

Thirty-five.

They drove their Militia truck west from the bridge at Inverloch. Looking back, they could see that there was a woman with the police party now. Maxine reckoned she was a cop too, she said she was never wrong about things like that. They watched the two cops in the reversing mirrors until they had shrunk and gone.

Kelly said, 'That was close'.

Maxine shrugged. 'We could have shot our way through', she said. 'But then there would have been a chase'.

Kelso said, 'What did you give them for the cigarettes?'

'All your dollars', Maxine grinned, 'you won't need them now anyway'.

At Banavie the canal was frozen solid but the bridge was clear and they soon drove through Corpach and into open country. Already the road had given way to a narrow track which looped and humped across county as it had in the days of stage and coach. To their left was loch Eil: it must have been low water, for the shoreline was crusted with the shattered remains of salt-water that had frozen during the cold hours of early morning. Dense, frozen pine forests lined the right side of the road, deep in snow. When the sun rose, the Nevis range behind them seemed for a time to be all on fire.

On the far side of the loch, quite clearly visible, was a unit of four Militia trucks. They appeared to be parked, and a wood fire was burning. In the lemon-coloured morning, the wood smoke seemed to curl upwards for ever.

They drove on until the little junction at the head of the loch; here, there was a choice of heading straight onwards, or taking the road that ran on the far side of the water. They stopped the truck:

the silence of the morning seemed to go on for ever. They could take the long route to Shona; for at least they knew there was a road all the way there. Assuming the little encampment of Militia over the loch would let them pass, of course. Or they could head straight on. At the road's end, they would have to walk over a shoulder of mountain to reach Shona

Kelly said, 'Perhaps we could steal a boat to take us round'.

Maxine said at once, 'There are no boats. This is one of their hunting preserves. They have destroyed all the boats for miles and miles for fear of poachers. And people like us'.

'Can we climb over the mountain in that case?', Kelly wondered.

Maxine laughed at the idea. She said, 'That old man in the back can hardly climb into a truck. He will never go over the hill in this weather'.

On the far side of the loch, the Militia troopers had begun to prepare for their day's work; whatever it was. They had extinguished their fire and had started the engines of their trucks. It was a matter of waiting to see the direction in which these trucks were headed. Then they began to move.

Kelso said, 'We don't have a choice now. They are coming this way. We better go'.

The drove west again, as quickly as they dared on the narrow, ice-rutted track, through the increasingly dense forest. Then the trees opened, and below them a railway line could be seen snaking west.

Kelly said, 'If they come after us by train, there is nothing we can do'.

But Maxine said the train would only take the Militia so far. After the head of the next sea-loch, the train would be of no use to them. After that, it was no more than a track - a very rough track indeed.

Then Kelly drove, and Kelso rode in the covered back of the truck with the royals and Maxine's three young partisans. The royals were in an increasingly bad condition for, although the truck was moving slowly, it was impossible to sit without holding on, and for the same reason it was not possible to lie on the floor and sleep. In any case, none had eaten in forty eight hours and though the three women seemed able to survive the journey, it was the king who occasioned most worry.

Kelso said, 'Six hours, maybe less. Before darkness anyway. Then we will have shelter and something to eat'.

The king inclined his head in understanding; but he seemed too weak to speak. Kelso began to wonder what they would do if he died before the pick-up: if the pick-up ever happened of course. There were still thirty six hours to go - if the Americans did come, and if they managed to identify the correct time and place of rendezvous.

The track dipped among some trees again; all around were scores of deer entirely without fear. The deer watched the truck's passing as they might watch a distant shooting star, or comet: either way, it had nothing whatsoever to do with them. Then the land began to level out beside a river which had burst its banks and flooded a large area of woodland. Then a fresh-water loch opened out to their left and the road climbed upwards through the ruins of a village. At the top of the village was a burned-out church: a number of ragged Daniels huddled at the door, and watched them pass. And then a

shallow valley opened up through the mountains, and they followed it for two hours as it dipped and swerved among the hills. To their left, a fresh-water loch was frozen: herds of deer strolled on its surface, oblivious to the danger of a thaw.

In the middle of the afternoon, they came to their turn-off. The track seemed to branch left and fall off the edge of the hill. It tilted down the escarpment at a dangerous angle. At the bottom it plunged into a river; for if there had once been a bridge, it had been destroyed or washed away. There was no option but to try to ford the stream: and their truck tumbled through and emerged dripping at the other side. For a moment, it seemed unable to claw itself out of the river: but then its wheels got a grip and it hauled its cargo out onto opposite bank.

There was no going back now: no truck would ever ford the river in the opposite direction - and if it did, it would certainly never climb back up to the main road. So they could only go on now - for as long as the track would allow them to.

Their route led past the blackened walls of a mansion house and then hard by the shores of a sea-loch. On the other side of the track, the mountains rose sheer to snow-covered summits. The track twisted and turned among the shore rocks. For some miles it was little more than a path for mules and pack animals rather than a wheeled vehicle of any sort: but then it widened a little, and they began to make slightly better speed. Then the sea opened out to the west where the bastions and turrents of blue islands floated: the fortresses of old gods on a serene horizon.

Dusk was beginning to fall when they finally approached their destination. A bay opened out ahead with a handful of houses scattered along its shores. At the far end of the shore could be seen

a large private house, perhaps even some sort of inn. It was still difficult to be sure, at that distance. They drove the truck straight to the door of this building: it seemed to be the only one in the hamlet which had not been burned and unroofed. There was very little fuel left, and already the engine was coughing from time to time with fuel starvation. But it had brought them from Inverlair in the early hours of the morning, and was no longer needed.

