

# THE FIRE TREE

## CHAPTER 5

Alex Brennan went to the window of his room. Drawing aside the curtain, he peered up at the sun. He did a quick mental calculation and decided that the time was around Ten O' Clock. His brows furrowed and he pursed his lips. He had not intended to sleep so late.

He scanned down the road, along the short level section that swept past the Inn and into the long curve that disappeared into the forest. Then he scanned the opposite direction, up the shallow rise and then up the long climb, into the far distance, to the top of the hill.

There was no sign of anybody. The road was deserted. He knew, for sure, that anybody on their way from Perth to Fort William would have to pass this way. There were only six routes in Scotland that were more than just mud tracks and this was one of them. He was happy to wait a while and bide his time.

He dressed quickly and strode to the door. Gently lifting the latch, taking great care not to make any noise, he slowly opened the door. There was no sound from the hall, outside. Alex waited for several seconds and then poked his head out, looking both ways. There was nobody there. He paused, listening intently. All he could hear was the clanking of a spoon against a metal pan, downstairs in the kitchen. He sniffed the air. Somebody was making porridge. It smelled delicious. His mouth began to water as he caught the vague whiff of honey and nutmeg.

Alex straightened his kilt, adjusted his shirt and ran his fingers through his hair. Feeling reasonably presentable, he descended the stairs. As he came around the narrow turn, half way down, he could hear the Inn Keeper, Hamish Pottle, in the public bar, sweeping with a coarse brush. Alex turned right and took the few paces to the door of the bar, tentatively standing on the threshold. Hamish saw him and nodded, cheerfully, reaching to tip an invisible cap to him.

Alex stepped in and glanced around the bar, taking in the decorative objects on the shelves with their indisputably maritime theme. He knew that Hamish had spent most of his life at sea and that these objects - including compasses, spyglasses and pieces of rigging - were, therefore, all the real thing rather than mere replicas.

The Inn Keeper went back to his sweeping, whistling and humming as he worked and, occasionally, throwing in a few impromptu dance steps in time to the tune.

Alex' gaze followed the line of little triangular flags that stretched from behind the bar, up to the ceiling. Obviously, these had once flown above the deck of a ship. Unusually, he noted, the ceiling was composed of a series of varnished wooden panels, set in a frame of thin wooden beams. This was a form of decoration a little ostentatious for such a venue, he thought.

Hamish did not pause in his sweeping, but Alex could feel his attention on him and felt himself being watched from the corner of an eye. Alex returned his gaze to ground level and, almost imperceptibly, Hamish appeared to relax.

If the ceiling panels were to be subjected to closer scrutiny, at arm's length, one or two of the panels would be seen to be slightly worn along their edges. From the outside of the inn there was nothing unusual about its construction, but – if the heights of the two interior floors were to be carefully with a pole – there would be some vertical distance found missing. This was accounted for by the crawl space hidden between the two floors.

Hamish Pottle was, in all general respects, a wholly law-abiding citizen, but was usually in possession of a few casks of spirits (in his "unofficial loft") that didn't have the red crown of the King's mark burned into their lids to show that customs duty had been paid! His continued connections with seafarers, from his past, meant that he still had acquaintance with a few smugglers, here and there. The temptations that this entailed had proven irresistible to him.

Alex bade farewell to Hamish, who continued diligently sweeping, and walked across the corridor into the kitchen. As he opened the door, the steam and heat hit him. It was like a wall of sweltering dampness.

Caitlan, the Inn Keeper's wife, turned to greet him, wiping her hands on her apron: "A bonnie morn' to you," she enthused, "I hope you slept well, Sir?" She felt a stab of guilt, as she knew that he suffered from nightmares.

"I slept wonderfully," he replied, "The feather mattress makes it feel as if I am sleeping on a cloud!"

Caitlan smiled and gave a little chuckle, "Well, your silver bought you the good room with the best bed. Don't go spreading the word about your mattress to the other folk sleeping atop bags of straw!". Alex joined in her laughter

"I have to say," Caitlan declared, "That it's been a long while since we've had so many logs split and stacked. Your skill with an axe is impressive! So is the enthusiasm you apply to using it!"

"I... I've...", Alex stumbled and hesitated, awkwardly. "I have things... Events..."; He shrugged his shoulders in exasperation, "Stuff that I would rather not remember. Things from my time abroad. They are quickest forgotten if I put my back into something to distract myself."

