

THE FIRE TREE

CHAPTER 8

Hamish Pottle's mind lurched as he imagined Duncan McRae – the rough, abrasive, foul-tempered leader of the local Rangers – slung, lifelessly, over the back of the Constable's horse. He felt a twinge of guilt on realising that the image gave him considerable pleasure. The guilt, however, faded quickly and was replaced by anger and annoyance as he considered the McRae's most recent victims. The families of the two young Rafferty girls, cousins from nearby Crianlarich, would have every right to be overjoyed at the sight of the corpse. This was the man who had most likely participated in, and even more likely led, their rape and savage beating.

Hamish cleared his throat and swallowed: "You've encountered the McRae's on your travels, Sir?", he asked the Constable.

"I have," replied the Constable, glumly, "Which accounts for me having a dead one on my horse." The corners of his mouth twitched and the twinkle was back in his eyes.

"Yes. I see." Hamish said, somewhat distractedly, "You met more than the one?"

"I only have the one with me.", replied the Constable, an almost imperceptible smile insinuating itself on his lips.

Hamish could not suppress a little sigh. The constable stood silently in the door way, a hint of amusement in his aspect. He clearly understood what the Inn Keeper wanted to know, but seemed determined to extract some effort as the reward for the telling.

"Will I take a seat?", the Constable enquired, pointing to a vacant chair, opposite Alex Brennan

"Oh! Of course! My apologies!", cried Caitlan, springing to her feet. Picking up a cotton cover, she deftly placed it over the seat of the chair.

The constable picked up his bag from the ground, which had been sat out of sight beyond the door, and strode to the chair. Nodding graciously, he sat down, placing his bag beside the chair. There was a dull, but unmistakable, metallic noise as its contents made contact with the stone flags through the canvas.

"Would you like some tea or a wee dram?", asked Hamish.

"A mere splash of whiskey, just to wet my tongue, would be most welcome.", he responded.

Caitlan poured a little more than the requested amount into a glass and handed it to their new visitor. Holding it up to the light, for inspection, the Constable nodded approvingly, flicked up the glass and emptied the contents into his mouth. He made a satisfied noise and dropped the empty receptacle into the palm of Caitlan's, now upturned, hand.

Hamish pursed his lips, ready for another round of probing and interrogation. Noting his expression, the Constable gave a short, hollow laugh and held up a finger to stop him.

"I came across the McReas five miles back down the road.", the Constable explained, "I had a short discussion with them, during which I made my opinions plain and we appeared to part company on tense but reasonable terms."

He paused, surveying his listeners, each agog with curiosity.

"I rode off, about my business, when I heard a galloping horse, behind me. I turned my own horse around and found their leader approaching me, at speed, with his sword drawn. Clearly he had indulged in seconds thoughts over my parting remark and decided to take delayed offence."

Hamish, Caitlan and Alex sat motionless, captivated by the law man's account. The two kitchen maids, meanwhile, stood like statues – ladles frozen in mid-air - utterly transfixed.

"It was clear, despite me having furnished my warrant from the king, that he was hostile," the Constable continued, "I was compelled to explain to this 'gentleman'...", He pronounced the word with disdain, "The error of his ways!"

His audience were like statues, rigid in expectant silence.

"So, I spoke to him!", declared the Constable, looking stern, "I said 'bang!'"

A look of confusion spread across the faces of the people in the room.

"Or rather," explained the story teller, helpfully, "I had my companion say it for me!" At this juncture, the Constable picked up his bag, pulled open its covering flap, and revealed the dangerous end of a monstrous pistol.

Alex and Hamish leaned forward, at the same moment, in disbelief. Not only was the gauge of this device huge, but where one barrel would normally sit, there were two, one beside the other. The two men's mouths gaped open in awe.

"Judging by the size of it," quipped Caitlan, "It fires hens' eggs!"

Hamish's glance fell on the open bag. Below the covering flap of the pale red satchel were brass letters, rivetted through the fabric. They spelled out: "McGrath". Constable McGrath followed the Inn Keeper's gaze but made no comment.

Carefully tucking away his weapon, he pulled and looped the cord that held the flap down. He ignored the two heavy straps that were designed to more firmly and resolutely accomplish the same objective.

"A moment's delay in reaching it could make all the difference.", McGrath explained. Then, nodding towards Hamish's arms, decorated with a mariner's tattoos, he added: "You'll know so yourself."

"Aye, I do, indeed.", Hamish responded. Then, nodding towards the man's bag, he added: "We carried a line of guns, just like that one, sticking out of the sides of my last ship!"

The two men laughed heartily and Alex and Caitlan joined in. Hamish was taken aback by how the big man's whole presence changed when he laughed. Gone was the dour and gruff persona, replaced, instead, by the cheerful and amiable one. He had a deep, easy laugh that lifted the spirits and a smile that illuminated both his own face and those around him.

