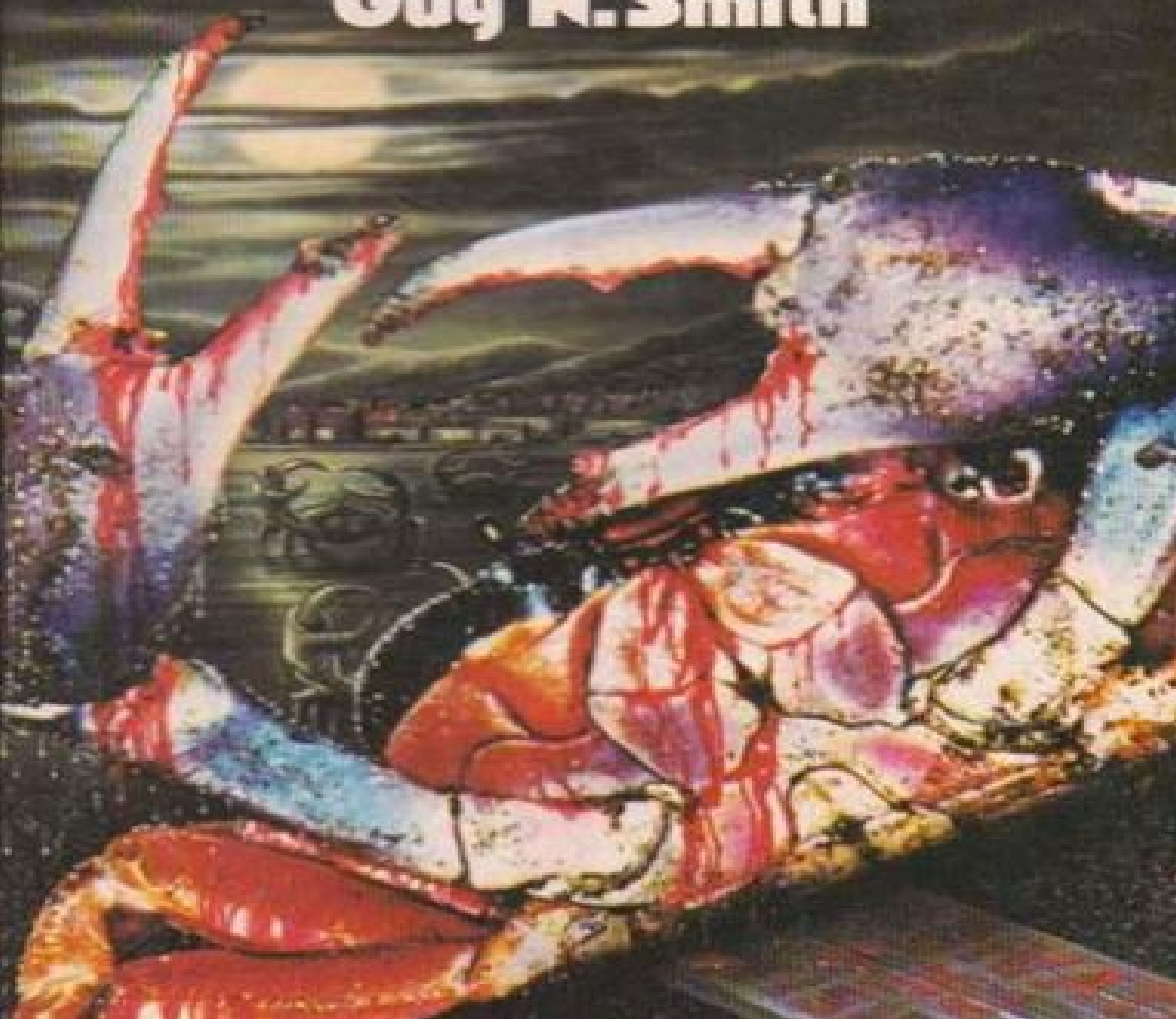
 Black Hill Books Ebook

THE ORIGIN OF THE **CRABS**

Guy N. Smith



The Origin of the Crabs - Kindle Version 1.0

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Chapter 1

The man had lain in the soft springy heather throughout the afternoon, and now, with the coming of an autumnal twilight, he raised his head slowly. Above him were the mountains, sharp bluffs which towered steeply, the grey stone interspersed with the brown of the dying bracken. A buzzard soared effortlessly, gracefully, its moth-like wings outstretched, almost motionless as it searched for an unwary young rabbit or vole in the wilderness. Below him the hills sloped more gently, winding streams rushing downwards, swollen by the recent heavy rains, gushing over the rock falls, spun into mist by the wind flying.

In the distance the last rays of the evening sun glinted on the waters of Loch Merse, a mile or so away at the end of the narrow valley, surrounded by stunted Scots pines that had weathered half a century of storms and would withstand another fifty years. A bunch of wild duck were circling, dipping, then planing down on to the expanse of water.

Freddie Law rose to his knees, and with gnarled hands focused the long telescope. Slowly he scanned the landscape around him, the keen grey eyes missing nothing. His tattered, camouflaged combat jacket with matching trousers blended perfectly with his surroundings, so well in fact that unless anyone had unwittingly stumbled upon him they would in all probability have passed within ten yards of him and been totally unaware of his presence. Many were the occasions when gamekeepers searching for him at night on the moors and in the mountains had brushed against his clothing with their boots and pressed on.

Suddenly, he stiffened. Something moved in the corrie a couple of hundred yards below him. He remained perfectly still, watching, the heavy spyglass never wavering. Then he saw them. Ten in all, a red deer moving through the undergrowth, a majestic stag in the lead, its head raised, stopping to sniff the air every few yards, alert for the slightest sign of danger.

‘Beauties,’ the watcher breathed to himself, ‘but they’ll ha’ to wait. Next month mebbe ...’

The telescope completed its arc of surveillance and was lowered to the ground. The man stretched himself out again, relaxing a little, satisfied that there was not another human being within a mile of him. He would not make a move until it was fully dark but he had to be sure that the Cranlarich gamekeepers were not preparing an ambush for him.

The light seemed to linger more than usual tonight. But Freddie Law was in no hurry. Carefully he lit a crumpled cigarette between cupped hands, exhaling the smoke in thin trickles so that it would not give away his position. He lay back and relaxed, conserving his energy for that which lay ahead, his left hand caressing the four-foot gaff by his side almost lovingly, a weapon which he had made entirely by his own efforts. The long ash handle had been cut and shaped with his sharp hunting knife and the three-pronged spearhead had been forged in his own kitchen fire. Well over a thousand trout had he taken with this gaff and a few salmon from the river, too, when the opportunity had presented itself. Salmon poaching was too risky these days, though, for the river authorities were increasing their staff of bailiffs. Only on the Cranlarich Estate did he feel safe. He had eluded Jock Rouson McKechnie's keeper, for over ten years, and he would continue to do so as long as his health allowed him to poach at will. Freddie Law knew no other way of life. If he could not hunt the deer in the forests, the grouse and rabbits on the moors, and take trout from the streams at the advent of the spawning season, then he would rather be dead.

Darkness came and he rose to his feet, the telescope slung over his shoulder, the gaff poised for use as a walking stick. His nostrils flared. Like the stag earlier, he would sense danger if it was there.

He was confident that some sixth sense would warn him as it had done on so many occasions in the past.

A mist was rising, and he chuckled to himself. It would mask the light of his small torch once he started to work the streams which gushed into the loch. Optimism added to the jauntiness of his step. He had a feeling that tonight was going to be one of those nights when everything went his way. No gamekeepers, a bag full of trout and back in his bed before dawn.

He embarked upon a course parallel to Loch Merse. There was no point in crossing the Cranlarie bog unless it was absolutely necessary. He knew the safe paths across it but they were winding and time-wasting. And there was always an element of risk. One false step, and there would be no way back, not even for Freddie Law. He had once witnessed a roe deer in one of the sucking quagmires powerless to help it as it had been slowly and surely drawn down into the mud, helplessly watching when only its head and rolling eyes were visible. Then it was gone. A final gurgle, the mud hissing and bubbling. Not a trace of its existence remained. The shifting quagmires did not overlook so much as a hoofprint.