Caitlan nodded. Her expression was sympathetic and concerned. She decided that not saying anything further was the best way she could help.

Submerging her ladle into the bubbling, churning mass of porridge, she scooped up a generous portion and delivered it to a bowl in her other hand. Alex Brennan took the bowl from her, as she held it out, and then accepted several generous spoons of milk, to cool it down.

"You'll only need to go a few miles down the road, South towards Stirling, and they'll be putting salt onto your porridge. Unlike them, with their

warmer weather," She winked, conspiratorially, "We know what real Winters are about!"

They both laughed.

"On that basis," Alex retorted, mentally estimating Stirling to be only half a day's ride away, "You'll be regarding London as sharing the same weather as the West Indies?"

"Well," Caitlan replied, "I am told they have streets paved with gold, down there in London! I am presuming they have a golden sun to match. No sense in our Good King James squandering his time in the wind and rain, up here, when he can sprawl out on a lawn, trimmed short by servants with scissors," She motioned in the air with little snipping actions, "And soak up all that sunshine!"

They both laughed, again, heartily. Caitlan Pottle turned, as she heard - from the doorway behind them - her husband's laugh boosting the volume of their own.

"I fear that Good King James has taken a fearful liking to London," Hamish Pottle declared, "I hear tell that his face is as long as a Summer day in Orkney when he has to consider travelling back up to Scotland!"

"We may not see him, again, in my lifetime!", Caitlan quipped.

"We may all be strumming a harp in the clouds", Hamish confided, with exaggerated gestures of harp playing, "Before he returns!"

Smiling broadly, Alex pressed a forefinger to his lips and cast his eyes skyward, as if seeking divine inspiration, then said: "I believe that, in the Colonies, they refer to it as 'Going native'...."

This remark seemed to tickle their sense of humour and left the husband and wife proprietors of the Inn unable to stand straight. They laughed so hard that they staggered and leaned against the furniture to keep themselves upright. Alex, unsure if he, himself, were laughing at their merry behaviour or the words he had just spoken, found himself joining in and ended up laughing so much that his sides ached.

Tears streamed down all their cheeks and, each time they were almost back under self-control, one of them would spot the face of another and this would set them off, again.

Eventually, Hamish marched first his wife, and then his guest, into opposite corners of the kitchen and pressed their necks to incline their heads to rest against the wall. Hamish then retired to a seat against the fireplace across the other side of the room. Thus, split up and isolated, the three eventually regained their composure. This was not, however, without a couple of relapses along the way.

At last, the three of them slumped in a line along the bench at the big, heavy table. They shook their heads, cleared their throats, wiped their eyes and each, eventually, recovered their restraint.

Alex studiously occupied himself eating porridge, suppressing the odd smirk of recollection, but managing to remain restrained. The two maids who, from time to time, had poked their heads around the door in bewilderment, during this performance, now judged it safe to enter and crept back in, hesitantly, to set pans on the stove in preparation for Lunch.

Hamish Pottle hugged his wife and slapped her bottom, then hugged Alex and slapped him between the shoulder blades. They exchanged glances, beaming at each other, but – by common, unspoken consent – ventured no words, for fear of subsiding into uncontrollable laughter, again.

“I stood shoulder to shoulder, in Austria,” began Alex, deliberately injecting solemnity, “With Englishmen and with fellow Scots, holding the line against the enemy, each of us glad for King James’ resolve to support our allies and keep they and us free.”

There was silence and the two maids paused in their stirring of the pots, so as not to break it. Only the hissing and bubbling of these huge pots, now suspended over the fire, interjected.

The unseen stranger who had come and stood quietly behind them in the doorway had arrived without announcing himself or drawing attention to his presence. Within a few further seconds, however, all three - Caitlan, Hamish and Alex – had become eerily aware of him. The three of them turned, in unison, and the intruder graciously inclined his head and upper body in a bow.

The newcomer was tall and well-muscled. His cloak was drawn back over his shoulders revealing a broad chest and strong arms. His powerful physique was only thinly disguised by his tunic. He wore trousers rather than a kilt, which was uncommon in these parts. The trousers disappeared into a pair of high, black, well-crafted riding boots. It was clear that he was neither local nor from anywhere in the surrounding area. His eyes twinkled as the hint of a smile played on his lips. It was clear that he had heard their raucous merriment.

A long silence hung like a ponderous weight, awkward and uncomfortable, before Caitlan spoke: “A fine Noon to you, Sir.”, she said.

