm away back to work. I don't suppose you want to come?'

'Wages aren't good enough.'

'You don't have to tell me that,' said his father, lifting a hand in parting and wandering off among the vehicles.

When he had gone, Aaron lifted the glasses from around Hugh's neck and scanned the crowd himself.

'I meant to tell you I saw a pearl-fisherman on the Kyle,' Hugh said. 'He got caught in the wave Sandancer sent his way.'

Aaron lowered the glasses but kept looking out. 'What did he look like?'

Hugh described the man: raw, weathered face, white hair.

Aaron shivered. 'Horrible,' he said. 'Fucking tinks. Mac calls them the beauty thieves.'

The boys looked at each other and laughed.

After Aaron had scanned the whole field he dropped the glasses to his chest. 'All it would take is two heavy machine-guns. You over there, me here, a crossfire.'

Hugh's mind wandered as he heard Gus Houston announce the forthcoming events over the Tannoy: 'And now for the tug-of-war, with the Tank captaining the blue end and wee Hairy Mary the red. Hang on, I've just been handed a note now. Yes, this indeed is the first pull Mary's had all year.'

Aaron looked at Mary through the glasses. 'Not fucking surprising,' he said.

'Time we got into the spirit of the thing.' Hugh dumped his empty lager can in the back of the truck.

'I think I'll do some more fishing,' said Aaron.

'The hell you will. Come on.'

They made their way down on to the field and through the spectators, Hugh nodding greetings to those he knew while Aaron ignored the few who acknowledged him. They were about a third of the way through when the postmistress stopped them. 'Hugh, my dear, your father, is he all right? He looked terribly unhappy.'

'He's fine, Mrs Cameron. It's hard for him, you know. The games remind him of Mother.'

She reached out and took his hand. Hugh looked down at his enclosed fist in surprise. 'Yes, of course,' she said. 'And no doubt you too.'

'I never knew my mother, Mrs Cameron.'

'You'll recall it was Hugh who killed his mother, Mrs Cameron,' Aaron interjected. 'His head was too big when he came out.'

The postmistress ignored this and turned to pick up a Cellophane packet of flapjacks from the stall behind her. 'Well, you give these to your father with my best wishes.' She gave Aaron a hard look as they walked off.

'Do you think she fancies your dad?' Aaron asked.

Hugh looked at him. 'My head was not too big, cunt.'



Aaron laughed and asked for a flapjack.

They were sneering at the strongmen when the Tannoy squawked at them. 'And would you look at this, folks. Who should be gracing us with their presence but Huil's very own inseparable pair! Is it Jesse and Frank, Butch and Sundance or even Bonnie and Clyde?'

Aaron gave Houston the finger.

'Ah, yes, it's nice to see the more anaemic of the pair has lost none of his renowned charm - but, Master Harding, we're not here just to pass the day, we have a request that you proceed to the casting area where you can stun us all with your excellence at that other solitary art you practise so well.'

'I don't need this,' said Aaron, as Hugh tried to convince him that retreat would be folly. Better, Hugh said, to prove that he was still the best - after all, he had won the competition six years in a row. It was a perennial argument and, in line with tradition, Aaron conceded and walked off to get his rod from the car. Hugh made his way over to the competitive area where an assortment of hoops lay spaced out in front of a line drawn in the grass marked 'bank'. The postmistress's husband, a local gillie, was acting as judge.

'Hey, Alfie.'

'Hugh.'

'I'm surprised you called him over, given his record.'

'It's a fair fight every year, Hughie, and what would it be without the young Lochanthrain?' The sarcasm was friendly.

'Bullshit,' Hugh said. 'So what's it all about, then, Alfie?'

The gillie gave him a tired look.

'It's humour, Alfie, like the time you put that eel down that woman's knickers.'

'That was different, Hugh, that was originality.' Then Alfie nodded to his side. 'It just might be that the Rod of God has scored twenty out of twenty, which if my mathematics are right should be just about unbeatable. Shame, really, if

someone who, you know, can appear a little high and mighty now and again might get himself beaten by the minister, don't you think?'