The night was black and murky, but the poacher did not need to use his torch. He followed the old sheeptrack in and out of the corrie, up the steep hillside, and down to the first burn. The icy water came up to his thighs as he waded in. There were seldom trout in this one, the water was swift and deep. He clambered up the opposite bank and forced his way through a patch of thick gorse. The sharp spines scratched his legs through his trousers, but he scarcely noticed the pain. It was all part of his way of life,

An hour passed before he reached the big burn, a fast torrent that rushed over its boulder-strewn bed. He paused, and felt in his pocket for his torch. This was the place, close to where the stream widened out into the loch. Two miles of its course lay above him, gradually becoming steeper until it reached the first line of rocks. He would work all of it tonight, walking slowly upstream so that any mud which he disturbed would only discolour the water at his rear.

A little shiver of excitement ran up his spine. Hardened as he was, he could not restrain it. This, for him, was what living was all about. Others got their kicks from backing horses, but his bet was on the night's sport, his bookmaker the mountain above him. It would either pay out on the long odds or full or send him home empty handed. There were no certs.

The torch beam cut downwards into the clear water. The mist swirled, thickening, but it did not obscure his vision. Gaff poised and ready, he began his uphill climb, his attention focused on the bottom of the burn, scanning the small pools close to the bank away from the main current. Spawning trout liked to rest awhile in such places during the course of their exhausting ascent. He glimpsed a slight movement, an elongated shape that might have been a sliver of rock. It wasn't.

He struck, straight and true, and with unbelievable speed for one of advanced years. His fingers secured a grip on the wriggling fish which was pinned down by the prongs of the gaff. Its death throes continued in the bottom of the canvas bag on his back, and encouraged by this early success he continued on his way, sweeping the torch beam a yard or so in front of him.

Suddenly, he stopped so abruptly that he almost slipped on the moss-covered stones. Something moved at the edge of the shadows just ahead of him. He directed the light towards it, and was just in time to see a creature approximately the size of a large cat disappear from view behind a clump of thick rushes.

'What the devil!' he cursed aloud, a sense of uneasiness sweeping over him.

Like many other men who spent their lives in such an environment anything unusual disturbed Freddie Law. Momentarily he chewed on his lower lip, a habit of his when he was either frightened or

puzzled, and attempted to determine the identity of whatever lurked in the shadows.

~~A fox? No, it was not large enough. A wild cat? No, they were only to be found much further north towards the Highlands. Odd ones turned up sometimes in this corner of south-west Scotland, but they would not seek refuge in a burn even if they fished it. An otter? An audible sigh of relief escaped his lips. That was what it was. He had seen one once whilst poaching salmon on a stretch of the River Annan. Maybe its holt was there behind those rushes.~~

His eyes narrowed. Otter pelts fetched money. Good money. In olden times the huntsmen used spears similar to his own gaff to finish off an otter which was held at bay by the hounds. There was just a chance that, with a little bit of luck, if this one did not move quickly ... Freddie Law had confidence in his own ability to drive that gaff into a darting fish. His new quarry was much larger. It remained where it was then it was as good as his.

Very gently he stepped forward an inch or so at a time, taking care not to splash unnecessarily. His torch extended in his left hand, his weapon held in his right, shoulder height. Now he had it cornered. He was level with that clump of reeds. Whichever way it bolted, it would have to pass him.

But nothing moved. There was no sound except for the rush of water over stones. The poacher took another step forward. It *had* to be there, unless, of course, it was skulking in a hole in the bank.

Then he saw it, or rather he saw where it was hiding, an indistinguishable patch of blackness that was darker than the shadows, and the glow of two small red eyes that glared malevolently at him. It remained motionless, making no attempt to escape.

‘Ye brazen bugger,’ he grunted, ‘or are ye just plain bloody stupid? Well, it makes na difference ...’

Freddie Law's arm went back, and then forward, the gaff driving fiercely at those eyes. But there was no soft impact of flesh and fur. Instead there was a jarring and splintering that caused the man's fingers to open in unexpected agony, the ash staff wrenching itself free of his hold. He gave a short cry of pain, almost dropped his torch and cursed fluently. A strange, foreboding noise seemed to answer him.

Click-click-click.

Freddie recoiled, slipped, and landed on his knees in the water. His expression was one of incredulity and fear as once again he shone the torch on the thing which squatted, half hidden by the reeds. Its noise was foreign to these parts, at least the volume was. It was like the clicking of crab pincers. Loch Merse was connected to the open sea by a subterranean tunnel, so it was believed, and occasionally crabs found their way into that expanse of inland water. He had killed one or two for the table on occasions, but generally he didn't bother with them. Crabs would not come up here, upstream away from the salt water!

It reared up, and in the circle of light thrown by the torch he saw it, a crab the size of a fully grown hare, its tiny face a mask of evil, showing the hatred it felt for the man who had struck at it. A loud crack echoed in the stillness as it lowered its weight on to the shaft of the gaff and split it in two.

‘Keep away, damn ye!’ there was fear in Freddie Law's shout as he backed away, losing his footing once more and falling into the shallow water with a splash. Feverishly he scrambled up. The crab was closer now, moving with a swiftness that was unnatural for one of its species. There was little doubt in his mind that it was bent on attacking him.

His panic-stricken retreat was punctuated by a series of falls. His hands were torn and bleeding but somehow he managed to keep a hold on the torch, terrified of the blackness of the night and the terror which it held if his light should be extinguished. He covered about ten yards, glancing back every few seconds, and now he was fully aware that this monstrosity was gaining on him.

Only then did it occur to him that safety lay beyond the banks and not downstream. Surely it would not pursue him on dry land. He changed direction, fell yet again, and screamed as one of its pincers slashed his right wellington boot. The rubber was slit, the woollen sock beneath torn, and he felt the flesh of his foot being cut as though with a sharp knife. His desperation lent him extra strength as he wrenched his leg free, grabbed at an overhanging sapling, and somehow hauled himself up into the heather.

His heart was beating wildly, and his breath was coming in strangled gulps. Fearfully he shone his light back into the burn, and peered down at his attacker. The giant crab was still there, motionless, looking up at him, thwarted. The horrific face was almost human, an expression of mingled hatred and defeat, the eyes glowing like distant campfires in a corrie, hypnotic, willing him to step back into the water.

With a shudder he forced his gaze away and, turning on his injured heel, he struck aimlessly through the thick vegetation which bordered the banks of the stream. One thought was uppermost in his mind: flight. Anywhere, so long as he could put as much distance as possible between himself and this nightmarish thing, this devil which had come up from the loch, maybe even from the Cranlarich bog.

The poacher blundered on for some twenty yards, and then fell headlong as his lacerated foot refused to bear his weight any longer. This time the torch flew from his grasp, bounced on a boulder, and the bulb shattered. He was in total darkness.

He whimpered softly in his fear. The undergrowth behind him rustled. He cowered, and buried his face in the heather in total surrender. He could go on no longer. The loss of blood had made him weak. There was no way in which he could fight this awful adversary. He prayed that death, if it came, would be swift and painless. The blackness around him was tinged with red, and then unconsciousness brought blessed relief from the terrors of the night.

Some time later his senses returned, and once again he was peeling into the night, still hearing the clicking of pincers, and seeing in his mind the terrible thing that lurked in the burn.

‘Dinna be such a fool, Freddie Law.’ He spoke aloud in an attempt to restore his courage. ‘It cannot follow ye on dry land, not even a bastard like that. Pull yerself together.’

His ankle ached and he felt it. It was warm and sticky where the blood had congealed in the slit in his wellington boot. With some relief he ascertained that the bleeding had stopped. He fumbled in the pocket of his combat jacket for his matches. His fingers located a soggy cardboard box, and he knew that it was useless even to attempt to strike the contents.

‘Ach, ye dinna need a light to show ye the way home, Freddie,’ he laughed hysterically, ‘ye know this place even better than the laird hisself, damn him!’

His courage returned increasingly as he proceeded to curse Bruce McKechnie, the laird of Cranlarich, and his gamekeeper Jock Rouse. He tried to push the memory of the crab from his mind. A freak, certainly, but it couldn't hurt him now. The most important thing was to find his way home.

It was almost impossible to walk on his injured foot so with some difficulty he broke off a silver birch branch and used it as a support. Even so, his progress was abysmally slow. Every few yards he was forced to rest. And now the night was full of noises, rustlings, crackings, and clickings that could have been made by the claws of an unnaturally oversized crab. His fears began to return, more terrible than before on account of his inability to flee from them.

Branches parted before his passage. Twigs and leaves brushed his face. An owl hooted in displeasure at being disturbed from feeding on a freshly killed mouse. *Something closed over his arm in a vice-like grip.* He tried to scream, but his vocal chords refused to function properly. Still being

held, he sank to his knees, muttering incoherently. Laughing to himself. Crying.

