

CHAPTER ONE

August 2013

The early-morning sun filtered through tall pine trees, warming patches of grass that were still green and lush, encouraging some rabbits to come out and feed. Cobwebs sparkled against the dark green bushes, momentarily transformed as their dewdrops were caught in rays of sunlight. Somewhere, hidden beneath the protective shrubbery, a moulting blackbird whistled quietly. It was not yet time to emerge; flight feathers were still to grow back and the bird sensed that it was easy meat for any predators wheeling high above the treetops.

Outside the perimeters of this wood the ground sloped away to a valley full of long tawny grasses and creamy meadowsweet, its scent wafting upwards as the night's dampness evaporated in a faint swirl of mist. A path that was regularly tramped by backpackers to test their stamina against the rigours of the West Highland Way wound around the edge of the field, disappearing into the darkening depths of the

forest. But there was no human presence to be seen, no solitary figure beginning a hopeful route that would end in the Scottish Highlands.

As the sun rose higher, a trio of buzzards flew above the pines, catching the thermals, their mews faint in the still cold air. The rabbits beneath the trees cropped and hopped, heads down, ears twitching as clouds of midges began to dance against beams of light slanting between the trees. And, as though a clarion call to this new August morning was necessary, a robin opened his throat and trilled, a joyous song that resounded through the woodlands.

There was nothing to signify imminent disaster, no sudden silence presaging a momentous event.

The earth shook with a boom as the bomb exploded, splitting tree trunks and throwing every living creature skywards, a malevolent cloud billowing above the wood, casting debris hundreds of yards away.

The noise of the explosion was over in seconds, but the damage would last for decades. Fallen trees lay in shattered heaps, their pale flesh ripped open and exposed, while flames licked hungrily at any dry patches of foliage.

And tossed aside, its tiny beak still open, the robin lay motionless on the narrow pathway, all but one of its fires extinguished for ever.

CHAPTER TWO

Detective Superintendent William Lorimer woke with a start. For a few moments he was uncertain where he was: shouldn't the light be coming from the window beyond the foot of their bed? Realisation crept in as he blinked away the last dregs of sleep, turning his head to see the sun streaming in through the big window to his left: he was home again, back in Glasgow. The clock on Maggie's bedside table registered six thirty. This time tomorrow he would be back at work, preparing for the first meeting of the day, but for now he could bask in the knowledge that it was Sunday morning and the day was theirs to spend as they liked.

Lorimer slipped his hand on to the empty space beside him. It was still warm. No doubt Maggie had gone downstairs to feed Chancer, their ginger tomcat, and would return to snuggle in beside him soon. Closing his eyes again, he yawned, stretched, then turned on to his side, feeling the ache in his legs from that last climb up Ben Mhor.

It wasn't hard in this half-awake, half-asleep state to conjure up the memories of these last two weeks in Mull. They had sat often enough outside the cottage door on the old moss-covered bench, mugs of coffee clutched in their hands, staring out across Fishnish Bay and the Sound of Mull to the mainland hills of Loch Aline, the scent of bog myrtle filling the air. A patch of brightness seemed to shine on those distant hills: shadows chasing sunlight, or a freshly cut wheat field glowing under the August skies. They'd watched countless yachts scudding up the Sound, racing towards the port of Tobermory, colourful spinnakers ballooning, catching the wind to speed them on their way.

Most days they had seen the buzzards, heard them mewling overhead, and Lorimer had listened to the melodies from the smaller birds, training his high-definition binoculars on the least little movement, too often foiled by the plentiful foliage. Reed warblers were there, he knew, and willow warblers too, but telling them apart took an expert eye. And of course there had been the sea eagles, Mull's celebrated birds of prey, that attracted twitchers and bird lovers from all parts of the world. They had been on their way to Calgary Bay when one had soared, skimming the treetops, causing them to stop the car and get out as quickly as they could to watch it. No need for binoculars that day; the huge bird was flying so low that Lorimer had felt he could almost reach out and touch it, the awesome silence so complete that he imagined the whispering wind ruffling its tail feathers.

