

October 1972

# DAY ONE

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All cities are riddled with crime. It comes with the territory. Gather enough people together in one place and malignancy is guaranteed to manifest in some form or other. It's the nature of the beast. In the awareness of the citizens the condition usually lies dormant. The preoccupations of our daily lives obscure any dramatic sense of threat. It's only intermittently (when, say, an Ibrox disaster occurs or a Bible John hits the front pages) that people may focus on how close to random risk they have been living. They can sometimes experience a renewed awareness that a kind of ubiquitous, threatening strangeness is haunting the edges of apparent normalcy. They realise again how thin the membrane is on which we walk, liable to fall through at any moment into darker places. They may wonder if they are as safe as they thought they were.

Commander Robert Frederick of the Glasgow Crime Squad was thinking of these things. He was aware of a potential risk that his city might be about to have that comfortable sense of security disturbed. A man called Bobby Carter had disappeared. His family had that afternoon

informed the police that he hadn't been home for the past two days. This in itself, as far as Frederick and his squad were concerned, wasn't exactly a cause for deep mourning. Bobby Carter was a career criminal. Or rather, a venally clever lawyer who didn't so much rub shoulders with criminals as steep in the same polluted bathwater as them. Well educated and from a decent family, Carter had chosen to spend his professional life protecting and guiding the scum of Frederick's particular patch of earth. His job was to move dirty money around, putting it out of reach of the taxman. Cash was made clean by buying out law-abiding and fruitful businesses, and it was Carter's remit to ensure that the contract always favoured buyer rather than seller.

As he sat staring across his obsessively tidy desk, what worried the Commander was the vacuum Carter's disappearance might create in the Glasgow criminal fraternity and the violent forces that might rush in to fill it. Carter was known to be Cam Colvin's right-hand man, one of the few he trusted. Colvin's was a name to instil fear, a reputation stretching back to teenage years when he had strode into a surgery demanding to see the doctor. Asked what the problem was, he had said nothing, instead turning round to show the receptionist the blade jutting out from between his shoulders. Cam Colvin decidedly wasn't a man to be toyed with or crossed, which meant that the implications of Carter's vanishing act might reverberate far beyond gangland and affect the greater, wholly innocent population.

The Commander's thoughts were interrupted by a knock

at the door. Without waiting to be asked, Detective Sergeant Bob Lilley entered, closing the door after him.

‘What’s the thinking?’ the Commander enquired.

Lilley took a deep breath. ‘One view is, here’s hoping he’s been abducted by aliens and taken to another galaxy.’

‘Who said that?’

‘The new boy.’

‘Laidlaw?’ The Commander watched Lilley nod. ‘Actually, I wanted to talk to you about him.’

‘Jack Laidlaw is not an unknown quantity, sir. His reputation has always preceded him, which I’m guessing is why we’ve been landed with him. Who has he rubbed up the wrong way this month?’

‘Who’s left?’ Frederick shifted in his chair. ‘But the same message keeps coming through – he’s good at the job, seems to have a sixth sense for what’s happening on the streets.’

‘I sense a “but” in the offing.’

‘Only insofar as he needs careful handling if we’re to get the best out of him.’

‘I’m not much of a one for babysitting, sir.’

‘It’s just for a week or two, until he gets to know our ways.’

Lilley considered for a moment before nodding his agreement. Frederick allowed himself to relax a little.

‘I’ll see you at Ben Finlay’s drinks tonight?’

‘Don’t you worry, sir – I want to make sure the bugger really is retiring this time.’

‘See to it that Laidlaw’s there, too. Let the team get the measure of him.’

‘Finlay’s already invited him. Seems they’re old friends. That’s a black mark against our new recruit right there.’ Lilley paused. ‘I’m assuming there’s no news of Bobby Carter then?’

‘I should be asking *you* that.’

‘We’ve been to talk to the family. Checked his office in town. They waited a couple of days before phoning us because it’s not unknown for him to take a deep dive occasionally.’

‘Meaning?’

‘A night at the casino followed by a day sleeping it off wherever he ends up.’

‘But not on this occasion?’

‘No establishment on our radar claims to have had his business.’

‘Spoken to his associates yet?’

‘I’m still hopeful that won’t be necessary, because once we’ve had words with Cam Colvin, we’ll have to do the same with the opposing teams.’

‘Meaning John Rhodes and Matt Mason.’ The Commander nodded slowly. ‘Softly softly, Bob, just like the TV show.’

‘But with a bit more realism, eh, sir?’ Lilley turned to leave.

‘Eyes on Jack Laidlaw, Bob. I want him inside the tent, as Lyndon Johnson says – if you take my meaning.’

Lilley nodded again and was gone, leaving his boss to recommence his staring contest with the closed door. Abducted by aliens was certainly a better outcome than some he could think of.