Hamish reached for the whiskey bottle and inclined it towards the Constable. McGrath held up his hands in a display of mock horror that would have been a credit to a puppet show and raised his eyes to Heaven in a sardonic protest of piety. Hamish smiled, amused and entertained.

The Constable held Hamish's eyes with a steady, unflustered gaze, and the Inn Keeper could feel the other's guard going back up into place.

"The McRaes," began Hamish, "Are not forgiving people. They tend to hold a grudge."

The point was not lost on McGrath.

"There are grudges in the Highlands that have lasted for centuries and ones that will, no doubt, last for a good few centuries more!", observed McGrath, jovially.

"Aye, true enough," replied Hamish, "But the McRaes tend to work to more pressing timescales."

McGrath cocked his brow, "I only have a middle-sized wall above my fireplace, back at home, but...", he arched his mouth in a frown and rocked his head from side to side in contemplation, "...I have, so far, just the one McRae. I could, no doubt, go for a brace or - if you would urge me the wisdom of it - I could put my mind to going for the full set!"

Hamish looked at the Constable in astonishment.

Caitlan looked at him as if he had lost his senses.

Alex looked at him with a troubled expression.

"Are you implying," began Constable McGrath, in injured tones, "That a Constable's Warrant of Office, signed by the King's own hand, is insufficient to guarantee his safety in these parts?"

Hamish, Caitlan and Alex glanced one to the other. They shared a look of awkward discomfort.

"A good job, indeed, in that case," retorted McGrath, "That I can call upon the support – not too far down the road - of 30 brave men in blue and grey, with muskets, sabres and the crown of King James on their belt buckles."

The expressions on the faces of Caitlan, Hamish and Alex changed in almost perfect synchronisation. First, they looked taken aback by the offhand, almost trite, disclosure of this information. Then, realising the confidential nature of it, they looked guarded and wary. Then, comprehending the burden placed upon them by being privy to it, they looked reproachful.

Constable McGrath held up his arms in self admonishment, "**Why** would I tell you something like **that**?"

Hamish, with clear hostility in his voice, snapped back his response: "Why **would** you tell us something like that?"

The maids, sensing the imperative for discretion, spontaneously lowered their heads and busied themselves fastidiously about their chores. Caitlan turned around to look at them and their stirring and mixing promptly picked up a notch.

"Maybe", McGrath replied, poising the supposition like a school teacher addressing their pupils, "Just maybe, I know that I can trust you."

Hamish snorted as if this were preposterous; "You don't know us!", he exclaimed.

McGrath leaned forward, secretively, "Maybe I **do** know you."

The three of them looked at each other, as if suddenly unsure of who each other might be

"Perhaps I have blackmail in mind?", McGrath asked, mischievously, arching an eyebrow at Alex Brennan.

Alex stiffened, taken by surprise, and simultaneously tried not to look guilty while feverishly racking his brains for anything incriminating. Caitlan and Hamish both looked at him, suspiciously.

The Constable shifted his gaze to Hamish, his eyebrow still raised.

Hamish jolted and, his mind racing to reassure himself that all the panels in the roof of the bar were firmly positioned, quickly adopted a countenance of pained innocence. Caitlan and Hamish both looked at him suspiciously.

The Constable slowly moved his scrutiny to Caitlan, who looked nonplussed and slightly offended. After quickly recovering her deportment, she fluffed her skirts in her lap and inclined her head haughtily. Hamish and Alex both looked at her, suspiciously.

The atmosphere in the room had become tense and uncomfortable, but – in a split second – McGrath dispersed it. His gruffness evaporated in an instant and, with a flash of his charming smile and a twinkle of his merry eyes, the whole room was awash with warmth and good humour.

“I cannot disclose my reasons for having such confidence in you,” the Constable declared, “For – as I travel North – I must take care. I may not always be among friends. A careless disclosure made in haste, today, might be one regretted at length, tomorrow.”

Such was the man’s aura that none of those gathered in the kitchen were of a mind to challenge him or to delve into his reasoning. At the back of the kitchen, the two maids made discrete eye contact with each other and imperceptibly nodded their approval of the bold new guest.

Hamish, Caitlan and Alex, quickly began to relax and, within no time, found themselves beaming at the man as – completely unexpectedly – he began to diverge into a series of amusing anecdotes about his time in the army. Not only did he always include all three of them in the conversation, but he routinely spoke to each of them in turn, directing his words first to one, then to the next, then to the other.

This time, when Caitlan offered him more whiskey, Constable McGrath accepted without hesitation. They all drank to each other’s health and prospects and – in a departure from the usual ways of the house – to the surprise of the two maids, Caitlan beckoned them across and gave them both a dram, too.

Trading stories of military action, the three men demonstrated blows that were delivered, sword thrusts that were made and shots that were fired, adopting poses to portray these conflicts. Caitlan, for her part, recounted a particularly bloody tale of skewering a wandering boar with a spear from atop the well.