‘Cup of tea?’

Maggie was standing there by the bed, a tray in her hands with two mugs.

Lorimer sat up slowly. ‘Thanks. Almost asleep again,’ he murmured apologetically, reaching out for the tea and already regretting the wakefulness that dispelled his vision of green hills and quiet sandy bays where the blue waters stretched as far as the eye could see.

‘Any thoughts on what you’d like to do today?’ he asked as Maggie slid in beside him.

‘Well I’ve just stuck on a load of washing and we’ll need to get a pile of groceries, but that shouldn’t take all day. What had you in mind?’

Lorimer opened his mouth to reply, but the peremptory ring of the telephone made him close it again in a thin line of disappointment as he reached for the handset at his side of the bed. Behind his back he heard Maggie’s sigh of resignation. A phone call this early on a Sunday morning meant only one thing: chances were she’d be grocery shopping alone.

Anyone watching the detective superintendent at that moment would have seen the expression in his blue eyes harden, the knuckles clutching the handset whiten as he listened to the voice on the other end of the line.

‘Why me?’ he said at last, then stifled a sigh and nodded as the answer came.

‘Right.’ He rose from his sitting position on the edge of

the bed, listened some more, nodding again before clicking the off button.

‘No time for breakfast?’ Maggie’s voice held just a hint of wistfulness tempered by long years of being left alone at home while he rushed to the scene of some crime or other. ‘What is it this time? A sudden death?’

Lorimer looked at her and opened his mouth as if to reveal the substance of the short conversation that had just taken place, then closed it again.

‘Need to get a move on. Don’t know when I’ll be in.’

Maggie followed him with her eyes as he dressed hurriedly, pulling fresh linen from the chest of drawers and a clean shirt from his side of the wardrobe. This was something else she was used to: not being told what was going on, especially at the start of a new case. Later, perhaps much later when they were in bed once more, he might tell her what had happened. Or not. The details of his work could be guaranteed to rob sleep from the most innocent of minds, and Maggie also knew better than to ask idle questions.

In less than five minutes he was washed, dressed, out the door and heading towards the Lexus, a bottle of water clutched in his hand, leaving Maggie Lorimer to contemplate the day ahead.

The journey to Drymen was punctuated by several vain attempts to clear the fly-strewn windscreen, the wipers’ blades leaving smears across Lorimer’s vision. There were

two options on the route to take: he could either drive straight down the Boulevard and through Balloch, or cut off at Clydebank and head past Milngavie, taking the twisting road across the moors. As the roundabout approached, Lorimer turned the big car to face the uphill slope to Hardgate village. It would be the slower option, but, he reminded himself, this was still supposed to be his holiday, so he might as well enjoy the drive. Had it not been for the thought of what awaited him, it might have been a perfect morning.

As he left the city behind, Lorimer noticed the sheep grazing on the flanks of the hillsides. The lambs were bigger now, their mothers trimmer creatures since the annual shearing. For a moment he recalled the sound of hundreds of animals baaing, and the shepherd's high-pitched whistle as the sheepdogs rounded them up on the hillside above the cottage in Mull, white bodies running, running, running towards Corry Farm, where the sheep pens and the shearers awaited them.

When the car approached a distinctive stand of tall conifers, their graceful fronds arranged in scalloped skirts of green, Lorimer lifted his head in expectation. Queen's View, it was called, and as he turned the corner, the rolling landscape emerged in all its regal splendour. To his left, Stockiemuir was purple with heather, the bracken changing to the colour of a grouse's wing; ahead, the mountains peaked against a sky of perfect blue, stirring the desire to

climb them once again. *One day soon*, he promised himself, nodding to the bens on his right as the car took the twisting slope through the glens and down towards the wooded dells below.