'Don't get too excited,' Hugh said, and his gaze slid past the rocky face of the Free Church minister to snag on a woman he and Aaron had missed during their earlier reconnaissance. He couldn't believe they had overlooked her. It wasn't that she was particularly beautiful – although in the context of Huil she was stunning – but she carried herself in a way that caught Hugh's eye and held it. He spoke slowly, as if trying to remember the words: 'He can still draw.'

Aaron arrived and the gillie greeted him. 'Well, Aaron, the score to beat is twenty.'

Aaron failed to look impressed. 'What if I draw?' he asked.

'Cast-off,' said Alfie.

Hugh looked at the woman again, suddenly jealous of what he knew would be a perfect performance by his friend. She was with a shepherd from an estate up the south glen, Shiloch, he thought, a funny-looking gnome of a man, but there was no doubt she was from the south: the casualness of her clothes spelt expense, her complexion a good diet, her posture dance. As he eyed her, he noticed the shepherd watching him, a faintly unpleasant smile in his deep, puritan beard. Hugh brought his attention back to the action.

Aaron had shown no interest in the woman. Instead he readied himself to throw a line across the field, and with a quick flick of his wrist sent out his first cast. Slowly the gillie went out to check, filling in points as he returned. Then Aaron did it again, and again, and again.

'He's not planning to lose gracefully,' the woman said to the shepherd.

'No,' the shepherd replied, before giving a slow nod. 'Not even in the face of the Lord's servant.'

Much to everyone's annoyance Aaron took his twenty points. Hugh had heard the shepherd call the woman Miss Hume.

'Cast-off,' declared Alfie grumpily, and made a sign to Houston.

'Over at the casting field the tension is so high that if you plucked it, it would sing. A cast-off has developed between the moral core of our community and the six-times champion, folks. Roderick MacLeod versus Aaron Harding. Good versus Bad. The Lord's man versus the Devil's spawn. What more could you ask for? Get on down there.'

The gillie asked the two participants up to the line, the minister towering above Aaron and Alfie.

'Right, what we have here is a small hoop twenty-three yards out into the field,' said Alfie, pointing. 'You get five casts, each of you taking a turn, and the one who gets the most in wins. Good luck, minister.'

Hugh noticed Miss Hume studying Aaron. He looked away then back, and caught her eyes on him. She looked at the shepherd.

'The Devil's spawn?' she said.

The shepherd did not reply but the minister caught the question and turned dark eyes to Aaron. 'I'll make you a deal, boy. If I win you have to come to church.'

Aaron laughed. 'And if you lose?'

The minister grimaced. 'That won't happen. I'm not asking you to gamble.'

'Not a very good deal, then,' Aaron said. 'But I'll beat you anyway.' He shrugged.

The Rod of God did well, but after three casts Aaron was up three-two. His concentration did not waver until he heard the green BMW turn down the Brae and accelerate up the glen.

The minister cast, throwing a perfect line out across the rough grass, letting it fall as straight as latitude, leaving the barbless hook to drop down dead centre of the hoop.

He grunted and looked for applause but few of the spectators had noticed. The low-slung car, its metallic green nose low to the ground, rushed up the glen. The tourists turned to watch as well. For a moment it looked to pass; relief and mild disappointment touched the local faces. Then it slowed and turned, and Aaron and Hugh looked at each other, grins irrepressible.

‘Let’s finish this, Alfie.’ Aaron threw a long cast across the field, his hook falling just beyond the hoop.

‘All equal at three apiece,’ said the gillie. ‘One cast left, then it’s sudden death.’

The minister took his shot and caught the inside of the ring but Hugh barely noticed. Instead he watched the BMW negotiate the bumps on the track down to the car park. Aaron, similarly distracted, was hauled back to the competition by the gillie. He nodded and threw his line.

And missed.

