

Thirty-four.

When they got back to their room Charlie told Fiona that the Home Secretary was dead. He had fallen, or jumped, from the clock tower at Westminster. Nobody knew how he had managed to get up there in the first place: but he did hold high rank in the government. Then the authorities had raided his home out in the countryside to the west of the city. They had found there half a ton of cocaine, and a gigantic quantity of American dollars. His wife and children had been arrested, and were already providing information which might throw urgent light on the matter. The Militia guard unit attached to the late Home Secretary was also under arrest, for suspicion was growing that a network of cocaine transporters led directly to the heart of the government, and at a senior level.

‘You know who he was?’, Charlie said.

‘Who?’

‘He was from one of the big Scotch noble families that always stays on the winning side. Of course, he renounced the title a long time ago’.

And then Charlie told Fiona that the king was still alive. He didn't fully believe this, but this is what the office in Victoria was saying. The king was alive, with the rest of his family, at some place in Scotland called Inverlair. It was a remote shooting-lodge near somewhere called Tulloch, at the northern end of the Ben Nevis range of mountains. It had been an extremely high-security prison in the war for special operations people whose trips had been cancelled at the last moment. These people had been kept at Inverlair until they were judged safe enough to be allowed out of preventative custody: for on the eve of any operation, some of them

were very dangerous indeed. That was why Inverlair was as remote as just about anywhere else in Scotland, under the edge of a mountain and surrounded by forests and lakes. It was also a long way from the sea. But an attempt might yet be made at any time to rescue the king and his family from their prison among the mountains.

From the search of properties following the death of the Home Secretary, and others, it was clear that some link existed between an established network of cocaine smuggling and the liberty of the king and his family.

'That's what I told you', Fiona said, 'it was all a plan to swap cocaine for the king'.

They found Tulloch on a large-scale map, and then found the site of Inverlair, a few miles to the south. Fiona had the idea of checking with the enquiry desk of the telephone service. Extraordinarily enough, there was a single listing for Inverlair Lodge.

She said, 'Try it'.

Charlie tried it. It seemed as if the phone might ring-out and he was on the point of replacing the handset when someone answered. A female voice, probably American.

He said, 'My name is Charlie Marr. Let me speak at once to Kelso Lamont'.

At that, the line went dead. Charlie said, 'At least someone is there. And they don't want to speak to us. How do we get there?'

They studied their maps, as if they were explorers from some earlier century. By road Inverlair was many, many hours away - supposing that the road was not blocked with snow. And supposing that it did not pass through districts held by rebels and bandits of a dozen sorts. There was, of course, no access to Inverlair by sea.

And the surrounding mountains made any sort of landing-strip, even of the most modest sort, impossible too. The nearest was an emergency Militia strip by the edge of the sea at Fort William, useable only during daylight hours.

At midnight, Morrison phoned back at last. He had spent all day golfing, and all night drinking in the club. Then to a little private club for policemen of a certain rank, and their cronies, where you could drink all day and all night, and there would never be any sort of trouble; least of all, of course, from the police. Or Mrs Morrison, come to that.

Morrison was certainly drunk. But he certainly sobered-up very quickly. The chance to get cocaine dealers, American agents and some very important prisoners of the state was too good a chance to miss.

‘Who are they?’, Morrison demanded to know.

But Charlie would not tell him until they met later.

Morrison and Findlay arrived at six. It took them half an hour to get to the airport. When they took-off, it was still very dark, and as they at first flew due west there was no sign of the day breaking. Findlay had brought a half-bottle of whisky, which Morrison and he passed between each other with enthusiasm. It transpired that each had a passion - apart from golf - for angling. Each man regretted heartily that he had not brought his clubs, or his rods; and passed the bottle again, until it was quite empty. Then Morrison produced another half-bottle.

Just as the day began to break they dropped down between ranges of mountains, above a long sea-loch, and fell slowly to a narrow landing-strip at the side of the sea. By the time they were down, it was daylight. Birds were singing nearby, and the mountains

were entirely coated with fresh snow. It seemed a winter's morning of the most extraordinary promise.

A solitary inspector from the Fort William police had been sent to meet them. He sniffed the air suspiciously when his colleagues from Edinburgh disembarked: but said nothing. To Charlie and Fiona he was civil but circumspect. He did not ask why they had come to his district in such a hurry; nor why they wanted to go to Inverlair. But he would drive them there in person: if the roads were clear of snow to the north.

At the bridge over the Lochy, a pair of Paramilitary trucks was parked. They would escort the party of police to Inverlair and back. The lads stood around, smoking Capstan. The inspector got out of the car to have a word with these lads. As he was talking, a canvas-backed Militia two-tonner approached slowly from the north. At the bridge, it turned right - and stopped. A girl got out - not much older than sixteen. She ignored the police and swaggered over to the Paramilitary lads. She bought some cigarettes from them, and swaggered back to her truck. She was now smoking a cigarette, all the lads had clustered round to light it for her. She stood on the running board and looked about the company with supreme confidence. She was sharing the cab with another woman and a male driver. For a split second, the driver caught Charlie's eye: and looked away.

'Where are you going?', Maxine said.

Charlie said north to Tulloch.

'Why Tulloch?', the girl said, as impudent as she was confident.

Charlie ignored the question.

But he said, 'If the snow will let us'.

‘We’ll be back in an hour’, the girl said with sparkling confidence. ‘We’re only going to Corpach and back. If you’re still here, we’ll take you’.

The inspector said, ‘Do we need to check your load?’

‘Since when did the police do that sort of work?’, the girl said indignantly. ‘And what load anyway? That’s what the Paramilitaries are for’.

But the senior Paramilitary didn’t think any check on the load was necessary, it could always be checked when the truck came back in an hour. The girl flicked the end of her cigarette in a high arc; it soared and dived and plunged into the soft snow an inch from the toes of Charlie’s shoes. The gesture was almost a challenge, a provocation: but of course it couldn’t be.

The truck drove onto the narrow bridge, crossed it, and disappeared. Charlie watched it, his eyes narrowed with doubt and care. Something was wrong with the morning: but it was not yet clear what that something was.