Even The Cobbler could be seen in the clear air, its anvil peak emerging for an instant between trees and hills as he drove on. It was on mornings like this that he asked himself just what he was doing. Why did he spend his life rushing to the aftermath of someone else's destruction? On such a morning he should be toting a rucksack and heading for one of the Munros that were still beckoning to be discovered, not speeding along at the beck and call of his paymasters. But a different sense of duty had been instilled into him long since, and Detective Superintendent Lorimer could only breathe a light sigh of regret as he passed the entrance to the village of Drymen and headed towards the scene of crime.

It was worse than he could ever have imagined.

Even from the roadside, where a line of police cars was parked, Lorimer could see the devastation. Plumes of smoke and flames still rose from the heaps of broken trees, and as he emerged from the Lexus, his skin was immediately touched by flakes of ash drifting in the air. The smell of burning wood was overpowering, and he could hear the occasional crackle and hiss of fire beneath the whooshing sound from the firemen's hoses as arcs of water were

trained into the heart of the inferno. His eyes took in the gap in the hedge where the fire engines had broken through to reach the narrow walkers' path, and the tyre marks on the verge. It would be replanted, no doubt, but the burning trees would leave a scar that would take far longer to heal.

'Detective Superintendent Lorimer? Martin Pinder.' The uniformed chief inspector was suddenly at his side, hand outstretched. Lorimer took it, feeling the firm once up and down as the officer motioned them to turn away from the direction of the cinders. 'Sorry to call you out, but as I said, we needed someone to front this. And your name came up.'

'But isn't this a local matter?' Lorimer asked. 'We're in the district of Stirling, surely?'

Pinder shook his head. 'It's bigger than you might imagine,' he began. Walking Lorimer a few paces away from the line of cars, he dropped his voice. 'And there is intelligence to suggest that it may have a much wider remit.'

'Oh?' Lorimer was suddenly curious. The telephone call had mentioned an explosion, the immediate need for a senior officer from Police Scotland and a request to keep the lid on things, but nothing more.

'You said *intelligence*.' He frowned. 'You mean Special Branch?'

Pinder nodded. 'I've been charged with giving you this

information, sir. And doubtless your counter terrorism unit will already be involved.’ He licked his lips, hesitating, and Lorimer could see the anxiety in the man’s grey eyes.

‘We are given to believe that this is just a trial run.’ Pinder motioned to the fire behind them.

‘A trial run,’ Lorimer said slowly. ‘A trial run for what?’

Pinder gave a sigh and raised his eyebrows.

‘The Glasgow Commonwealth Games.’

Lorimer looked at the man in disbelief, but Pinder’s face was all seriousness.

‘That’s almost a year away. Why do they think . . .?’

‘Haven’t been told that. Someone further up the chain of command will know.’ Pinder shrugged. ‘Perhaps you’ll be told once you liaise with Counter Terrorism.’

Lorimer turned to take in the scene of the explosion once more, seeing for the first time the enormous area of burning countryside and trying to transfer it in his mind’s eye to the newly built village and arenas in Glasgow’s East End. He blinked suddenly at the very notion of carnage on such a vast scale.

‘We can’t let it happen,’ Pinder said quietly, watching the tall man’s face.

Lorimer gazed across the fields to the line of rounded hills that were the Campsies. Glasgow lay beyond, snug in the Clyde valley; on this Sunday morning its citizens remained oblivious to the danger posed by whatever fanatic had ruined this bit of tranquil landscape. He had

asked why the local cops hadn't taken this one on, and now he understood: the threat to next year's Commonwealth Games was something too big for that. And since the various police forces in Scotland had merged into one national force, Detective Superintendent William Lorimer might be called to any part of the country.

'The press will want statements,' Pinder said, breaking into Lorimer's thoughts. 'It's still an ongoing investigation. Don't we just love that phrase!' He gave a short, hard laugh. 'And there is no loss of life, so we can try for a positive slant on that, at least.'

'They'll speculate,' Lorimer told him. 'You know that's what they do.'

