

Heather Lowpers.

Carey Coombs

'You okay dad?' Duncan asked, as Alistair lent on the three-foot wide galvanised metal gate that he'd been delegated to open, to let the tups out, one by one. Three days after the funeral.

'Aye, fine son. Just taking a breather. Catch m' wind.'

Alistair was feeling irritable. He stepped back, leaving a size eleven imprint in the mud. His heather-lowpers were at least thirty years old, a legacy of when shepherds herded on their own two feet, rather than their own four wheels. They had been hand-made in Ayrshire and he'd had them re-soled with Commando soles more times than he could remember- the original leather studded undersides hadn't lasted long. He was still meticulous with the neatsfoot oil - every other day- just as he was with all his mundane chores. It wasn't getting any easier to take his boots on and off, but he had rocked along on the sprung curved soles for so long, it was worth the effort. He didn't sway back and forth quite as he had done in his youth, but he could still feel the familiar lope that had urged his stride over the heather hills, stick in hand, dog at heel. His passage across the close to the bike wasn't a liting flourish anymore, but the curved soles still carried that swagger of his youth – the only footwear that would not stand still. The toe was too clumsy to slip easily under the gear lever of his Honda. That was a bugger. But his latest bike had an electronic gear change on the handle. That was a blessing. He counted his blessings, even the small ones.

Alistair gripped the gate latch and let the last of the Cheviot tups out of the handling pen.

'Aye we're good to go,' said Stevie.

It was near to the end of September, and Stevie and Duncan had been handling the ovine battery that would, in eight weeks-time, be released among the seven hundred and fifty Cheviot ewes that ran the hills that the farm had title to. Alistair's pride had insisted that he help.

His meagre day's work done, Alistair took up his stick and, with studied deliberation, set out to walk the one hundred and fifty yards from the buchts back to the farmhouse. He'd had enough for one day.

'See you tomorrow,' he tried to shout, but it was a hoarse and croak-like sound.

'Aye.'

The fingers that clasped the stick were calloused, scarred and claw-like. They were ingrained with mud and grease. They carried home with him the familiar tang and stench of rampant tup. Alistair was well used to the complex odour of male sheep at the time of the ewe's highest receptiveness; it had clung to his clothes and his skin every year of his life, ever since he had been

considered large enough, strong enough and battered enough to risk entering a pen alongside them. It was a seasonal phenomenon, arising in autumn along with the shortening days, the glowing sunsets, the autumnal gales and fluttering leaves. It was redolent of a life dedicated to the husbandry of sheep and kye, with an unpleasant musky acidity that would still be with him when he brought his buttered toast to his mouth. The combined efforts of soap and brutal hygiene wouldn't cut through the lingering volatile memory; it would only get stronger as the weeks went by. It symbolised not just the end of another farming year, but the inescapable duty and responsibility that he and his soil bound comrades carried with them; to plan for the next year's cycle of husbandry and culture.