The minister barked in triumph, and Alfie made a sign to the commentary box. ‘After seven long years there is a new casting champion,’ Houston cried. ‘Aaron Harding has been defeated by the Reverend Roderick MacLeod.’ Even while he spoke the publican, like everyone else, watched the man get out of the BMW; a man with skin so dark-grey it looked as if it had been long soaked in brine. Mac Seruant heard the news of Aaron’s defeat as he stood to his full five foot three and threw his protégé a look of disappointment and surprise.

As soon as he missed, Aaron, with Hugh beside him, had turned and walked off to meet Mac. As they approached they could hear a low, angry growl rising from the interior of the station-wagon. Mac reached in and emerged with a Jack Russell, its taut little body an explosion contained only by the poacher’s enormous hands. Mac nudged the door closed with his heel and began to walk out onto the field, adjusting his route to meet the boys on his way. He was singing to the dog, a tune Hugh recalled from nights up at

his mountain croft – ‘Listen to my woeful tale . . . All is lost, my heart is broken . . . Death please sting me, my misery is complete’ – and all the while the dog struggled, throwing about its muzzled head, releasing a continuous growl. Hugh thought Mac must be twisting its testicles in time to the tune.

‘Afternoon, boys,’ Mac said cheerily. ‘I want you to meet Spot. Say hello to my good friends Aaron and Hugh, little hound.’

The Jack Russell yelped.

‘Since it seems you managed to fail to triumph over the Lord’s faithful servant at fishing, boys, I find it falls to me to uphold our good names. Gentlemen, our companion here is going to be our entry in the terrier race.’

Aaron tried to stroke the Jack Russell only to have his hand pushed away by a muzzled bite.

As they made their way towards the track Mac nodded to acquaintance and stranger alike, a lack of discrimination grounded in the hostility of all but those who walked beside him. A familiar nervousness itched at Hugh’s belly.

At the small table beside the dog-traps the Colonel’s wife, a woman of world-weary elegance, jotted down the entries for the races on carefully drawn-up cards. She looked at the man standing in front of her then threw a disgusted look at the dog, which, Hugh now noticed, was covered in small scars.

‘I presume that thing is to be entered for the terrier race,’ she said. ‘It is a Jack Russell, isn’t it, Mr Seruant?’

‘Indeed it is, Mrs Horne.’

‘I didn’t know you kept Jack Russells, Mac?’ She leaned back, regarding him.

‘That is because you haven’t been to visit lately, Gladys.’ She smiled at the impertinence and asked whether he planned to keep the muzzle on. Mac nodded.

‘What name, then?’

‘Spot.’

‘Spot?’

‘See Spot Run.’

She looked at him.

‘I’m learning to read.’

‘I’ve heard that you read too much, Mac,’ she replied, writing out the entry ticket and handing it to him. She didn’t look up, just left her palm outstretched. ‘Two pounds, please.’

Mac had already moved on, and Aaron followed, so Hugh searched his pocket for two damp pound notes and paid.

She took them without comment.

The whippets were first to run, and Hugh, Aaron and Mac picked a place to watch the race. Of the five competitors, three were being led to the traps by people Hugh did not recognize. Aaron nudged him. ‘That bloke there’s English,’ he said.

Hugh raised his eyebrows at this and offered his own, disconnected thought. ‘They should hold these things in a shopping mall, with corners and polished floors.’

Aaron looked at him blankly. ‘Do you think that guy’s come all the way from England for this?’ he asked.

Hugh shrugged and looked around for Miss Hume, but she had disappeared. Instead he watched the three girls they had ogled earlier fuss over their whippet; the dog was running in circles, ever more excited.

‘Dogs, eh?’ said Aaron.

Mac ignored them, concentrating on his own contender, and Hugh began to pick out a little of what he was saying. ‘I know the hatred and envy in your heart,’ Mac whispered. ‘You may not believe me but in that hatred lies power. Don’t be ashamed, embrace it, hold it dear, and use it to rise above all else.’ Hugh raised his eyebrows at Aaron.

‘You are the Nobill Boutie.’

At this Hugh could not help but laugh, and received a severe glance from Mac as his due.