The stranger nodded and smiled. His lips were bordered by his well-kept beard, which was flecked with early signs of grey, matching his grey eyes.

“How can we be of service to you?”, Hamish managed, rising from his seat.

“I am on my way to Fort William and wish to break my journey for the day,” he replied, amiably.

“On some kind of business?”, ventured Hamish.

"Yes," Replied the stranger. Then, after a pause, he added: "The King's business."

Hamish fought to keep the shock from his face and failed.

"What kind of business would that be, if I may ask?", the Inn Keeper enquired, recovering himself.

"I am a Constable.", the other announced.

Hamish knew that the stranger was studying his face and did his best to show no further surprise or alarm, hastily putting thoughts of his contraband whiskey, brandy and rum as far from his mind as possible.

Hamish knew that there were two Constables in Edinburgh, at least one in Glasgow and one each in Stirling, Perth and Dunfermline. His mind, whirling and tumbling, could make no sense of one of them straying this far to the North West. He knew that Constables were always well-connected people from privileged backgrounds and high social standing. He also knew, as the position was mostly unpaid, that they had to possess a good income of their own.

Caitlan shrugged and looked puzzled, "In these parts, law and order is usually attended to by the Rangers or by the Laird."

The Constable crinkled his forehead questioningly, "How do you get along with the Rangers?"

Hamish snorted, "They are not usually my most favourite of visitors to these premises," He contorted his face in mock disgust, "And I tend to rarely look back on, or forward to, their coming with any degree of joy."

The Constable seemed to weigh up this reply in his mind, before nodding slowly.

"The Rangers, or 'The Watch', as they call them, further up," Caitlan gestured to the hills, up the road, that led into The Highlands, "Can be a blessing, under the right circumstances. Often, in fact. Especially if they are on your side!"

She frowned.

"But...?", the Constable asked, responding to the hanging question.

"But," Caitlan continued, "While they are good at tracking down cattle, horse and sheep thieves, they are not above taking the odd animal themselves! While they do deter burglars and they do catch pickpockets at the fairs and markets, they lack the discipline of soldiers and they don't have a soldier's honour. Only a few weeks ago, two young girls were raped on the road to Stirling and people who are well informed and who know what goes on - people whose word is held in high esteem - are convinced that The Watch were the ones who did it."

The Constable looked to Hamish and raised his brow in query.

"But," Hamish took up, "Their idea of justice can be affected by what they see as being good for them. A bit of generosity, by one person or another, tends to alter their idea of what is fair or unfair."

The Constable shook his head, sadly.

Hamish continued: "The Laird allows them to draw a tariff from the people they serve, but they tend to want more than is reasonable. Especially if they sense that somebody is weak or they have something to hide."

Their visitor pursed his lips in a tight smile, "You are an Inn Keeper. You sell alcohol." he replied, "I have no interest where you obtain it."

Hamish blinked at the other's bluntness. His mouth dropped open. Quickly closing it, he opened it, again, to speak, but his shock at this remarkable directness rendered him dumb. The Constable raised a hand, wagging it in the air in dismissal, then shook his head in reproach of any need for a response.

The Constable cocked his head, "These people are a little expensive to maintain?"

Hamish smiled, ironically. "Yes," he replied. Then added: "The Rangers in these parts tend to be from the McRaes." He left the implication of this to speak for itself. The Constable didn't seem to miss it and smiled ruefully.

Attempting to dispel the awkwardness, Hamish decided to change the subject. Pointing to the man's boots, he asked: "The lad is attending to your horse, I take it?"

"Horses," The man corrected, "And, aye, he is."

It was Hamish's turn to raise an eyebrow.

"One is to ride and one to carry.", the Constable added, as way of explanation.

Hamish nodded, not quite sure if it would be tactful to pry into such an arrangement, but – after a few moments of heavy silence – decided there was nothing to be lost: "You have a cargo?"

"Yes. I have a cargo," Replied the law man, "A McRae."

Neither Hamish nor Caitlan could disguise their shock and exchanged worried glances.

Recovering himself, Hamish said: "I have a fine room for yourself, Sir, and I have a bunk room off the stable for your...." He hesitated, searching for the words, "Your fellow traveller. It might be cold, tonight."

His new guest looked straight at him and the merest hint of a smile danced in his eyes and on his lips, before he replied: "That won't be necessary. He won't be feeling the cold anymore."