The Wolf Hunters

Amanda Mitchison

The Wolf Hunters
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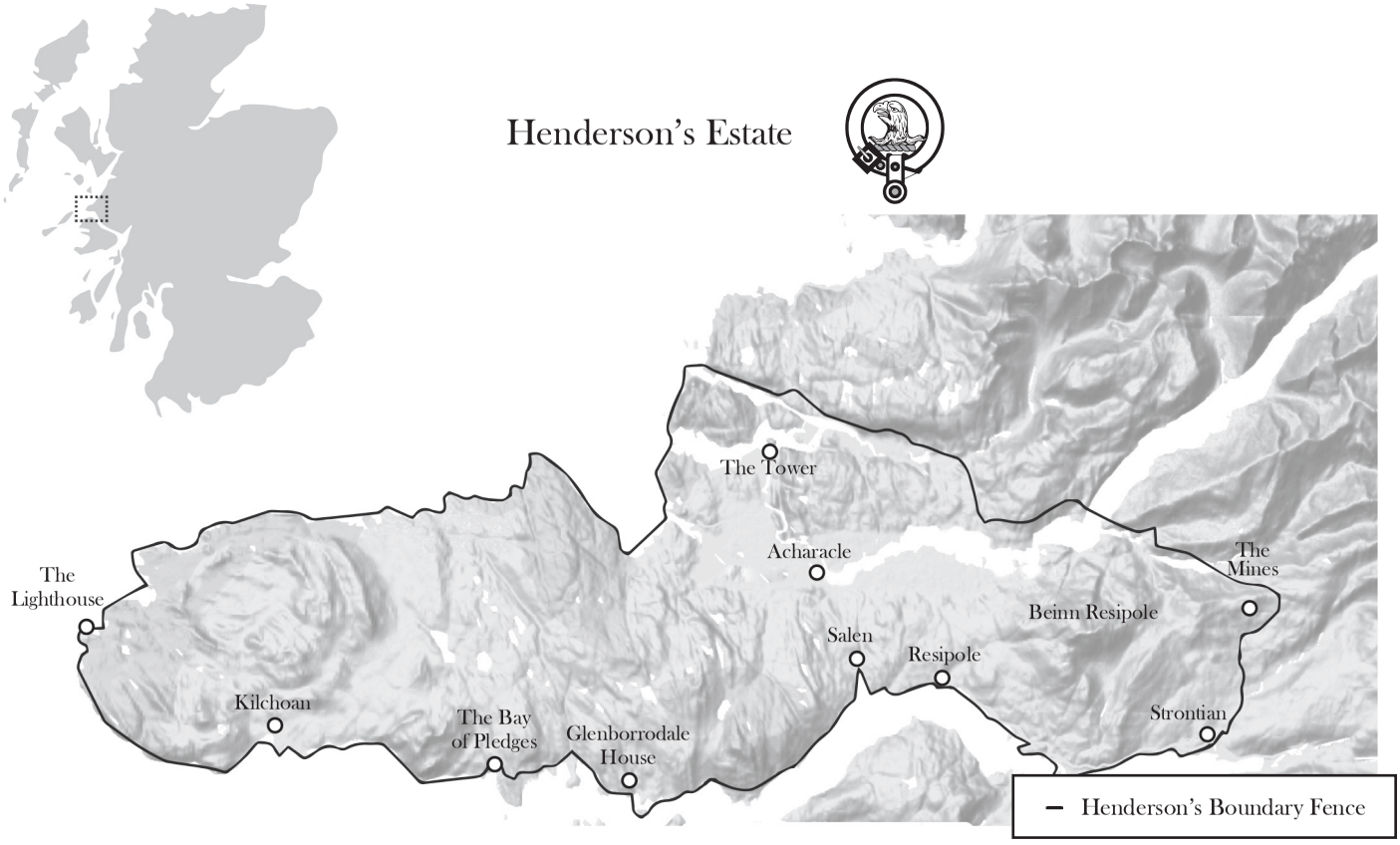
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To my happy lockdown family: Neil, Aideen, Jeremy, Donnchadh, Naomi, Ruairi, Eóghain and Catrìona.