~~'All right, you bastard. Ye've got me. Now kill me, and damn ye, ye devil from hell!'~~

'So you've slipped up at last, Freddie Law.' The voice which spoke out of the darkness was harsh and unfriendly, the grip on the poacher's arm tightened, twisting the limb behind his back. A torch was shone in his face, dazzling him so that it was impossible to see his captors. His first sensation was one of relief. At least his attackers were human!

'Jock Rouse!' Freddie grunted. 'Well ye're oot o' luck, mon. I've na gun, na gaff, na nowt.'

'We'll see about that.' The burly gamekeeper maintained his hold on his captive. 'Here, Joe, I've got the old sod.'

Freddie heard footsteps coming towards them, and another man appeared on the scene. Whilst the torch was diverted from him he could see that both men wore waterproof clothing, including leggings, and sou'wester hats. Their nocturnal vigil, for once, had not been in vain. They had caught their man at last.

'Search his bag, Joe.'

The canvas haversack was upturned. Freddie groaned inwardly as he heard the trout thud on to the ground. Up until this moment he had completely forgotten about his only catch of the night.

'That's all we need.' Jock Rouse thrust his florid, cruel face close to Freddie's. 'You can't talk your way outa this one, Freddie. You can hide yer gaffs and guns, but the fact that you've been poaching is good enough for us. Not that we even needed proof o' that. This is Cranlarich, and we have our own laws. Our own ways o' dealin' with the likes o' you, also!'

'Look mon,' Freddie whined, 'ne'er mind the poachin'. Ye can take me to the sherrif. My foot's hurt, mebbe the ankle's broken.'

'Why, so it is.' Jock Rouse guffawed as he shone his torch downwards and saw Freddie's torn bloody boot and twisted ankle. 'Stepped in one o' yer own gin traps by mistake, eh!'

Both gamekeepers laughed.

'Ye gotta listen to me, mon.' There was a note of pleading in Freddie Law's tone. 'There's ... a ... a monster in the big burn.'

For a few seconds there was silence. The two men looked at each other and then at the poacher.

'Ye don't think,' Rouse's expression hardened, 'that we're going to believe that sorta crap, d'you? Mebbe there's somethin in Loch Ness, who knows? There could even be in Loch Merse if you've got an imagination, but in the fuckin' burn! Joe, we gotta try and knock some sense into this crazy o' bastard, and knock 'is bleedin' silly notions out of 'im at the same time.'

'No. Listen to me, *please!*'

'Jock,' it was a vain, half-hearted protest from the under-keeper, 'the old guy's hurt ...'

'And he's gonna be hurt a lot more before we've finished with 'im!' Jock Rouse gripped the other man by the lapels of his saturated jacket, and dragged him up to a kneeling position. This is what happens to poachers on the Cranlarich Estate.'

The huge clenched fist descended with full force into Freddie Law's abdomen. There was a sickening thud. The poacher grunted and sagged forward. He gurgled a protest, but there was more to come. A chopping blow caught him on the side of the face, and he would have sprawled in the grass had not his attacker been holding him.

'Steady on, Jock. We don't want to kill the old bugger.' The head gamekeeper's assistant had a look of alarm on his face.

'We won't ... quite.' Rouse laughed, and hit his man yet again.

Freddie Law's strength and powers of resistance were ebbing from him for the second time that

night. He had a sensation of floating in space, being dragged towards a yawning black cavern in which red and green lights were flashing. Then he blacked out, and was totally oblivious of the flurry of blows which rained down upon his unconscious body.

It was daylight when Freddie regained consciousness. It was raining heavily, and for some time he lay there on the edge of the corrie finding the downpour refreshing to his burning, aching body. Gradually the memories of the previous night drifted back to his confused mind.

‘I musta bin crazy,’ he grunted, tried to rise, and fell back again.

His ankle hurt most of all, and looking down at it he saw the torn rubber boot, and a portion of the blood-soaked sock which was exposed through the tear.

‘This is sommat t’do wi’ McKechnie,’ he swore as he started out on what he knew would be a long crawl back to his tumbledown cottage in the distant village of Cranlarich. The bastard knows he can’t get away wi’ settin’ mantraps these days so he’s found somethin’ worse. He put that monster in the burrow because he know’d I would come after the trout. That’s it, somehow he’s bred a big crab and ‘e’s usin’ it as a watchdog ...’

It was after midday before he reached the outskirts of the village. The narrow street of grey stone cottages was deserted as the injured man made his way on all fours along the pavement. Even with his own dwelling in sight he was forced to rest every few yards. His breathing was laborious and his vision was restricted by the fact that his left eye was swollen and closed. Yet he did not miss the slightest movement of curtains and screened inquisitive faces that peered from behind. The occupants of Cranlarich were witnessing his tortured progress over every inch, but none came to help him.

Once again he was tottering on the brink of oblivion. He wondered if he would make it, and if he didn’t if anybody would come to his assistance. No, he decided, they wouldn’t. They would leave him lying there, to die if necessary. It was the way of Cranlarich, a tiny hamlet where everybody kept their doors behind closed doors because they feared Bruce McKechnie and his men, remote from the outside world, cut off by the mountain range of Criffel on the one side, and the treacherous Solway marshes on the other. They were all prisoners, every one of them.

‘Why, Mr Law, what on earth have you been doing?’

Freddie started and tried to turn his head to see who was standing behind him, but could not. Nevertheless, he recognised the voice after a few seconds. It belonged to the Reverend Angus Dalglish, the minister who served these outlying villages.

The clergyman moved forward until he was in front of the other, looking down, his pink rostrated face a mask of bewilderment, concern, and reprimand.

‘Doubtless you have been poaching, Mr Law,’ he spoke with reproachful tones. ‘Stealing other men’s game. Nevertheless, you appear to be much the worse for wear. Who has done this to you?’

‘Canna ye guess?’

‘Aye,’ the other sighed, already resigned to the answer that would doubtless be forthcoming. ‘I can’t guess. The laird’s gamekeepers.’

‘Thugs, Reverend.’

‘They will have much to answer for when the day of reckoning comes- The Lord will exact His revenge, Mr Law.’

‘Is there nowt we can do about it?’

‘We can pray, Mr Law. Pray that things will get better in this valley.’

Freddie Law somehow refrained from spitting in his contempt. He attempted to struggle up, and gratefully clasped the other’s proffered hand.

‘Surely somethin’ can be done, Reverend.’

~~The clergyman was silent for a moment or two. He did not speak again until the two of them were shuffling along in the direction of the poacher's cottage.~~

‘It is indeed a sad state of affairs.’ He grimaced, and with his free hand pulled the wide brim of his black hat down over his forehead in an attempt to shield his face from the driving rain. ‘This man, McKechnie is a disciple of the devil, I am sure. His brother before him was such a kindly man, and he was respected by villagers and crofters alike. And then, his untimely death, that fall over the precipice ...’

‘He was pushed, Minister, by ...’

‘Do not say it, Mr Law. Let us not judge a man by vicious gossip, even the laird. His brother fell from his death, and within a few weeks, as we all know, this man, who is now laird, returned to his kingdom. He built a “sporting empire” as he calls it. The shepherds had their grazing taken from them to make way for extensive grouse shooting for wealthy clients staying at Clanlarich. Things happened to certain people who opposed the new way of life. Ferguson, for instance, was found drowned in the loch because he persisted in taking his sheep on to the meadows adjoining the bogland. MacPherson, it is said, walked into a bog when he was the worse for drink, although it is known that he quarrelled with the laird in the Royal Stag over peat rights. Yet we must not make accusations, Mr Law.’

‘Because we hasna the guts.’ Law spat this time, and was relieved to see the dilapidated door of his home was only a yard or so away. With one supreme effort he shook himself free of his companion and leaned up against the wall, twisting around so that his eyes met those of the other. ‘I repeat, Reverend, none of us has the guts to stand up to this fiend. Not even with all your fine talk of forgiveness and faith in the Lord. Meself ... well, up until last night I carried on much as before ...’

‘Aye, poaching, stealing,’ Dalglish countered the accusations, ‘and look where it has got your man.’

‘I'm no complainer, Reverend. It hurts, aye, but I'll mend in a week or so. But there's something you oughta know, and maybe you can include this in your Sunday prayers, too.’

‘And what is that?’

‘There's ... sommat in the big burn.’

‘What on earth do you mean. Something? What? A mantrap set for trout poachers and you stepped into it?’

