

# THE FIRE TREE

## CHAPTER 2

Alex Brennan cried out in his sleep. His head thrashed first to one side, then to the other as he gasped and choked to say the words his sleeping body would not permit. After a few moments, he seemed to calm.

On the nightstand by his bed, stood a candle in its holder, its flame not long extinguished. The pool of hot wax around its wick bulged precariously around the brim of the candle, threatening to spill over. It hung there, like a bird on a cliff unsure about taking its first flight, before gradually solidifying, its escape to join the rolling waves of wax down its shaft, thwarted.

Next to the candle was a silver cloak clasp in the shape of a bird's claw, an antler-hilted knife in a leather cover, that was almost black with age, a brass uniform button and miniature tinder box, the size of an adult thumb.

The owner of these objects stirred, again, his body momentarily tensing in the motion of a person straining against something, before slowly relaxing and resuming sleep.

Presently, however, he began to whimper. Soon after, he cried out, again. The words were incoherent and babbled, tumbling from his lips with urgency and desperation.

He arched his back and clenched his teeth, as if trying to stifle sudden pain. His hand rose to his neck, clawing at the sweat soaked collar of his nightshirt. He had already kicked his blanket down to his knees and now he flailed his legs, as if hurriedly walking on the spot. The blanket eventually tumbled to the floor in a heap on top of his kilt.

All at once, he became calm and his body relaxed, a smile flooding to his lips. He could hear a vague roaring sound. The noise of a waterfall? He strained his ears, in his dream, to hear. No, it wasn't the sound of a waterfall. It was the sound of flames. Something was burning, but he couldn't tell what was on fire. Whatever it was, it was close by, not far from the window.

Alex became vaguely aware that he was asleep. He tried to open his eyes and wake up, but his lids were too heavy. Hanging midway between sleep and wakefulness, his smile widened. He could see the glow of the flames dancing on the wall. In the real world, his brow creased as he studied the flames in his dream. They were friendly flames. They were good flames.

He sighed a long, heartfelt sigh and returned to a deep, tranquil sleep.

In the hallway, beyond the door to his room, the Inn Keeper stopped, his leg frozen in mid stride. His candle, which had been flickering and swaying precariously, as if it had caught a hidden draft, suddenly began to burn steadily again, its flame once more rising, serenely, straight up.

The Inn Keeper, a kindly old man with the weathered, salt-scoured face of a sailor, listened intently for a few moments, cocking his head this way and that. Satisfied that his guest was no longer in any kind of distress, he slowly turned around and crept back to his own room. With the practised stealth of a smuggler, he silently lifted the latch. A few soundless steps later, the door was closed and he was carefully and gently climbing back into bed.

His wife, alerted only by her inexplicable awareness of his presence, opened her eyes and peered out at him from under the blankets. As the candle flame wafted and swayed, throwing its crazy lengthening and shortening shadows across the walls and ceiling, he spied a questioning expression on her face. He shrugged his shoulders, pursed his lips and rocked his head from side to side in a gesture of cluelessness. His wife smiled a weak wistful smile and shook her head, sadly.

"He's a good man.", his wife said, before yawning and falling back to sleep.

The Inn Keeper laid awake for a while, listening to the wind and rain outside. An owl hooted, bad temperedly, somewhere in the bright moonlit night. Further up the valley a fox barked, softly, as if in reply. Straining his ears, he could hear the gurgling of the little waterfall at the foot of the valley wall, to the West. Across the yard, the handle on the winch, atop the well, began to squeak as the wind gusted and caught its dangling rope.

The Inn Keeper leaned up on his elbow and blew out the candle on the bedside stand. It extinguished with a little flutter and he watched the glowing red tip of the wick appear to hover in the air for a few moments, before it winked out.

Leaning back into the pillows, he looked up at the wall, studying the constantly changing patterns thrown by the moonlight shining through the rain on the window pane. The light was, at one moment, pale yellow, and then – the next – a ghostly white.

As he yielded to sleep, his eyelids flickered and reopened a couple of times, before finally closing. His lips began to form a smile as he began to hear the soft, oddly comforting crackling of a fire. Now, in his sleep, he could see the fire on the wall. A friendly patchwork of yellow, orange and red flames was dancing and shimmering from floor to ceiling.

The stranger, across the hall, had brought a warmth to the inn since his arrival a few nights ago. A feeling of peace and tranquillity. A feeling of warmth.

Next to the Inn Keeper, his sleeping wife shared his smile, and gave a little sigh at the beauty of the flames.