Henderson's Estate
The Tower
Acharacle
The Mines
The Lighthouse
Beinn Resipole
Salen
Resipole
Kilchoan
The Bay of Pledges
Glenborrodale House
Strontian
Henderson's Boundary Fence

PROLOGUE

Passport control at the Carter Bar border crossing on a bright December morning. A long grey frill of breezeblock four metres high and topped with razor wire runs along the humps of the Cheviots, like the crest on a lizard. An old billboard proclaims: Welcome to Scotland, *Fàilte gu Alba*.

On the English side a bus draws up. The doors wheeze open and out spill a bevy of Scottish migrant workers in hi-vis jackets. Last off the bus is a woman in her thirties: black jeans, grey jacket, grey face. Rhona Ballantyne is clearly not a shabby migrant worker. She is tall and very thin, with shoulder length brown hair. She has regular features, faint lines at the side of her mouth. It's a neutral face which is thoroughly forgettable – this has been useful in the past.

Technically, Rhona is completely shit-faced, having downed all six of the grappa gift miniatures she'd brought for her friend Cat. But she still manages to hoick her bag over her shoulder, and walk directly up to the wall and join the queue a few metres from the border checkpoint.

Rhona waits, holding her vaccination certificate and her passport with the obligatory 1,000 American dollars, which she will have to change into the local Merks using the extortionate official rate. She rummages in her pocket, finds a tube of mints and takes one. Will they still have mints in Scotland?

She looks up; nailed to a pillar of the gate is a severed

human foot. A practical joke? But when she looks closer there's something very familiar about how the toenails are prising themselves away from the cuticles – in the police you do learn about death, and what time does to flesh and bone and blood.

The queue moves closer to the passport gate, closer to the foot. Behind it, pasted to the pillars of the gates, are the Peace and Stability Ordinances. A paragraph has been circled in red with an arrow pointing to the foot.

She shuffles forward, and notes that the foot is glazed, like the top of a French tart; they've used yacht varnish.

On the Scottish side of the border, Cat is waiting for her. Just for a moment, Rhona sees her friend as a stranger would see her: a pretty, snub-nosed woman, mid thirties, dressed in leggings and a long, flecked cardigan, a chopstick holding her hair up. Not really changed, Rhona thinks. Some women (like Cat) soften and glow with age, others (like herself) look as if some giant, red-eyed vampire spider sucked them dry in the night.

And then Cat sees her and holds out her arms.

'Roo!' Cat gives her a great, enveloping hug while Rhona stands stock still.

'I thought nobody touches these days.'

'I do!' Cat draws back, 'Let me look at you! You're so *thin*!'

'You mean old and racoon-eyed.'

'That's not what I said. I said, "thin".'

'Mmmm. Well, you look great too,' says Rhona tonelessly. 'I don't know how you do it.'

'I eat, Roo. I eat.' Cat takes Rhona's bag from her. 'Is this all then?'

Rhona nods.

'I thought this was you coming home.'

‘It is. I’ve brought some nice underwear. And a funeral outfit. You always need a funeral outfit.’

‘That’ll do for church then,’ says Cat.

Rhona looks at her askance.

‘Didn’t you read my letters? You have to go every Sunday now. The Holy Willies keep registers.’

‘I’m not going.’

‘Believe me, you will be,’ Cat weighs the bag in her hand, ‘You forgot the gearbox, didn’t you?’

‘Sorry.’ Rhona flinches. ‘I mean it, I’m sorry.’

Cat gives her a weary smile.

They walk across the car park to Cat’s van which is being watched over by two pointy-faced boys with cropped hair and long sticks. Cat hands them each a five merk coin and they slope off.

Cat and Rhona climb up into the van and then Cat pushes down the snib to relock the doors. Here in the cabin, they’re perched high above the ground. The seats have brightly coloured hand-knitted covers, and a pine tree air freshener hangs from the rearview mirror. Cat always was a homemaker. When they were children, she’d sewn little cushions for their den. The three of them, Cat and Rhona and her twin sister, Maggie, all bunched up together with their piles of sweets and their candle stubs and their secret pacts sealed in blood from a compass point. Together-forever-and-ever. Perhaps that is still true, even if there are only the two of them now.

Rhona sinks back into the woolly seat.

‘You all right?’ Cat starts up the engine.

‘They’ve put a dead foot up at the crossing point. They’ve even covered it in varnish.’

‘That’ll be to preserve it.’

‘But it’s medieval!’

‘Left foot? Or right?’ Cat edges the van out of the parking bay, skirting round a flurry of crows.