‘No, Reverend. A ... a monster.’

‘How utterly ridiculous! And you expect me to take note of your lies, to believe such wild stories coming from a man who makes his living by stealing other men's game! You've been drinking again, Mr Law, and until such time as you are sober I will have no more to do with you.’

The portly minister, his features red with indignation, turned on his heel and strode away in the opposite direction. Curtains moved again in the windows on both sides of the street. But the door remained closed.

Freddie Law sighed and shuffled into the gloomy front room of his cottage. In the reality of his drab abode the happenings of the night before seemed far from real. Yet he knew that huge creature existed. It was no figment of his imagination. However, he knew only too well that it was useless to relate his nightmarish experiences to others. He would only invite the ridicule of the inhabitants of Cranlarich.

Chapter 2

Bruce McKechnie, the laird of Cranlarich, drew deeply on his Havana cigar and surveyed the extent of his estate from the shores of Loch Merse. He was a tall, imposing figure, awe-inspiring to those who knew him. His immaculate Norfolk jacket and soft deerstalker hat were cut from the same expensive tweed. His riding breeches were especially tailored in Saville Row, and his leather leggings were highly polished to match the shine on his Argyle boots. Yet his features betrayed the cruelty of the man; the thin, almost bloodless lips, the slim, pencil moustache, the hooked nose like the beak of a bird of prey, and, above all, the close-set pale-blue eyes with their almost total absence of lashes. His age was indeterminable, his fair, almost white hair camouflaging any flecks of grey which might otherwise have been visible. Even those guests staying at Cranlarich, business executives from home and abroad, were aware of his overpowering personality, and felt uncomfortable on those days when he chose to shoot or fish with them.

Jock Rouse had an air of humility about him as he beached the small rowing boat and turned to his waiting employer.

‘Well?’ McKechnie grunted, not troubling to remove the cigar from his lips as he spoke.

‘The loch's full, sir. Crammed full with every species of fish you care to mention. The trout have come in in shoals.’

‘Perfect.’ The laird did not permit himself a smile in spite of his obvious satisfaction. ‘And early too. I reckon we're going to be able to offer the best fishing in the United Kingdom next season.’

‘But *why!*’ the gamekeeper spread his hands in puzzlement. ‘We've always had good fishing, but never anything like this.’

‘Undoubtedly the rumours concerning an underwater nuclear test carried out by the Russians in the Arctic Circle last summer were true,’ McKechnie replied. ‘There are reports of all-time record catches, too. The cod war is forgotten simply because there is suddenly enough for everybody. Record weights, too, almost as though some form of mutation has taken place. Underwater life is fleeing north, moving south, taking refuge where it can find sanctuary. And where could be better than the peace and quiet of Loch Merse, eh, Rouse?’

‘It certainly seems a possibility, sir,’ the other agreed, ‘but, well ...’

‘What's worrying you, man?’

‘There's ... there's some crabs amongst the rocks on the east shore, sir, and, well ... they're not like ordinary crabs, if you know what I mean.’

‘No, I don't know what you mean, Rouse,’ McKechnie snapped. ‘Have they got five legs, sprouted wings, or something equally peculiar?’

‘No, sir.’ The gamekeeper shuffled uncomfortably. ‘Nothing like that, sir. It's just that they're big. Too big. Horrible. Even in the light of what you say it's unbelievable. God, there's something wrong.’

Bruce McKechnie studied the other carefully for some moments without speaking. Rouse's normally ruddy complexion was pallid, and his large coarse hands shook visibly.

‘You'd better take me to look at them.’ The laird spoke calmly, taking his cigar from his mouth and carefully flicking off an inch of ash. ‘We'll go by boat. It's a long walk round.’

Jock Rouse nodded, and turning away he began to drag the boat down to the water's edge again. His every movement was slow, reluctant. Suddenly he was remembering an incident of a few nights ago, the beating up of Freddie Law, the poacher, and that man's reference to a monster. Having seen the huge crabs that afternoon he no longer ridiculed the story. Doubtless, Law had seen *something*.

'You remember I told you how we caught that fellow Law, sir.' he said as they pushed off into deeper water.

'Oh, yes.' McKechnie replied as though matters of poaching were no longer of importance. 'What about him?'

'Well, he was babbling about a monster in the burn. We didn't take much notice, but maybe . . . maybe there was something in it.'

'Unlikely.' The laird peered down at a large trout which darted away in front of the bows. 'You know as well as I do, Rouse, how these locals embellish rumours. There's a new round of gossip started in the Royal Stag about my brother.'

'Gossip?' This time Rouse dropped the 'sir' and there was a note of defiance in his voice. 'You know as well as I do what happened.'

'You murdered him, Rouse. Pushed him over the cliff. As you dealt with one or two others who got in my way.'

'Acting on your instructions . . . *sir*.'

'That'll do, Rouse. I could get you life if I wanted, so don't get any ideas. Your instructions were verbal. No witnesses. It would be extremely difficult to prove.'

'I'm just making a point.'

'Then don't. And don't go asking me for any more money because you won't get it. Do I make myself clear?'

The gamekeeper nodded, and they lapsed into silence, the only noise being the swish of the oars through the dark, deep water. Each was busy with his own thoughts. Jock Rouse remembered James McKechnie, handsome and kindly. He recalled that fateful deerstalking trip, when he had persuaded the former laird to stop out late in the hope of a shot at a stag on the topmost mountain peaks. A low cloud had obscured the scene of the murder, the muffled scream. Another similar night MacPherson pleading had gone unheeded as the sucking bog had claimed him. And Ferguson had had his head held in the loch until he had drowned, and the body had been taken out to the centre and dumped. It had been nearly a week before it had drifted ashore.

Bruce McKechnie, on the other hand, was thinking about a young girl, the daughter of the landlord of the Royal Stag just outside Cranlarich. She had her uses apart from her petite young body. She was the laird's 'ears' in the village. He wondered how much longer he would be able to suppress their simple people. They either loved or hated a laird in such remote places as this. He had to have respect. They had to know their place just as their forefathers had in the times of the feudal system. Maybe it was a mistake to ban grazing on the moors, but if the grouse were disturbed then his wealthy clients would not come here year after year. There did not seem to be any middle course. And now suddenly all this was happening, shoals of fish, giant crabs . . .

His thoughts were interrupted by the scraping of the bottom of the boat on rock. They had reached the east shore. He glanced up. There, nestling at the foot of Criffel, a mile and a half away, was the big white house. *His* house, overlooking *his* land. All his. And Christine thought that she was going to have a half share in it. No way. She was his whore, and nothing else.

'Well, where are these crabs, Rouse?' he barked.

'Can't see any at the moment, sir.' The gamekeeper was shading his eyes from the afternoon sun, peering up and down the rocky shore.

'Sure you didn't imagine 'em?' he snapped with a hint of sarcasm.

'I never imagine things, sir.'

'Then let's go ashore and take a look.'

McKechnie stepped on to the beach, and stood back whilst Jock Rouse heaved the boat up out of the water. ~~Some seagulls screeched at them overhead, and somewhere a curlew was warbling in a solitary melody. But there were no crabs in sight.~~

'They're usually to be found amongst the rocks at the water's edge,' Rouse stated, as though trying to convince himself as well as his employer. The gamekeeper wasn't sure whether he wanted to see any crabs or not. Suddenly he found himself wishing that he had not mentioned them at all. Fear and revulsion were creeping over him. He remembered again Freddie Law's words. Oh, God, the fellow *could* have been telling the truth ...

Bruce McKechnie was striding away, keeping to the edge of the loch, his keen eyes scanning the uneven ground at his feet. He was puzzled. Strange things were happening here, certainly. And Jock Rouse was not the type to let his imagination run away with him. Above all, there was a shooting party arriving the following week. Right now the laird did not want publicity of this sort. He had to satisfy himself one way or the other. Either there were huge crabs in Loch Merse or there were not. He would find out for himself.

Rouse stumbled in the wake of McKechnie. The latter was fit and agile. It was all he could do to keep up with him. He cursed under his breath. *And then he saw the crab.*

It had been lying motionless among some large boulders. The laird had not spotted it, for its colouring blended perfectly with its surroundings. But now it was rearing up, a couple of yards in front of Jock Rouse. Its pincers waved menacingly, the tiny hate-filled eyes regarded him steadily, a look of cunning, almost of superiority showed on its hideous face. It knew that it barred his path. It recognised fear.