The interior of the inn was undamaged and the children quickly got a fire burning. They said the smoke would be unseen against the background of the high mountains, and anyway it would be dark quite soon now. And they found oil-lamps with which to light the little room they occupied, and even some canned food in the kitchens. Maxine said that it was a Militia hunting-lodge, but they only used it in the autumn. The royal party moved close around the fire, for as night fell it would begin to get very cold again.

In the last half hour of daylight, Maxine and Kelso went to research the prospect of getting over the mountain on foot. There was a high pass at the back of the inn, very steep and very rough. No wheeled vehicle could get over it. Nor would any party on foot, at least in winter weather, for the track was scarcely any more than a foot-path, very steep and swept with sheets of ice and sloping banks of rock. If the Militia had left a half-track mountain vehicle, of the sort used by their hunting parties, then they might well have got over the pass. But without one, there was no hope. And there was no half-track.

‘I am really sorry’, Maxine said. ‘Maybe if we had gone round the other way’.

Kelso said it did not matter. There was nothing any of them could do. By now, there would be search parties out for them. They

would track them as far as the turn-off, and then down the shores of the loch. They would find them by tomorrow morning, tomorrow afternoon at the latest. And would have taken them captive by the time darkness fell tomorrow.

Maxine said her children could hold them off for a bit, but Kelso said it did not matter. This would only delay things. He said Maxine and the children should get out tonight on foot. They might manage to take the truck back whence they had come for as long as the fuel lasted. Then they could try to walk the rest of the way, to the rail-line. If they could find shelter for the night they might manage to get aboard a train in the morning. Otherwise, there would be no hope for them either.

In the little inn the king sat at the blazing fire while the royal children and the queen slept in armchairs under the cover of Militia greatcoats. The young partisans had prepared them some food and some drink, and had then gone with Kelly to prospect the houses and utility buildings scattered throughout the settlement.

In the soft firerlight the king spoke of how the authorities had faked his trial, execution and death. He spoke quietly, for fear of waking his daughters. They had brought all the pressure to bear on him that they could. At one point during his captivity, they had even taken him to an evening in Edinburgh Castle. There had been a private dinner party. Fisher had been there, in his role as Archbishop of Canterbury. And of course his Dean, Hewlett Johnson. One of the country's top barristers, a Wykehamist called Pritt, was there. And Lords Beaverbrook and Rothermere too, though they did not speak to each other.

'And of course the Duke of Argyll', the king said wearily, 'though he had obviously renounced his title by then'.

‘Kelso said, ‘Why was he there?’

‘He had to be there’, the king said, ‘as Home Secretary’.

Fisher had wept continuously throughout the meal: but even so, he had urged the king to show a proper respect for history and legal precedent, and submit to a trial. Of course, he would have to recognise the court - there was not much point in having a court otherwise, was there! And of course he would have to agree in advance to plead guilty to whatever charges might be brought against him - it couldn't be the sort of court where the defendant had any sort of option as to how he might plead, after all!

The old king leaned forward in the firelight and said, ‘That was the deal they offered. I would plead guilty and they would sentence me to death. But I would be reprieved on the axeman's platform at the last moment and exiled’.

‘And you refused?’, Kelso said.

‘I refused’, the old man said. ‘They threatened to shoot the queen and the princesses one by one, but I still refused. Then they told us how they would fake the trial. They would soon get someone who looked a little like me, or could be made to look a little like me. Remember, nobody had seen me for two and a half years anyway. They could fill him full of drugs. They said an overdose of cortisone would make anybody suicidal. And in Westminster Hall, he could be kept quite a long way from the public, and with his back to them. They said it would not be difficult to fool people. Even the poor stand-in. They said they could take any old pauper off the street, or take anyone they wanted from one of their camps. They could tell him that he would be reprieved at the last moment. And by the time he was on the platform, of course, it would be too late. I imagine that is what they would have done with me’.

Kelso said, 'And then they were going to shoot you all in secret at Inverlair'.

'Before daybreak', the king said. 'If you had not come when you did, we would not have survived. They would have come back as quickly as possible and shot us down'.

Kelso said, 'I am afraid it has all been wasted effort. We can't get over the mountain without specialist transport. We need a half-track for snow conditions. We can never walk over in this snow. And we cannot go back, we have no fuel in the truck. Even if we did, we would run into them when they come to look for us. Tonight, we will be safe here. But sometime tomorrow they will come for us. Perhaps by fast patrol-boat, perhaps paratroopers by aircraft. Certainly, some of them will come down the track. We will not be able to fight them off for long'.

The king said it was a pity that so much effort had been wasted on behalf of his release. He asked that the queen and the princesses be left to sleep, and that they not be told of the attack they could expect in the morning. It would be better if they died without having had any warning of it. It would be kinder on them, this way, for they had had a dreadful time in the two and a half years since their arrest.

The king and Kelso stood at the door of the inn, looking out over the little bay on whose shores it sat. A few early stars were reflected in the water. There would be a moon later. They heard an aircraft, slow-flying somewhere in the vicinity. Then a plane showing no lights, cruised at a very low altitude up into the hills, following the line of the sea-loch.

The king said, 'I suppose they are beginning to look for us already'.

On the shore-line, Kelly and the three partisan children were returning from their search of the ruined houses and the outbuildings which were scattered along the shore. In the darkness, somehow, Kelly's American accent seemed more obvious, more prominent, than ever.

She said, 'You had better come and see what we have found. And you better come now. There isn't much time to waste'.