‘Left. And someone young. Christ, does it matter?’

‘The right foot controls the accelerator so that’s what they take for repeated speeding offences. The left foot is for the clutch. That’ll be joyriding.’

‘I hope I don’t have to enforce this.’

‘You could be lenient and just chop off toes instead,’ Cat glances at her. ‘Sorry, that was a joke.’

One of the car park boys runs into the crows, swinging his stick. The birds fly up in a rush of black. But the boy has hit home. Now he bends over to smash in the bird’s head.

Cat toots her horn. When the boy glances over at the van, she sticks up her thumb and he gives her a little yellow smile.

‘Don’t encourage him!’ says Rhona.

‘That’s his supper.’

Rhona shuts her eyes. Her teeth ache, her eyeballs ache, muscles in her scalp, that she didn’t know she had, ache.

The road sweeps round the brow of a hill and down into a valley. There are no trees any more. They pass a pair of roadside shacks with roofs of corrugated iron and uncountable small filthy children wading in puddles. The gardens grow a forest of oil drums, and rolls of rusty chicken wire. On the washing line hangs a pair of lonely jogging bottoms. Two cardboard signs: ‘The Lord Hath Mercy’ and ‘Jesus Coming Soon!’

‘This is worse than Catania,’ says Rhona.

‘It’s better than it was,’ replies Cat tightly. ‘If you’d only flown into Edinburgh, then you wouldn’t have had to see all this horrible stuff. At the airport they cater for tourists. They’ve got a piper in the arrivals lounge, and girls in mini kilts with trays of welcome whisky.’

‘That’s a great idea!’

Rhona opens the glove compartment hoping for a bottle of welcome whisky. Instead, she finds a welcome gun. She picks it up: an old Colt 33, clean, oiled, loaded.

‘What the hell!’ she says. ‘I thought you made handicrafts.’

‘I do. But everyone carries a gun now.’

‘I’m going to have my work cut out.’

‘Oh, you are,’ says Cat. ‘But the crime isn’t what really gets to you. The worst thing is the double speak, the hypocrisy of it all. So everyone trots off to church and opens their Reading of the Day App and pretends life is still okay.’

‘Did you say, Reading of the Day?’

‘Yep. It’ll pop up on your mobile every morning. Apps are part of the Kirk’s outreach programme. Sometimes they become ear worms – you just can’t get them out of your head.’

‘You wrote that the Holy Willies have been praying for Dad.’

‘How is he?’ says Cat. ‘The hospital will only talk to next of kin.’

‘I don’t really know. He had another operation yesterday. He’s still in ICU.’

‘So?’ Cat tilts her head to one side.

‘So why am I coming home? It’s time, isn’t it? I can’t run away forever.’

‘But why *now*?’

‘I suppose I thought the prospect of death might soften him up a bit. Make him more forgiving.’

Cat says, ‘You may be pleasantly surprised. He’s lonely. He’s always saying that he has no one to look after him. You can mop his brow.’

It’s an absurd idea. They look at each other and smile.

Cat is quiet for a moment. Then, cautiously, she says, 'And Maggie?'

'She's there in my mind all the time,' Rhona is pleased that her voice has stayed steady. 'Any other persecutingly intimate questions you want to ask me?'

Cat just nods and keeps her eyes on the road.

At the foothills of the Eildons, the van struggles. Cat screeches down through the gears, eyes flicking reproachfully at Rhona. Finally the engine gets some traction and the van judders forward.

As they zigzag up the hillside, Rhona watches a buzzard circle high above them. It stops and hovers, wings tilting, its gaze fixed, no doubt, on one microscopic mousehole. That was the answer to life, wasn't it? Think of just one thing only.

'I need a pee,' says Cat.

Near the summit they pull into a lay-by. While Cat goes behind a rock, Rhona gets out of the car and stands looking down on the valley below. She follows the glide of the river past the clumps of gorse, the crumbling walls, the little hamlet of houses with dented roofs, the churchyard with its tree stumps.

Seven years ago, she left in pursuit of Sergio Verviani, her sister's killer. In Italy she finally managed to do what she had failed to accomplish back home; she got Verviani and several other members of his criminal network put behind bars.

But in the meantime, Scotland has changed. Of course it has – only she hadn't expected things to be quite so desperate. Yet it's still home. It's still the land that has made her who she is and where, despite everything, she still belongs.