McGrath took hold of Hamish by the hand and carefully positioned his arm to dramatically re-enact the parrying of a blow. Hamish, catching sight of the infected jet-black thumbnail on McGrath’s right hand, noisily drew in air through pursed lips.

“You look to be sporting the outcome of a more recent battle!”, interjected Hamish, pointing to the thumbnail.

“Aye!”, replied the Constable, “That’s the truth! I was kicked by my horse. It hurt like the Fires of Hell! I cursed and I swore with every foul word that I had ever known and then invented another six to go with them!”

They all laughed.

Holding up the thumb for inspection, McGrath said: "It takes every ounce of restraint I possess to stop myself from picking at it! It's a real annoyance. It will fall off, in its own time, when its good and ready, I'm sure."

The maids, having finished preparing food for the establishment, had withdrawn to other duties. One of them now returned, peeking round the door, and caught Hamish's eye: "The good gentleman's room is now fully prepared, if it pleases you," She said, motioning towards the Constable, "And I have furnished the bed with a feather mattress and with the duck down quilt."

"Well done," congratulated Hamish, "You can show Constable McGrath to his room and provide him with any amenities he may require."

The maid nodded and held open the door for McGrath to follow her.

"If it's all the same to you," began McGrath, turning to Hamish, "I'll be assured, without inspection, of the fine standards of your hospitality and, instead, I'll take a walk around outside and maybe limber up a little before the light fails."

McGrath adopted a stance portraying a physical workout.

"Whatever pleases you, Sir." Hamish replied.

"If you'd like to flex your muscles, Sir," Alex offered, "You can join me at the wood stack. There's a certain satisfaction from splitting logs with an axe that I, myself, find most rewarding."

McGrath nodded his approval and the two made their excuses and went out to the wood shed. Alex selected a sturdy axe apiece and they laid siege to the remaining pile of logs.

The two men laboured, side by side, pouring with sweat, until dusk came and then beyond. Only when they had reached the very last log and could scarcely see it in the gloom to be able to strike it, did they put down their axes. By the time the last log was broken up into suitable lengths, the sweat had soaked their shirts and was dripping liberally onto the logs and onto the ground. They stood side by side, proudly surveying their work, and then forcefully shook hands, in triumph, and pounded each other on the back.

After panting and gasping to recover their breath, McGrath jerked a thumb towards the stables: "Would you care to take a look at what a dead McRae looks like?"

Alex Brennan shook his head, eyes cast to the ground and seemed to disappear into his own thoughts for a moment. Raising his eyes, he locked them with that of the Constable, and replied: "I've seen enough dead men to last me a life time."

McGrath nodded, solemnly, "Quite so," he responded.

The two stood in a clumsy silence, each deep in their own thoughts, before the Constable gestured to the line of trees and said: "Come with me and we'll find a more suitable pastime."

The two strode off to the edge of the forest and, a few minutes later, set off back with a handful each of pine cones.

The two set to work laying a little campfire and then, rummaging in the shed, found some long, thin spokes of metal used for holding down straw while thatching roofs. These they pressed into service as spikes to hold their pine cones to roast them over the fire.

Alex knelt by the kindling and took out his tinder box. Extracting the flint and the striking rod, he conjured enough sparks to set fire to the dry leaves and grass. The flames quickly took hold and the fire began to crackle and roar.

The noise of the fire was distinct and unmistakable. The crackling and popping gradually growing in ferocity. The two men sat, cross legged, both transfixed by the flames and both plainly captivated by the sound. Alex felt an odd comradeship as he marvelled at the flames. Closing his eyes, Alex drew in the noise of the burning wood and allowed it to fill him with an overwhelming sense of peace and wellbeing. It was strangely familiar and reassuring. Alex opened his eyes and, feeling obscurely detached, watched as the other – eyes now closed – smiled serenely, wooed and captivated by the sound of the burning wood.

Absentmindedly, Alex toyed with the tinder box in his palm, stroking it, turning it and caressing it with his fingers.

"A treasured possession?", asked McGrath in a kindly tone.

"Yes. Very much so.", Alex admitted.

The two men sat in amiable, contented silence for a minute.

"Do you have any special and significant possession?", Alex enquired.

The Constable looked at Alex long and hard with a steady, thoughtful, contemplative regard. Alex had the distinct impression that he was being carefully assessed. Oddly, the sensation didn't cause him even the slightest pang of discomfort. After a long few moments, his instincts told him he had passed.

"Yes.", replied McGrath, shuffling closer to him and leaning over to speak into his ear.

As McGrath began to tell him, Alex' expression became puzzled, but he listened patiently. When he had finished, Alex, was unsure if it had just heard a verse of poetry or, perhaps, a riddle. Whatever it was, despite its meaning being slightly obscure, there was no doubt that its telling was profound.