Rouse stopped, staring. His mouth opened, but the warning shout was a mere gulp, his eyes bulging in horror and disbelief. The creature was larger than a sheepdog, almost twice the size of the one which he had seen previously. They had scuttled away at his approach. This one, quite obviously, had no intention of retreating. Even as he stood watching it moved, a sinister shambling gait that brought it nearer him.

Rouse suddenly let out a piercing scream, releasing him from the paralysis of sheer terror in which those malevolent red eyes had held him. In panic he turned and tried to scramble up the slippery rock face. But his feet could not grip; slowly he began sliding back down, ever closer to the nightmarish form that was rapidly approaching, its huge claws waving in the air, its powerful jaws opening and closing in anticipation ...

Click-Click-clickety-click.

'Christ Alive!' Bruce McKechnie turned as he heard the scream, and froze into immobility as he witnessed the scene some fifteen yards from where he stood. For one of the few occasions in his life he was frightened. He had hunted big game in Kenya, taken part in a seal cull, slaughtered kangaroos in Australia. His whole life had been devoted to the chase, but suddenly he felt that this time Man was the prey.

The huge crab was astride the hapless gamekeeper, its bulk covering the upper part of his body. The laird could only guess what was happening. Another scream died away abruptly. A booted foot that had been kicking wildly in the air suddenly dropped lifeless to the ground. There was a crunching sound like he had once heard on a visit to an abattoir, that of bones being severed and crushed splintering. It was calculated, sadistic slaughter.

Click-click.

McKechnie whirled. The sound came from his rear, and it was close. Rouse was forgotten. The laird recoiled, but he did not panic. He let out his breath in a low, scarcely audible whistle as he saw

them. Three, four, and another emerging from the water. Five giant crabs, not as large as the one which had already made its kill, but big enough to send the sanest and bravest of men into the realm of madness. Some would have fled, panic-stricken; others would have been incapable of movement, standing there as their minds snapped, meekly awaiting the end. But not the laird of Cranlarich.

He glanced back at the monstrous killer crab. Its face was towards him, but the features were indiscernible, a morass of human intestines trailing from its mouth as it slurped greedily, its whole form covered with scarlet blood from the severed jugular vein of its victim.

McKechnie felt the bile rising in his throat, knew that he wanted to vomit, but such a time-wasting function would inevitably seal a similar fate for himself. His brain had momentarily stalled but now responded to ice-cold logic.

‘You bastards,’ he spoke aloud, seeking to boost his own courage with curses, ‘you dirty, oversized bastards!’

They halted their advance almost as though they understood his words, five monstrous crustaceans confident of securing their prey, preparing to pull down this puny man and devour his remains, perhaps fighting amongst themselves over morsels of flesh and blood. McKechnie seized upon the delay to move in for the kill. The loch prevented his escape on the south side. The big crab was behind him. The other five almost had him surrounded. But not quite. There was a gap of three or four yards before the circle of death was complete. And he leaped for that one exit which held the possibility of survival.

McKechnie would not have believed that such cumbersome-looking creatures were capable of moving speedily. Even as he breached the gap they were starting to close it. A pincer brushed against the pouch of his riding breeches, another touched his arm. He heard them hissing, first in anticipation, then with frustration at being deprived of their victim. They were certain they had him. Now, as he burst through, they knew they had lost him.

As he bounded over rocks and shingle, two of the crabs took up the pursuit. McKechnie heard them coming, but he did not look back. One slip would have meant certain death. But his agility was second only to that of the majestic stag which showed itself on the peak behind the big house each evening. He ran, sure-footed, leaping and negotiating every obstacle, until finally he reached level meadowland. Only now did he pull up, breathing heavily, and look back.

Only two of the crabs were visible, those which had pursued him, and they were scuttling back in the direction of Loch Merse. Of the others there was no sign. Not even the big one.

‘Jesus.’ McKechnie wiped his brow with the back of his hand. ‘Where the devil did this lot come from?’

It was almost unbelievable. The two retreating crustaceans had altered direction, and now they had stopped. A splintering smashing sound carried to the watching man's ears. The boat. They had seen it, recognised it as some kind of human threat to their watery domain, and with a series of blows from their powerful pincers they had smashed it. Within seconds it was unrecognisable, a heap of driftwood for trespassing locals to take home to kindle their fires.

McKechnie saw the last of the crabs enter the water, walking out until it closed over them. And then they were gone.

He seated himself down on a boulder, and taking a long cigar from a leather case in his breast pocket, he placed it between his lips. He struck a match with fingers that scarcely trembled, and inhaled the smoke deep into his lungs. The crisis was past. That initial moment of fear was gone. Once again he was the laird, the local ruler of these moors and mountains. Creatures from the deep threatened his kingdom, but they would not conquer it. He was determined. They must be destroyed.

By him. But right now he needed time to think.

~~The sun had already set behind Criffel by the time he stood up. He knew now what he had to do.~~ He, Bruce McKechnie, was probably the only living soul who was aware of the existence of the outsized brutes in Loch Merse. Possibly the poacher, Freddie Law, had seen them, but nobody was likely to take much notice of a drunken old man. He could always be dealt with if the need arose. Jock Rouse was dead. The laird had no intention of going back to see what remained of his gamekeeper, but it was logical to conclude that if the crabs had not already eaten their victim then they would return after dark to consume whatever remained. Rouse had disappeared completely. His absence could be explained to those who might ask questions. The villagers would not bemoan his departure from Cranlarich. He had no living kin. A gamekeeper's job, anyway, was insecure. They came and went. Jock had gone elsewhere to a better post. McKechnie smiled at the thought. The man's death benefited him. There was nobody to tell of the fate of James McKechnie now. No threat of blackmail over his own head. For the moment the huge crabs had done him a favour.

Yet he had to keep these creatures out of sight of other people. He knew only too well what would happen. Loch Ness was a classic example. There would be scientists arriving with bathyspheres and other equipment to search the bottom of the loch. Sightseers would come in their thousands, camping all over Cranlarich. The sporting empire which he had built up would be destroyed overnight. The shooting and fishing would be ruined. It must not happen. It would not, if Bruce McKechnie had his way.

He started out on the long walk back. Even so, his route to the big house was not direct. Darkness was falling when he reached the small semi-derelict cottage nestling in the spinney. This was the head gamekeeper's residence, where Rouse lived. An old Austin A35 van stood on the grassy track outside the front door. The laird smiled to himself. There would be no problems.

The door was unlocked and he went inside and lit the oil lamp on the table. The place smelled of unwashed clothing and stale cooking. Methodically he began to carry out various items to the van: clothing, a few old photographs, some books on natural history. Fortunately, Rouse owned few personal possessions and the task was completed in less than an hour. McKechnie went back inside, checked to see that he had not overlooked anything, blew out the lamp, and returned to the van. The battery was old, and he cursed as the starter-motor turned over too slowly, but finally the engine fired. He was sweating as he reversed out on to the narrow forestry track and headed uphill.

The slate road was steep and winding, and in places he had to change down to bottom gear. He did not use the headlights. They might have been seen from the village below. He knew the terrain well enough, and by driving slowly he eventually arrived at his destination, a small plateau directly above the marshes. He heaved a sigh of relief, clambered out, and walked to the front of the vehicle.

The ground ahead sloped gently downwards for about thirty yards, and then terminated in a steep drop of some fifty feet. It was too dark to see clearly, but the laird was well aware of what lay at the bottom of the precipice - the Cranlarich bog!

He returned to the van, opened the nearside door, and reached inside. His groping fingers located the handbrake lever, and released it. The van moved forward a foot or so, hesitated, and then began to roll down the slope, gathering speed.

McKechnie heard the scraping of the underside of the A35 on the rocks, followed by a deathly hush. A few seconds later a dull splash reached his ears. The bog gurgled hungrily, devouring its victim voraciously, its appetite such that it swallowed living beings or inanimate objects with equal eagerness.

At last the silence rolled softly back, and with a loud sigh the laird began to retrace his steps.

had been a satisfactory night's work.

The large study had changed little in appearance throughout a succession of Cranlarich lairds. Several pairs of antlers adorned the walls together with an array of antique firearms, flintlock and percussive deer rifles, and horse pistols. The wide bow window behind the Elizabethan mahogany desk commanded a panoramic view which incorporated the lower reaches of Loch Merse, the bog, and Criffel, although now a mist obscured the peaks of the latter. It had the promise of a typical autumn day, however, for already weak rays of sunlight were penetrating the swirling grey vapour and reflecting on the water.