Down in the valley, shadows already rim the little buildings. Rhona thinks how meanly winter light is

apportioned here. It'll be growing dark by the time they reach home.

They head on northwest, past the old slag heaps of Lanark, loop round the south of Glasgow and come into Paisley under the dead-eyed tower blocks where the rusty metal sidings are sheering away from the concrete. In the car park below, scores of skinny children are playing among the incineration bins; the boys kicking footballs, the girls huddling on the benches, some holding babies wrapped in blankets.

'It'll be different when we get up north.' Cat has both hands on the steering wheel, chin tilted up, her glasses halfway down her perfect ski jump of a nose.

'Will it?'

'Well, it'll be wilder.'

'What kind of wild? Wild as in mountains and forests? Or wild as in Wild West?'

'Both. There's even bears up there now. And wolves. The Ardnamurchan peninsula has become a game reserve. It's still got loads of trees. They say that if you stop your car in a lay-by there, the bears will come out of the forest and pry open the boot. They'll kill for a chicken sandwich.'

'So would I,' says Rhona.

At the Erskine Bridge Cat pays the 70 merk toll and they come out onto the A82 which, Cat tells her, is now designated a 'signature road' by the Scottish Executive and is duly fitted out with birch saplings along the verges and hideous modern statues at every roundabout.

Cat is driving faster now, talking easily and going over seven years of local news – which is mostly who got the virus and how they died. Rhona pours out cups of dark brown tea from a thermos.

They cross Rannoch Moor, the land rolling out flat and

raw in the winter light. Eventually, the road swerves to the west and they enter the great, desolate scoop of Glencoe. They're in the Highlands now, nearly on the home straight.

But at the first car park Cat pulls over. 'I've just got a wee delivery.'

'*Here?*'

'It's just for some friends.'

Cat takes two holdalls from the back of the van and sets off briskly along a track across the glen. Rhona, head down, trails behind. Cat, she knows, always has some money-making scheme underway.

Cat waits for her on a small footbridge. When Rhona catches up, she says, 'What's wrong?'

'Nothing,' says Rhona. 'But if a wild dog was chewing my leg off you'd say, "I'm just finishing off this macramé plant holder."'

They come to the foot of the mountains. Behind a large rock stands a metal pillar with pulley wheels at the top and a loop of steel rope that disappears up the slope. From the rope hang two green plastic baskets.

Cat puts the holdalls in the baskets, opens a small metal flap on the side of the pillar and presses a switch. The baskets wobble away up the mountainside.

'Good, isn't it?' says Cat. 'It's solar-powered. I had it made.'

'What's in the bags?'

'Epoxy resin, Vaseline, tampons, paracetamol and two months' worth of insulin.'

Rhona frowns.

'You'll see.'

Cat leads the way up a path in a cleft of the mountain. After a steep climb they come out onto a narrow ridge. On the far side the ground dips down into a small hidden valley, cupped between the two mountains of the ridge.

Rhona sees before her a small, squalid settlement surrounded by piles of old tin cans and plastic casing and broken machinery. In the middle are low stone byres with black plastic sheeting on the roofs, and holes for windows. The nearest byre has a white metal door that once belonged to a fridge. And everywhere there are goats: goats in corrugated iron enclosures, goats tethered to rocks, goats tied to posts in the ground.

Standing at a slight distance is a much larger building with a corrugated iron roof. Two women in brown tabards are waiting outside, holding Cat's bags. They have hard, dark faces and hair in long plaits.

Near the entrance to the building, a hubcap filled with liquid has been set into the ground. Cat dips both her trainers in the little pool and walks towards the women. Rhona dips her feet in too and follows.

The women lead them through plastic seal flaps and into a hot, noisy workshop smelling of epoxy resin and burnt hair. At the nearest long table small boys are sawing deer antlers into fingerlength sections, and two bigger boys, one with a squint, the other with a starburst of warts around his neck, are gluing the bits together to form hands. At the next table are trays of completed antler hands onto which women and girls are gluing tiny gold balls, seed pearls, crystals, lapis lazuli, and little squares of tartan cloth.

Cat picks up a hand, 'They're Highland ring holders. What do you think?'

'Creepy *and* hideous! Next you'll be making lampshades from human skin.'

'I've learnt what sells,' Cat surveys the table. 'Think of the most bad taste thing that you can. Then – and this is the real secret – you go that one step further. You add the glitz and the tartan.'

