

Thirty-six.

Charlie watched the Militia truck move over the Lochy and disappear slowly in the distance. Something was troubling him, but he was unable to say exactly what. Morrison and Findlay had still to arrive from the airstrip. The local cop had gone to collect them, by car. It was a short trip, but it seemed a professional duty. When Morrison and Findlay arrived, they sensed the trouble. But Charlie said the truck would come back in an hour. That is what the girl in the cab had told him. And anyway, they had been ordered to go to Inverlair, wherever else they might go subsequently.

The Paramilitary truck led the way north, followed by the local inspector's car. In less than an hour they had reached the vicinity of Tulloch. A troop train coming up the line in the early hours of the morning had been derailed and shot-up. When it had come to a halt on its side, some partisans had opened fire with a machine-gun positioned at each end of a deep cutting. There had been considerable casualties among the troopers, and none apparent among the attacking force. One of the survivors said they had been children for the most part, and few in number, but members of one of the most notorious outlaw group in the whole north west. By the time day had broken properly, these children had disappeared into the forests and mountains.

In the ruins of the train, a number of Militia paramedics were working on wounded troopers, while others were being buried at the side of the line without ceremony. Able-bodied troopers, meanwhile, were digging-in around the site, for they could not expect to see reinforcements until tomorrow, and the men were terrified of coming under attack from the bandits again during the hours of darkness.

In the event, the children had not found it necessary to bring down the road bridge to Inverlair, which carried traffic to and from the lodge over the railway. So it was relatively easy to drive through the thick woods and deep snow for the house. One of the Paramilitary lads drove the truck, and Charlie and Fiona rode with him in the cab. The three Scottish policemen chose to keep each other's company in the following Riley. Perhaps they feared being overheard by their London colleagues.

'Perhaps they are discussing golf', Fiona said.

The truck swayed and dipped violently as it lurched and splashed through deep and dangerous potholes up towards the house. The driver said if they didn't arrive soon, they could expect to break a drive-shaft or axle: and then they would be unable to return to Fort William. Looking back, it was clear that the local inspector had already given up the attempt to reach the lodge by car. Their truck rolled on alone through the trees.

Fiona said, 'I don't like it. Something doesn't feel right'.

And indeed for a moment, there was in the woods an overpowering sense of evil.

Charlie said, 'Christ, don't say that. We can't turn back until we reach the lodge'.

Inverlair Lodge seemed perfectly normal at first sight. They found that the main door was open, and went in. On the left was the principal reception room, decorated and furnished like some Victorian lithograph. The walls were covered with the stuffed heads of stags, each with a commemorative plaque below it. The walls were also covered in tartan fabrics. In the kitchen the Paramilitary driver found an oil lamp, burning gently: but it was clear from its glass reservoir that it did not have long to remain alight.

In the giant fireplace, the remains of a wood fire were still glowing and there was still a tiny heat left in them. In the centre of the floor was a trapdoor, thrown back. Below it, a set of steps led down into the darkness. Charlie took the lamp and went down into the cellar, very carefully. Fiona came down after him. In the lamplight, it was possible to see that some small number of people had been held there, though it was not possible to say for how long. In one wall, shackles had been set, and some shovels and crowbars were stacked in a corner.

Charlie said, 'I don't like it. Let's get out of here quick'.

They returned to the principal room. A breeze was starting to build, and they could hear it beginning to whisper in the trees.

Charlie said, 'Where the fuck have Morrison and the other two gone?'

'I will go and look for them', Fiona said: but Charlie insisted that she stay with him.

'This is where they were', Charlie said, 'no doubt about it. And they were going to shoot them down there and then bury them. And set fire to the place on top of them. If they hadn't been rescued'.

From the window, they could see Morrison and the other two policemen trudging their way up the track, through the deep snow, towards the house. Charlie tried the phone but it was dead. A large map of the region was displayed above it. They studied it carefully.

Fiona stabbed a finger at the northern end of loch Treig and said, 'There. That's where we are'.

Charlie traced the railway line back into the mountains, towards Corroul and Rannoch.

'And that's how they came in', he said, 'they came by the railway line, either on foot or by train'.

Their eyes strayed across the map, without sense or direction. Then in the same split second, their eyes fell on the name Shona. On the coast.

Charlie said, 'Lamont trained there with special operations. We saw this name in the papers in the PRO'.

'And it was on the charts the police picked-up in the flat at Gorgie', Fiona said. 'It was the fallback position if they couldn't land cocaine at Easdale or Luing'.

'And Shona', Charlie said with absolute certainty, 'is where they are going to be picked up'.

They stared at the map, simultaneously tracking any route from Inverlair to Shona. They could hear the three policemen arrive at the front of the house, panting with the exertion of the walk and stamping their feet to free them of snow. Somewhere at the back of the house, the Paramilitary driver was screaming, and shouting that the bandits had murdered six Militia chaps, cut off their ears and stripped their clothes.

The traced a route from Inverlair to Roy Bridge and then Spean Bridge. With a hideous sense of simultaneous premonition, they arrived at the junction at the bridge over the river Lochy.

'Oh Christ', Charlie said, 'it was that lorry this morning. We have missed them'.

Now they traced the routes from the Lochy Bridge to Shona. A road ran from the far end of Loch Sheil via Corran and Strontian to Salen. Then on to Acharacle and Ardmorlich: thereafter, it was a matter of finding a boat.

A second route ran down the south shore of loch Ailort, as far as a hamlet called Glenuig. But the road seemed to be little better than a track: and after the hamlet, there was nothing but a steep and

trackless shoulder of mountain, which would be impassable in winter weather.

Charlie said, 'It's the only way we can get there. Let's get after them. They have no way out. We've got them'.

Morrison and the lads had gone round the back to look at the bodies of the Militia troopers who had been mutilated, and who had had their boots and tunics stolen. The wind was whispering in the trees now, as if a conspiracy were in the vicinity. The sky was heavy with snow, though it had not yet started to fall. There was a dreadful sense of impending disaster about the house and its immediate vicinity.

Fiona said, 'Let's get out of here now. I don't like it'.

Charlie said, 'We can start at first light, maybe earlier. We can be down at Shona by noon tomorrow'.

'We've got them', Fiona said.

'Yes', Charlie said, 'we've got them at last'.