Bruce McKechnie looked up from his seat at the desk, slowly and methodically folded the previous day's edition of the *Financial Times*, and regarded the small dark-haired man clad in plaid trousers and a tweed jacket who stood before him.

'Oh, yes, Joe,' the laird smiled faintly, 'I just thought I'd let you know that you have gained a promotion.'

'Promotion, sir?' The other's mouth fell open in obvious surprise.

'Yes, Joe,' McKechnie said, lighting his first cigar of the day. 'You've been promoted. From this moment onwards you are headkeeper to the Cranlarich Estate.'

'But ... but ...' Joe Kinlet stared in disbelief, 'but ... what about ... what about Jock?'

'Jock Rouse has left,' McKechnie spoke slowly, watching closely for every reaction which the young man might show. 'That's the way it is in the keeping profession. Let's face it, he wasn't the best headkeeper we've ever had here. Last season's head of game shot speaks for itself. And the early grouse shoots were abysmal. Much of it was due to bad organisation. The muir burning was only done scantily, and there are a hundred other things I could mention. Suffice to say that last night Jock and I had words. I told him Cranlarich would benefit by his absence so he packed his van and went. Now it's up to you, Joe.'

'Yes, sir!' There was obvious delight in Kinlet's reply. 'I'll do my very best, sir.'

'Good. There's a party due in on Monday. Two of the guns, Ryland and Barrett, are regulars each season. They know what to expect, the high standard of sport which we maintain here. I don't want them disappointed. And, er ... one other thing. Confine the duck shooting to the flight ponds on the moor. I think we'll have to regard the loch as a kind of sanctuary if we're going to keep duck coming into the estate throughout the season.'

'But ... but ...' Joe Kinlet stammered. 'We've always shot duck on Loch Merse. It's big enough to act as a sanctuary as well. And there's the geese, sir. They always start moving down from Perthshire about this time of year. Many of the regular guns look forward to shooting geese on the loch as much as they enjoy the grouse on the moors.'

'That's an order, Joe.' Bruce McKechnie regarded his new head keeper with a steely glint, an expression which those who had worked on Cranlarich knew only too well. 'I don't want anybody messing about near the loch until further notice.'

'Yes, sir.' Joe Kinlet nodded, and shuffled towards the door. 'I'll see to it, sir.'

Bruce McKechnie rose and strolled towards the window. The sun had now broken through the mist, and the waters of Loch Merse presented a breathtaking spectacle. His lips compressed into a narrow line, and he shuddered. After some minutes he turned away and crushed the remains of his cigar into a large cut-glass ashtray.

'Damn the crabs!' He thumped on the desk with his fist. 'Of all the rotten luck. They have to choose *my* loch. My God, how much longer can I hide 'em?'

Chapter 3

Christine Blacklaw reclined on her bed in her attic quarters of the Royal Stag. Her pose was a adopted one, one that she had rehearsed countless times, using an old glamour magazine as a guide. She gazed at herself in the dusty full-length wardrobe mirror, and adjusted her negligee by about half an inch. She smiled her satisfaction. That looked perfect, she decided. It had to be. She was showing just enough naked flesh to excite her lover the moment he walked through the door. Just enough leg and just enough breast. He would help himself to the rest as his lust escalated.

Her long dark hair fell almost to her waist. Her dark eyes were set just a shade too close together, reflection of her cunning, her constant scheming. Without Bruce McKechnie there would be nothing for her in Cranlarich. She would have to move on, perhaps to Glasgow, or even up to Aberdeen where there was a good living to be made amongst the oil riggers. Her parents, too, would have to go, for the income from the Royal Stag would not provide them with a living without the 'subsidies' derived from her being McKechnie's mistress.

The thought of marriage crossed her mind. It was not totally out of the question. She wasn't in love with the laird, but he had his attractions. She could live with any man twice her age if he owned several thousand acres of land, a small village, and had a million pounds invested on the stock market. Any man. She did not try to convince herself that he loved her. Her body, certainly. Even if he tired of her after a few years he would still have to make it worth her while to give him a divorce. She could have her freedom and her riches then.

Her reverie was broken by the sound of footsteps on the creaking stairway. She stiffened, and her pulses quickened. She really had the urge tonight, and for once her lover need not necessarily have been a multimillionaire.

The door opened. Bruce McKechnie stood framed in the light from the stairway still wearing his Norfolk jacket and riding breeches. His eyes alighted on the girl lying on the bed, but his expression remained impassive.

'You're late,' Christine murmured, her eyes closed, unwilling to meet his gaze. 'I thought you weren't coming tonight.'

'I had business to attend to.' His reply was curt as he stepped into the small room, closing the door behind him.

He took off his jacket, draped it over a nearby chair, and seated himself on the bed. Her hand found his and squeezed it lightly.

'I was starting to get worried.' She hoped that her concern sounded genuine. 'People are talking.'

'These damned crofters are always gossiping. What is it about this time?'

'About you ... me ... us ... the loch.'

'What are they saying about the loch?' he snapped, his eyes narrowing, his body stiffening.

Her eyes flickered open, surprise and indignation causing them to widen. 'So you're more concerned about what people say about the loch than what they say about us?'

'I'm sorry.' He smiled faintly. 'It was just ... well, why should they gossip about Loch Merse?'

'Superstition, I suppose.' She was watching him intently now. 'Freddie Law was in the bar earlier. Your keepers have certainly roughed him up, haven't they?'

'There was a bit of trouble the other night. He was poaching. These fellows have got to learn what to expect, otherwise the whole of Cranlarich would be living off the estate.'

'He reckons that there was ... well, something in the big burn, a kind of giant crab.'

The laird gave a laugh. He hoped that it sounded like genuine ridicule, and that his consternation did not show. ~~‘How totally ridiculous. A giant crab! I suppose it won't be long now before the Loch Ness monster is reported to have changed its habitat and come to live in Loch Merse. Nevertheless, we don't want rumours flying about otherwise we'll have Joe Public and his wife invading Cranlarich.’~~

‘Oh, I don't think anybody took him seriously.’ She smiled and guided his hand beneath the lower folds of her flimsy garment, moaning softly when his fingers rested where she wanted them. ‘They're talking about us, though. I'm just your whore, aren't I, Bruce? That's what they're saying.’

‘It's jealousy.’

‘It's true, though.’

‘No it isn't.’ His lips went down to hers, meeting in a lingering kiss, tongues touching, entwining. ‘Don't take any notice of them.’

There were a lot of things she wanted to sort out, but this was not the time. Her desires were increasing and satisfaction in that respect was paramount. Her slim fingers began unfastening his shirt buttons, helping him off with the rest of his clothes, kissing and fondling him until finally they both lay naked.

Yet something was disturbing her lover. She could tell even as he entered her, although he gave no outward sign. He kissed passionately and thrust ed eagerly, but things were not as they usually were. Something was definitely worrying him.

Finally, they climaxed together, clutching at each other, convulsing, rolling on the bed, then lying still, nestled together, kissing more tenderly. It was half an hour before he began to extricate himself from her embrace.

‘What's the matter?’ There was concern and disappointment in her voice. ‘Now that you've been satisfied, it's time to leave your whore, is it?’

‘There's things I must do.’ He avoided her searching gaze and reached for his clothes.

‘Things more important than me?’

‘You don't understand.’

‘You're right there. You never give me the chance. Like I've already said, I'm just your prostitute. You never confide in me.’

‘You'd be in a sorry way without me.’ His eyes blazed with anger.

‘I'd manage.’ Her own temper was rising. ‘It's something to do with Loch Merse, isn't it? Something's going on, and you're frightened of it leaking out. What is it, smuggling in cannabis from a submarine from the Solway via this mythical subterranean tunnel?’

‘Don't be bloody stupid, girl!’

‘Well, something's going on. I can tell. You can't hide it from me, Bruce.’

‘I don't know.’ He sighed, and made a deliberate effort to control his mounting anger. ‘I'm sorry. I'm on edge. I don't like rumours going round that might bring crowds of sightseers from the cities just when the sporting season is getting into full swing. Jock Rouse left the other night. That means additional work for Joe Kinlet and he hasn't got the experience.’

‘I see.’ She wasn't totally convinced. ‘Well, I'll keep my ears open. You'll come and see me tomorrow night won't you, Bruce?’

‘Yes.’ He nodded. ‘I'll come. I promise.’