'I didn't know you were quite that cynical!' says Rhona.

But Cat seems distracted. She scans the room. ‘We’re short-staffed today. Some of these orders are going to be late.’

She says something in a foreign language to one of the women.

The woman replies at some length and then turns her head away.

Cat looks worried.

‘What’s up?’ says Rhona.

‘They’ve lost a couple of young girls. And a boy.’

‘How? What happened?’

‘We don’t know. They were all good kids – not the sort to join gangs.’ She takes a breath, ‘Maybe they got sick and went off to die on their own. People do. They skulk off like dogs.’

‘But I thought Scotland didn’t get the flux? That was the one thing it had going for it.’

‘Don’t you believe it.’

‘Wasn’t that the whole point?’ says Rhona in a strangled voice. ‘Wasn’t that why you closed the borders?’

‘Of course it was. And they’re still pretending we’ve been virus-free.’

‘You never mentioned it in your letters.’

Cat gives a scornful snort, ‘What do you expect? It’s a state secret. And there are still little pockets of disease. Nobody here will have been vaccinated. They are not *officially* here. They’re off the record. They’d be turned away at the hospitals.’

Some of the women have put down their glue and tweezers. They’re watching.

‘What happens when they get sick?’ asks Rhona.

‘Either they get better. Or they don’t.’

‘And school?’

‘I can’t get anything in their language. They’re Moldavians. I have to speak Russian to them.’

‘Do you speak any Russian that isn’t in the imperative?’

‘What do you mean by that?’

‘You said they were “friends”.’

‘They are. We get on well.’

‘They’re your *staff*, Cat.’

‘I pay them a good wage.’

‘I’m out of here. I’ve had enough.’ Rhona walks quickly to the exit and plunges back through the plastic seals. Outside, she finds a rock, checks it for goat droppings, and sits down. She eats a mint, but a drink is what she really needs.

Someone is watching her. Quickly she turns, but nobody’s there. Then she sees a billy goat looking at her with the same mournful, heavy-lidded eyes as Cat’s workers.

Cat comes out and joins her. ‘What’s the problem?’ she says.

‘I didn’t know you kept slaves.’

‘That’s not fair! I’m helping them.’

‘Helping them? You said you hated doublespeak. How can you do this?’

‘They need the money.’

‘Doesn’t look like you pay them much.’

‘It’s better than what they’d get from anyone else. And I put the pulley in and the workshop.’

‘But that was for *you,* for your business,’ says Rhona.

‘You don’t get it, do you? This is what they need. It’s better than charity. It means I can pay them *and* bring in medical supplies.’

Cat picks up a stone, flicks it high into the air and catches it again. ‘I wonder if they traded them.’

‘*Sold their own children!* You’re joking!’

‘Take a look at the kids here, they all have something wrong with them. But the three that have gone were perfect. They had good teeth, straight limbs, no groin rot. Sorry, Roo. That’s just how things are these days.’

Rhona feels a sudden weariness wash over her. She says, ‘Take me home, Cat.’

‘You sure about that? I thought you’d stay with us. At least at the beginning, till you found yourself somewhere.’

‘No. I want to go home.’

‘But the house…’

‘It’s still standing, isn’t it? Or is that another horrible thing you’ve just been waiting to tell me?’

‘The house is there all right.’

‘So, what’s the problem?’

‘Just, you know…’ Cat says delicately. ‘Nobody has been living there. You might feel…’

‘I might feel *what?* Ghosts?’

‘Yeah.’

‘I won’t be going into her room. Please Cat, take me home. Just take me home.’

And Cat takes her home

SIX MONTHS LATER

A BEAUTIFUL DAY TO DIE

Reading of the Day
'Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.'
John 3.3

On a morning in June, Rhona is the duty officer and takes the first call of the day. She dresses quickly and drives straight through Fort William. She takes the public road through the scalped hills of Lochaber, past the tinker settlements and the quarry and on down to the coast.

The road ends when she reaches the boundary of Henderson's wild game reserve. In front of her is the great steel mesh boundary fence which cuts off the Sunart and Ardnamurchan peninsula from the mainland. A coat of arms has been wrought into the metalwork of the gate; the crest shows an eagle head in profile.