Pinder touched the detective superintendent's arm, nodding towards the figures milling around on the fringes of the fire. 'Apart from you and me, there is not a single person here who has been told about the background to this event. So unless the press leap to that conclusion by dint of their own imagination, any leak can only come from us.'

When Lorimer turned to face him, the uniformed officer was struck by the taller man's penetrating blue gaze. For a long moment they stared at one another, until Pinder looked away, feeling a sense of discomfort mixed with the certainty that he would follow this man wherever he might lead.

Wouldn't like to be across the table from him in an interview

room, he was to tell his wife later that day. But there on that lonely stretch of country road, Martin Pinder had an inkling why it was that the powers on high had called on Detective Superintendent William Lorimer to oversee this particular incident.

He was no stranger to the big hall in Pitt Street, once Strathclyde Police Headquarters; it was the place he had briefly hung his hat when heading up the former Serious Crime Squad. Nor was he unused to sitting at this very table, peering down at the crowd of newspaper reporters thronging the hall. It was scarcely midday, and yet here they all were, eager for a statement from the man whose face had often graced their broadsheets as they reported on the various crimes to blot their fair city.

The statement had been prepared by himself and Martin Pinder, sitting in the Lexus at the scene of the explosion. To minimise the incident would give rise to the notion that something was being hidden, and that was a path they didn't want any inquisitive journalist to go down. On the other hand, seeing a senior officer like Lorimer might rouse their curiosity further. In the end, they had decided to express outrage at the idiocy of whoever had planted the bomb and emphasise the sheer luck that nobody had been hurt.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' Lorimer began, pausing as the babble of voices hushed and every pair of eyes turned

towards him. 'This morning around five a.m. there was a large explosion in a wood close to the village of Drymen. Firefighters were immediately called to the scene and have extinguished the ensuing blaze.' He looked up, scanning the upturned faces, wondering at the thoughts buzzing inside their heads. 'We are grateful that, despite the proximity to the West Highland Way, there was no loss of life, but it is with regret that I have to announce that this section of the famous walk has been closed until the damage to the woodland has been cleared. There is an ongoing inquiry into the exact nature of the explosion, but at present we are working on the assumption that it was caused by some sort of home-made device.'

He stopped for a moment to let the murmuring break out. *Plant the idea of daft wee laddies messing about in the woods*, Pinder had suggested. *A prank that went wrong*. Lorimer had raised his eyebrows at that, but so far it seemed to be working.

'The main road should be accessible later today and diversion signs have been put in place until then. If you have been listening, you will know that the radio stations are issuing regular bulletins to that effect,' Lorimer told them, managing a smile.

He folded his hands and nodded, the signal for a forest of hands to be raised.

'Any sign that it's terrorist activity?'

Right off, the question he had expected.

Lorimer's smile broadened. 'It has all the hallmarks of a home-made bomb,' he reiterated. 'Something that anyone could get off the internet.'

'You think it was done by kids?' someone else demanded.

'There were no witnesses to whoever planted the explosive device,' Lorimer said, adopting a bored tone, as though he had explained this several times already. 'So we cannot rule out any particular age group.'

'But it might have been?' the same voice persisted.

'It would be entirely wrong for me to point a finger at the young people in the community,' Lorimer said blandly, knowing full well that they were scribbling down that very thing as he uttered the words, and mentally apologising to any computer-geeky schoolboys in Drymen.

'How much damage has been done?' one female reporter wanted to know. Lorimer told them, giving as many statistics as would satisfy a readership hungry for facts.

What he did not tell them was the way the clouds of ash had settled on his hair, the whiff of burning birds and animals discernible through the acrid smell carried on the morning breeze. Nor did he describe the scar on the hillside, a mass of blackened tree trunks instead of the once graceful outline of pines fringing pale skies to the west. And there was certainly no mention of any further threat to the good citizens of Stirlingshire or their near neighbours in the city of Glasgow.