The sun mustered its full late autumnal warmth, and the row of beaters sweated profusely. In the middle of the line across the sloping moorland Joe Kinlet shouted frequently for them to keep level. Some slowed, others quickened their pace, but their enthusiasm was waning after the first hour. The b

coveys of grouse had split up since the early shoots, and the birds were wild. Spasmodic shooting from the butts ahead reached the ears of the men as they struggled across a marshy area.

Phil Ryland opened the breech of his smoking gun, ejected the spent cases, and reloaded. Two birds downed, one in front and one behind, a good right and left in any class of shooting.

‘Nice shooting, Phil,’ the tall lanky young man in the next butt, fifty yards to his left, shouted.

Ryland nodded, a smile on his handsome tanned face. ‘But not enough of ‘em, eh Paul?’

Bruce McKechnie in the stand beyond Paul Barrett scowled. It was true what these two said. There weren't enough grouse, certainly not enough to warrant a £100 per day charge for shooting on the moor. It was just one of those inexplicable things. Some days the coveys were to be found, on other days they were absent from the big moor. But it was no good trying to explain that to the guns. They paid their money and they expected some sport in return.

The drive finished, and the guns and beaters made their way to the two waiting Land Rovers for the luncheon break. The laird looked across towards Ryland and Barrett. Hell, he needed to provide some good sport for these two. In a way they were a part of his business, directors of a large shooting supplies company in North London. They could either recommend the Cranlarich Estate to their customers or they could advise them to go elsewhere.

Beaters and guns ate their sandwiches in separate groups. McKechnie poured himself a double whiskey from his flask and strolled across to the shooters, smiling with a confidence which he was hoping to pass on to the others.

‘A few birds to warm up on,’ he murmured. ‘No doubt we'll find the main coveys higher up the afternoon. Strange, but lately they seem to prefer higher ground.’

‘Maybe,’ Paul Barrett replied. ‘But I've shot in these parts long enough to know that when grouse are scarce, they're scarce, up hills and down dales. And from what I've seen of this heather of yours, McKechnie, it's no wonder. There's been little or no burning here in the spring. The growth is old. The birds have gone elsewhere, where some muir burning has been done and there's plenty of tender young shoots to feed on. I reckon Jock Rouse has been skipping his chores this year. Where is he, by the way?’

‘I fired him,’ Bruce McKechnie scowled, ‘and I think the reasons are quite obvious by what you've just said.’

‘We'll make up on duck and geese,’ Ryland grinned. ‘That's what we've really come for this time. Many birds flying into the loch at present?’

McKechnie hesitated, biting his lower lip before replying.

‘We're not shooting on the loch at present,’ he said. ‘We're using it as a sanctuary to conserve our stock of wildfowl.’

‘Not shooting on the loch!’ Barrett stood up, his good humour disappearing and being replaced by indignation. ‘Of course we're shooting on the loch. We always do.’

‘Well, we don't now.’ The laird's cheeks were flushed. There are ample flight ponds, enough to shoot a flight every night of the week.’

‘But we don't get geese on the pools,’ Ryland snapped. ‘And if you can't provide grouse, McKechnie, then you've got to give us geese. We're shooting on the shores of Loch Merse, whether you like it or not. It's advertised in your brochure, “good goose and duck shooting on the shores of Loch Merse”, so you can't get out of that one. Not this season, anyway, Paul, and I will be down there tonight, depend on it.’

Bruce McKechnie lapsed into silence. He glanced at the other three men who made up the shooting party for the week. A retired colonel, a barrister, and an elderly gentleman of private means. The

showed no inclination towards wildfowling after a full day's grouse shooting. It was the former two who would make trouble. Ryland and Barrett. He cursed them under his breath.

'If you wanted good grouse shooting you should have come up in August,' he snapped.

'We came now because we wanted to shoot geese as well.' Ryland was already picking up his gun and cartridges, a gesture indicating that he wanted to get on with the afternoon's sport rather than delay the midday break any longer. 'And shoot geese we will.'

On that note guns and beaters moved off, the latter conversing in low tones amongst themselves. It was verified what people were saying in the village of Cranlarich. There was something strange going on around Loch Merse.

There was barely an hour before the deepening shadows would merge into dusk and then drift slowly into nightfall. The sun had already dipped behind Criffel, and the first wisps of an autumn mist were creeping over the Cranlarich bog. Curlew warbled in the distance on the Solway marshes, and mallards and teal were flighting in from the shore to their favourite inland feeding grounds.

Phil Ryland and Paul Barrett arrived on the edge of Loch Merse clad in thick sweaters and waterproof clothing, each carrying an expensive London-made gun. Toby, the Cocker spaniel they shared, panted excitedly at their heels. The dog knew what was expected, he anticipated the whistle of wings in the semi-darkness, the crashing reports of the shotguns, and then it was up to him. He relished the long swim out in the icy water, the search amidst the reeds for a winged duck, and then the slow triumphant paddle back to dry land. The sport of the chase was bred into his species. Had there been a thin layer of ice on the loch he would willingly have smashed through it, forging on in his quest to please his masters.

'Don't give much for our chances tonight,' Ryland muttered. 'Too still. Not a breath of wind. The birds will be too high.'

'Always the pessimist, Phil,' his partner grinned and slid a couple of heavy crimson-case cartridges into the breech of his gun. Toby most certainly doesn't agree with you. Now, where are we going to stand? Do we split up or stay together?'

'Thirty yards apart in this reed bed should do,' Phil Ryland replied, loading his own gun. 'I'll put a leash on Toby otherwise he'll spend the whole time running between us to make sure we're both here.'

'Fine.' The other was already moving off to take up his position. 'Best of luck, Paul.'

'And you.'

Five minutes later the two men were hidden from sight, standing up to the tops of their waders in the marshy surround of Loch Merse, the dog whimpering softly to itself in its excitement as he squatted on a hummock of solid reeds.

Twilight came and lingered, daylight reluctant to surrender to darkness, the mist thickening steadily and advancing over the bog towards the loch. Duck were on the move in earnest now, winged and hurtling in from the direction of Criffel, circling, checking, then diving down to land in the centre of Loch Merse. It was as Phil Ryland had forecast. The birds were too high, out of gunshot range when they passed over the waiting men, losing height only when their nocturnal destination was directly beneath them.

Suddenly both men stiffened. Far away they heard a sound, a wild musical honking, gaggling in silence, then honking again. There was no mistaking the call of wild geese, the orchestra of wings in inaccessible places, the cry of the Greylag as it completed the last stage of its migratory flight from Iceland. The long journey had been undertaken in stages, first the Hebrides, then on to the extensive lochs of Perthshire, and now the Solway. Or maybe an overnight stop on Loch Merse.

'By God, d'you hear 'em, Phil?' Barrett called out in his excitement

'I'll say.' The reply was in undertones, almost as though Ryland feared that the skein would hear him and change direction. 'Just hope and pray that they'll come into the loch.'

Silence returned. Then the gaggling resumed anew, louder now, closer, a thrilling sound to those who heard it. Shapes materialised out of the darkening sky, silhouettes, with wings beating majestically, long necks outstretched, starting to lose height.

'They're coming for the loch,' Ryland whispered hoarsely, instinctively pushing forward the safety catch on his gun. 'And straight over us. In range!'

The 'V' formation of eleven Graylag geese seemed to hover momentarily over the waiting gunners, the swishing of the mighty wings an accompaniment to the honking. Then, harshly destroying the wild chorus, came the simultaneous crashing of shotgun fire. To those who watched from below the scene appeared to be one of slow motion. The leading gander halted abruptly, head drooping forward, wings closing, falling ... falling, drifting, falling again. The remaining ten wild geese slowed wings beating, altered direction and climbed, seeking safety in altitude. Two more shots rang out, the flashes from the guns briefly illuminating the scene, one bird falling, the rest retreating. But no more geese fell.

Toby heard the splash and his large floppy ears cocked up. He whirled round, almost forgetting that he was still tethered, and gave a sharp bark of frustration.

'Go get 'im, boy.' Strong fingers undid the slip knot of the check cord and with one bound the spaniel jumped into the reeds. He splashed, submerged, came up for air, and struck out, half-wading, half-swimming.

Then he was gone, grunting softly to himself as he slid into the deep cold water of Loch Merse.

'Sod that.' Barrett appeared at Ryland's side, twin trickles of smoke filtering from the barrels of his gun. 'We fucked that up properly, Phil. Should've had three of 'em. Maybe four.'

'We both fired at the lead bird,' Ryland replied. 'They were higher than we thought in the half-light, and by the time we got our second barrels off the rest were out of range.'

'Still we got one.'

'Providing Toby finds 'im.'