On the far side of the fence Rhona can see the green woods of the estate and, just by the gate, a transparent, egg-shaped cabin. The glass or plastic of the cabin is clean and unscratched. And sitting inside is a guard wearing a green fleece. He has a semi-automatic rifle resting at his feet and he nods to Rhona while making a circling motion with his hand. She winds up her window, smiling at the idea that a sheet of glass would really save her from a wild bear. The gates open and she enters the reserve

She drives fast between columns of trees, occasionally

passing neatly boarded-up houses. The road is smooth and beautifully cambered, the tarmac shiny. Yet it is also wild here. At the luxury, foreign currency hotels she is used to stage set woods that are only two or three trees thick. But this is different. These are real forests that reach up into mountains. Miraculously, nothing here has been destroyed.

What is the price?

When the road divides she heads inland. She winds the window down again. It is the freshest, dampest, cleanest morning of the world. Later, it will be hot – the first day of summer. Tiny yellow blossoms of tormentil shine in the grass and when she drives through the wood, the car plunges into pale green light from the beech trees vaulting high overhead.

A beautiful day to die.

In a lay-by up ahead she sees a Land Rover and she parks behind it.

Matt Simpson, the gamekeeper, is waiting for her. He too is dressed in a green fleece with a small gold embroidered eagle head. His tweed cap is crunched deferentially in his hand, folded tarpaulins lie at his feet.

'You must be the new lady inspector,' says Matt.

'I'm not that new. I've been here six months.' She looks at the tarpaulins. 'Leave them. The men will do all of that when they get here.'

She's made it sound as if they are on their way, but she hasn't even called the procurator fiscal's office yet. She always puts that off. She knows that the more people around the less you sense where you are, and what has happened.

She walks along the verge for a better view down into the dell. The clearing in the woods is about seventy metres wide, with a round, brown pond in the middle and a small shed off to one side. Near to the pond lies the body of a

young man. He is naked, lying on his front, his arms loosely at his side, one leg slightly bent and with the foot facing inwards. There's no sign of any injury, except a couple of brown smudges on his back. You might even have thought he was taking the sun. But who would sunbathe here?

And, as always, there's that terrible, emptied out stillness.

'It's nobody local,' says Matt. 'No one from the reserve.'

'So who is he then?' she says.

'I don't know.'

There's just the faintest quiver in Matt's voice.

Rhona thinks: *his first lie.*

'But you have some record of who comes onto the reserve, no?'

'Mr Henderson keeps a register of car number plates. But I haven't checked at the Big House.'

'And you're certain it was a bear?'

'They're all satellite tagged. Wilber was here at 2 a.m.'

'*Wilber?* Isn't it a wild animal?'

'That's his name. Short for Wilberforce.'

'So we know the killer, but not the victim. That's most unusual.'

Matt blinks slowly and doesn't reply. He's a coarse-featured man, his forehead and nose pitted by the flux. An ugly face, an honest face – or so you'd have thought.

'How did you find out about the body?'

'We had a tip-off.'

'Who gave you that?'

'A man. He didn't leave a name.' *That's his second lie.*

'And you don't know who it was?'

Matt shakes his head.

'Matt. You don't mind if I call you Matt, do you? This is a reserve, right?'

'Yes.'

‘So, I presume not many people live here?’

‘Twenty-eight adults.’

‘Exactly. And the land is surrounded by a five metre electric fence?’

‘Four metres. And only electrified over the sections on dry ground.’

‘Whatever. But the number of people likely to have seen the body is small. And you know them all.’

‘You’d be surprised who creeps in. We get a lot of tip-offs. People call up with sightings of the peregrines and sea eagles all the time.’

‘It’s nice to know there are people still interested in wildlife. But this isn’t about a roosting bird, is it? This is a little bit different, no?’ She gives him a quick, devastating smile.

Matt looks at his boots.

They walk down the bank to the dell, through buttercups and dog’s mercury. At the foot of the slope the ground is boggy, moss and hummocks of marsh grass, a buzz of bluebottles and the smell of standing water. Through an opening in the trees she can see the shore and the huge seaweed-covered boulders hunkered into the sand. The green mesh boundary fence traverses the shallows of the beach. Beyond lies the sea with the thin line of Coll on the horizon.

Matt introduces his son, Gordon, who is sitting very still on a rock, a few feet from the body. The boy is thirteen, maybe fourteen and with a lumpy nose – his father’s son. His face is set and stolid, and he holds a shotgun across his knees. He’ll remember this morning for the rest of his life.