

Thirty-eight.

They stayed overnight in a wintry hotel in the heart of Fort William, and asked to be called at six. Morrison and Findlay spent the evening drinking in the town's pubs, and when these pubs closed they returned to the hotel and demanded residents' rights at the bar, which they intended to exercise for as long as they were willing and able to stand and drink at it.

They finished drinking, and practising their golf swings and fly-casting techniques, by no later than five in the morning, and by six appeared to be fully recovered from the recreational exertions of the previous night. Findlay had two full breakfasts and looked as if he might manage a third, but Morrison asked him to recall that he was representing the force, and had high standards to observe and set. Morrison then asked for, and was given, a second breakfast for himself.

Morrison then demanded the immediate use of two cars, but the local police said that none was available. Morrison, however, was not a man to overlook the value of the threat of force on country bumkins such as he deemed his local colleagues to be. A phone call to his headquarters in Edinburgh was made.

After the call, Morrison said, 'We're closing in on them fast now. We got the Edinburgh MP Jack last night'.

'Alive?'

'Not any more', Morrison said.

Edinburgh then called local police headquarters in Inverness, and the order was passed to Fort William that two cars be made available at once, and for as long as necessary, to the visiting

officers from London and Edinburgh. But the local inspector insisted that no car was available, far less two.

‘I saw two cars out the back!’, Findlay cried.

‘They’re broken’, the inspector said, ‘and you’re not getting them anyway’.

‘Leave this to me’, Fiona said: and she and the Fort William inspector repaired for some minutes to his office.

They left the town a little after seven in the pair of Rileys belonging to the local constabulary. But the local police could not - or would not - supply fuel for both legs of the journey; there might be a pump with petrol at Salen, or there might not. And if there was not, then the visiting officers would be in trouble, for without fuel in the heart of the country’s largest hunting preserve, they were in serious danger - from the weather, from the wild animals which had been introduced there, and from the murderous young bandit-gangs with which the preserves were said to teem.

When they left it was still dark, but by the time they were at the end of loch Eil the day was beginning to break. And it was showing signs of snowing as well, though no more than a few lazy flakes drifted from a leaden sky by way of warning. Then the road narrowed to a single-track route from the days of stage and coach, and the black Rileys drove slowly down the length of loch Linnhe, nose to tail.

After Corran, the road became worse than ever and progress slowed to a crawl. It had still not started to snow, but the snow could not hold off for ever. And when their route left the seashore and started to climb into the interior, it did indeed begin to snow: large, lazy flakes which gave promise of snowdrifts in the near future.

At Strontian they stopped for a conference. Morrison and Findlay moved into the back of Charlie's car; for a moment, Charlie could have sworn he had smelt drink. But perhaps it was no more than the result of the previous night, of course. Morrison asked for the map and studied it gloomily.

He said, 'They could be anywhere. They could have gone to this place Lochaline. Or they could have gone right on to Kilchoan. I never knew Scotland was so big'.

'It's Shona', Fiona said.

Findlay said, 'Why would they go to Shona?'

It was a fair question. It hardly seemed a fair answer for Charlie to say that he had seen a document in an archive in London which had mentioned Shona as a training camp ten years earlier. Or that there had been a vague and pencilled reference to Shona on a nautical chart found in a flat in Edinburgh.

But that was all there was to say; and he said it.

Findlay said, 'Is that all we have? You must be joking. I think we should go back and leave all this to the naval patrol'.

But they drove on, in their little black convoy. The world now seemed absolutely empty of human life. All the roadsigns had been removed and all roadside houses and cottages had been destroyed. They drove half the length of loch Sunart without seeing a living creature, human or otherwise. At Salen, they stopped for another conference. Morrison and Findlay had indeed been drinking, for by now they were getting drunk again. Findlay wanted to stop in the village and visit a hotel in the hope of finding more drink there. But the hotel had been burned, and Findlay began to whine in a maudlin way that they were getting far from civilisation, and where would they spend the night in this hungry, god-forsaken wilderness?

Morrison said that there might be drink to be had in the next village: and they left the seashore and drove up over the low pass that soon brought them down to the western end of loch Sheil and the village of Acharacle. A dim lamp burned in a window below a hand-painted sign which said 'Hotel'. It would be dark in an hour, if not less. Again they studied the map. One track led to Ardtoe. A second led round to the head of loch Moidart. And a third led to the road-end at the mouth of the river Shiel.

They took this last road, and drove to its end. Water seemed to occupy three sides of the universe. On a tiny islet, the gaunt ruins of a castle tilted, as if it had been there for centuries. On the other side of the water, the dense trees of Shona could be seen.

Charlie said, 'We have been beaten by the dark. But they are here somewhere. We are very near. We will get them tomorrow'.

They returned to Acharacle. They lodged at the hotel: an inn from the previous century with walls three feet thick, tiny windows, low ceilings and a floor of beaten earth. They found a reception room with a fire banked with what seemed to be earth too. After an immensity of time, a crone made herself known to them. She said there was venison or whisky: or both, if that was more to their taste. But there was nothing else at all, in the way of food: or drink.

There was only one room for guests in the middle of winter. The young lady would have it. The men would have to sleep at the fire.

Morrison said, 'We're looking for a king'.

'You're not the first to come looking for a king down this way', the crone said.

When she went to fetch whisky, and perhaps venison, Morrison asked what she had meant by that; from his tone, he was

preparing for an arrest, should the evidence merit it. But nobody knew what the crone had meant, and perhaps it didn't matter anyway. Morrison and Findlay then went to check the inn's single bedroom: as if they expected to find arrestable evidence of infamy within it.

When the crone came back, Fiona asked if there were any boats left in the district. But the crone said that they had all been destroyed, and if the authorities wanted boats they took them in by sea, and took them back by sea when they had finished with them.

'I just have one more question', Fiona said. 'Does the name Baramore mean anything to you?'

It was a wild, desperate shot: but it hit home at once.

'The crone said, 'Yes, of course, it's a house on Shona'.

Fiona showed their map to the crone, who pointed without hesitation to the middle of the north shore of the island, where a spit of land jutted out into a narrow neck of water.

'There', she said.

When she had gone away, Charlie said, 'How did you persuade them to give us the cars at Fort William, by the way?'

'Remember Johnson's house?', Fiona said. 'The cocaine we got there?'

Charlie said, 'You must be joking!'

'Not at all', she said, very cool. 'He said he would hand it over at the first opportunity. Anyway, without the cars we would never have got here. Tomorrow, we can go to Baramore. That's where they think they are going to be picked up'.

'Yes, we'll get them tomorrow', Charlie said. 'They can't get away now'.