'Bloody pessimist you are, mate. That bird was as dead as a stone. Fell like one, too. I heard him hit the water. Shouldn't be any trouble for old Toby.'

They fell silent, listening. They could hear the dog swimming, then treading water. He snorted, a sound of triumph.

'He's got the goose. Good boy, bring 'im in.'

The two men peered into the darkness, but could see nothing. By this time the daylight had almost gone, and the rising mist was thickening, drifting like a grey opaque curtain around them.

Suddenly, there was a loud splash from somewhere out on the loch in front of them. Toby's jubilant snorting was cut short, to be replaced by a sharp yelp, a canine cry of pain and fear. The water gurgled, and then everything went still.

'What the bloody hell's going on?' Phil Ryland took a step forward, forgetting for the moment where he was, and the water came over the top of his thigh-length waders, saturating his lower clothing. 'Oh, fuck it!'

'Steady on.' Barrett caught at his companion's coat and just succeeded in preventing himself from falling headlong. 'Something's happened to Toby. There isn't a sound. Hey, Toby! *Toby!*'

They stood there with a sense of foreboding and helplessness creeping over them. The dog was a first class swimmer. He had won two certificates in water tests. And now, engaged upon a simple

retrieve, he had disappeared without trace.

‘What the hell’s happened to him?’

‘How the fuck should I know?’

‘Well, shine the fucking torch on the water.’

The torch beam was thrown back at them by the wall of fog which was now barely ten yards front of them. Cold clammy fingers seemed to clutch at them.

‘Wait ... I can hear something.’ Barrett held up his hand.

They listened. Something moved a little way to their right. There were faint splashes, rustling. But there was no grunting and panting such as the gundog usually made on his return with retrieve.

‘Come on, Toby. Here boy.’ Barrett scarcely recognised his own voice. His throat was dry, and there was an unpleasant tightening of his stomach muscles. He knew something was dreadfully wrong but he wasn't going to admit it, not even to himself. ‘Come on, Toby, lad. Hurry up and bring the goose.’

Splash. So close that it made them start and whirl round, almost overbalancing again. The reed bank was moving. A shape, unrecognisable. Two eyes. Not Toby's brown orbs reflecting the torchlight. Red ones. Tiny eyes that glowed and shone like uncut diamonds. Coming closer.

Click-Click-Clickety-Click.

‘Jesus Christ!’ Ryland yelped and turned to flee in the face of the unknown terror.

Barrett had not seen the creature. His friend had blocked his vision, and now they collided, grabbed desperately at each other, lost their footing on the muddy surface, slipped, and submerged.

Ryland was the first to come up, coughing and spluttering, but his only thought was flight. He pushed at the clutching Barrett, and felt the other going under again. It didn't matter. When you can't push up against something like this, whatever it was, then it was every man for himself.

He took two steps and stopped, almost paralysed with fear. The light from the torch in his hand revealed a scene which could not be true. It could not possibly exist on this earth. No way. His terror mounted, reached its summit, and then he began to laugh. Quietly at first, chuckling, then loud peals with head back, tears trickling down his mud-spattered countenance.

‘You fucking stupid idiot.’ Barrett dragged himself to his feet. ‘If you think it's bleedin' funny to push me under ... Oh, Jesus God!’

A couple of seconds of silence followed, and then Barrett was laughing, too.

‘Aint they just beautiful. Nice little crabby dogs. Come to work for us. Hey, where are we?’

‘This must be hell, old son. And it ain't hot like they used to tell us. Bloody cold, in fact.’

They were bent double, laughing, crying. There was no fear in them now.

The giant crabs moved in slowly, knowing that their prey could not escape them. The largest, some five foot in height, had fresh blood on its evil face. Fur adhered to one of its pincers. It had tasted human flesh before, and the craving for more was strong. A dog was no substitute.

Barrett felt the pincers close around his legs, just below the knees. The pain was excruciating, and even in his newly-discovered euphoria he yelled aloud. The double amputation was swift. So swift that he merely sank another eighteen inches into the swamp, the bloody stumps embedding themselves into the thick mud. Somehow he remained upright. His hand was being held. Someone gripped his wrist. He knew he was safe, that he wouldn't fall. But where was Phil? There was no sign of him.

Phil Ryland was underwater, the fallen torch still alight, illuminating the macabre scene. A face stared into his. Piercing eyes that numbed his brain, conveying their message of death. There was to be no mercy. An audience, horrific staring faces, surrounded him. Muffled clicking. The victim at the

guillotine, the blade already severing his neck, could not shut out the sound of the knitting needles. symphony of death.

Ryland died, but Barrett still lived. His pain barrier was broken. Legless, armless, a human trunk he bobbed in the water, his life's blood gushing from him, turning the reed bed in stages from muddy brown to crimson. Pincers slashed. The creatures were playing with him as a cat would torture a mouse. Each strike was on target. Guttled like a freshly killed rabbit, he floated on his face, still alive, dutifully offering his head to the executioner. The big crab accepted his offer, and the night's sport was over. The hunters had caught and killed. Now it was time for feasting, a royal banquet to celebrate the human carnage.

Far out on Loch Merse a dead Greylag goose floated, belly uppermost. It, too, had died as the result of this night's sport. Yet its end differed from that of the two human hunters. It had been killed swiftly and painlessly, and had been spared the horrors that lurked beneath the dark waters.

Chapter 4

There were two empty places at the table in the Cranlarich Hotel dining room. The other three guests ate sparingly, glancing at the vacant chairs from time to time, then at each other, mutely asking questions that none could answer. Where were the two young men, Ryland and Barrett? They all knew that the headstrong pair had gone fowling on the shores of Loch Merse against the laird's wishes. The incident created an uncomfortable atmosphere that still persisted.

Almost apologetically the three looked to the head of the table where Bruce McKechnie sipped his wine, deep in thought, his plate of roast pheasant almost untouched. Canvers, the waiter, kept his distance, standing almost motionless at the rear of the large room with tapestries of fifteenth-century hunting scenes adorning the walls. They looked strangely macabre and realistic in the shadows cast by the two cut-glass candelabras. Nobody spoke, but somebody would have to soon, Colonel Sanders reflected, wiping his short-clipped white moustache delicately with his napkin. Damned young fools upsetting a shooting holiday like this. What the devil were they doing out there, two hours after darkness? There was always the possibility that they had stayed to try for a duck under the moon. The moon was almost full. Dashed unsporting. One didn't do those sort of things in these kind of places. The Solway marshes were the place for that, rough it with the riff-raff, stop out shooting all night if you wanted to, catch pneumonia and then try to kid everybody that it had been worth it. He sighed audibly. The sooner peace was made with the laird, the better. Somebody had to do it. He cleared his throat.

'Those dashed silly fools are damned late, McKechnie.' Colonel Sanders looked down at the remains of his Rainbow trout as he spoke. 'Damned inconsiderate of them, I reckon, what about your chaps?'

He was answered by a chorus of half-hearted grunts. The three men visibly wilted under the searching stare of McKechnie. The laird's personality was overbearing, even to men who were leaders in various modes of life.

'Inconsiderate?' McKechnie snapped, sensing the embarrassment of his guests, their willingness to pander to him, and secretly revelling in it. 'I'd say it was just plain bad manners. Well, as far as I'm concerned they can bloody well camp out if they want to.'

'But ... er ... I mean,' Colonel Sanders fidgeted with his fork. 'They're hours overdue. If they're not back before bedtime ... well, somebody'll go and look for them, won't they?'

'Like I said,' the laird smiled, but there was no humour in his expression, 'they can stop out if they want to. If they're not back by eleven-thirty they'll have to, because the doors will be locked and they won't be opened until seven-thirty tomorrow morning ... on my instructions.'

The uncomfortable silence returned. Valiant efforts were made by the three men to finish the second course, sweets were waived in favour of coffee and liqueurs. Three brandies were ordered. They needed them.

Bruce McKechnie rose from the table, a glass of crème de menthe in his hand. Weariness showed in his every movement. His features were drawn, only his eyes showing the determination which drove him on. He, personally, would not be retiring for some hours yet. A young girl awaited his coming down in the village of Cranlarich. Already she would be lying on her bed, perhaps naked, delighting herself in a variety of ways because her sexual appetite was almost insatiable. The laird knew that he had to satisfy her. Most of the time he looked forward to it eagerly. Not tonight, however. By this time there was no doubt in his mind that the crabs had got Ryland and Barrett. Their disappearance would take some explaining. Rouse's had been easy.

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